

The User Centre

15 Years of Working with Hard to Reach Users in Easy to Reach Places

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The User Centre is the name given to a collection of user groups that are hosted at the University of Dundee [2]. Over the last 15 years the User Centre has become an embedded part of research and teaching at Dundee, providing a unique environment where students and researchers can interact with end users that are typically difficult to gain access to. The purpose of this position paper is to reflect on the original purpose of the User Centre, how it has changed and evolved over the last 15 years, and to provide a brief commentary on our observations in working with this group over our academic careers.

1 Description and Original Purpose

From 2000 onwards, it was becoming clear that technological developments were creating opportunities and challenges for different groups in society. In particular, older age groups felt left behind in a digital world where things moved at an ever increasing pace. Existing research, together with the increasing transfer of many ordinary life tasks *online* suggested scope for a different approach to helping older people engage with new technology. An innovative, and interactive solution was needed where end users could interact with researchers and students.

In 2006 the Queen Mother Building (QMB) was opened at the University of Dundee and acted as the new home to the School of Computing. This building was designed to facilitate closer integration of researchers, students and end users. Shared open plan work spaces provide flexibility and a sense of informality which allow people to engage in different stages of technology development and research. The ground floor of the QMB is separated into two, distinct halves. One half is occupied by student lab spaces that are used primarily in undergraduate teaching in Applied Computing and Computer Science degrees. The other half, affectionately known as *The Street* is home to The User Centre and a large high ceiling gallery space that is used events such as the Dundee Computing End of Year Show. The User Centre is an integral part of the day-to-day teaching and research activities within the QMB and offers computing learning experiences for a number of different user groups.

The User Centre is a place where groups of computer users and learners of varying skills meet to learn and help each other in a relaxed and friendly environment. University staff provide input and backup. The underlying principles of the user centre was to provide drop in sessions for members that would provide assistance that was geared to the particular needs of the individual, would be flexible in attendance and content, and would provide assistance from university staff, students, and volunteer helpers. In addition, the user centre was designed to provide an opportunity to participate in research project taking place within the university and to act as a friendly environment where members could learn from one another. The final purpose of the user centre was to create a learning bridge between end users and student developers, allowing students to work with older adults in the creation of new technology products [4].

2 Evolution over the Years

2.1 Early Beginning and Academic Leadership - 2005 to 2012

The initial running of the User Centre was carried out by Dr Paula Forbes, a Research Assistant that was employed by the university to work on a number of research projects that focused on how people interact with technology. At this time the User Centre was designed as a place for older adults (50+) to meet and learn how to use technology whilst also being given the opportunity to take part in research studies within the university and assist in teaching undergraduate students how to interact with end users. Under the leadership of Dr Forbes, the User Centre developed a steady stream of dedicated attendees that wished to learn about technology. The Centre itself had initial funding from the Matthew Trust who provided equipment that allowed attendees to learn new skills on a mixture of PC and Apple platforms. Drop in sessions were run twice a week where attendees could come along with their own issues with special

sessions being run to introduce new concepts and activities. These activities were designed to showcase the potential of technology and, for example, showed the process that happens from taking a picture of an item through to selling said item on eBay.

2.2 Developing Ownership and Growth in Numbers - 2012 to 2015

When Dr Forbes left the University of Dundee in 2012 running of the User Centre Run by a committee of volunteer helpers and university representatives. This committee consisted of members from within the User Centre itself who took over the day to day running of drop-in sessions and also acted as assistants for those that required digital help. Additional assistants are recruited from the student population to help in the user centre with this commonly seen as *in-kind support* for those that required participants for research studies.

During this time the User Centre grew in popularity, helped by the EPSRC funded SiDE project that created a pool of 700+ older adults within Dundee and the surrounding area that would take part in research studies [1]. Drop in sessions were extended to 4 days a week and the coordination of recruitment for participants, along with management of the ethical processes needed for this to occur, was handled by a designated member of university staff.

2.3 Growth and Diversification - 2015 to Present

In 2015 the User Centre expanded its initial reach in working with older adults and began to also act as a home to other groups. This coincided with substantial growth within the AAC research team within the university that was spearheaded by Prof Annalu Waller.

The Straight Talking Group is a user group of adults with complex disabilities who use a range of technology in the form of voice output aids which provide non-speaking people with a voice. This group was establish as a pilot project in 2010 but has continued, and grown, since this time. The members of STG provide a valuable resource for researchers and students, contributing feedback on their research into designing better AAC technology.

Tap and Talk was initiated and supported by NHS Tayside's Speech and Language Services for adults. The talk and Talk Aphasia iPad group works with former NHS stroke patients, investigating mainstream apps on the iPad from an accessibility point of view. Together with staff and volunteers the group develops more creative approaches to supporting communication.

The expansion of the User Centre to include three very distinct groups of users reflects the breadth of research that is carried out at Dundee, and allows for students to empathise with those facing specific accessibility challenges as part of their studies [3].

3 Common Themes in Working with Groups

In working with these user groups we have identified four common themes that we see as important in creating and cultivating the type of interaction that is commonplace in user research Dundee. It is easy to take the presence of these groups for granted however their creation and sustainability requires effort.

- **Designated Spaces are Crucial** - Designated space is needed for each group. Providing user groups with a consistent space that they can call their own gives users the confidence to take ownership. We believe that without having a dedicated space within the QMB, the User Centre would not be as established in terms of the ownership that its users take in its daily running.
- **Slow and Steady Creates Belonging** - The characteristics of each group within the User Center are different. Each group has different needs, abilities and desires. They will grow as a group in their own time. A sense of belonging emerges in each group, with natural leaders, etc, just as it does in any group that spends a lot of time together. This belonging means that the group take responsibility for each other and care for each other. We do not see ourselves, as academics, as the ones that create belonging, but view our continued encouragement and support as a catalyst to create group belonging.
- **Communication Changes over Time** - As that sense of belonging emerges, the communication within the group changes. This changes group dynamic to be more about the group as a collective and its shared purpose. The medium of communication is different for each group. As academics, we can make suggestions, but let it brew naturally so that the group are comfortable

using whatever platform is chosen. We encourage researchers that interact with these groups to not be frustrated when things don't move fast enough and believe that things move at a fast enough pace for individual group communication.

- **Ethical Considerations Remain Core** - Ethical considerations are key. We see the User Centre as a vital aspect of what makes Computing at Dundee. Being part of these groups and interacting with them is an enjoyable experience, however we are aware of the duty of care that is placed on us. Interacting with these groups within an academic setting comes with ethical responsibilities and this must not lose sight.

References

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