11. ICTs AND ADULT LEARNING

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is a term that refers to a variety of technologies that facilitate communications and information sharing. Most often they are computer-mediated forms such as the Internet, including email and the World Wide Web (popularly called the net or web). They also may refer to mobile phones, handheld computing devices, or even pre-computer technologies such as community radio (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006). The words SKYPE, Blackberry, moodle and Twitter have become the lingua franca of our world, all within a very short space of time. Despite the ubiquity of these ICTs in all facets of our life, there has been amazingly little written in our informal and critical adult education literature. We see far more in the distance education literature which tends to focus on the technical aspects of these ICTs and their use in formal education environments. Yet, it is clear to those of us in the informal and nonformal sphere that the use of ICTs to mobilize, educate and communicate is at record proportions. Only a Luddite would predict its demise or even ignore it.

Take for example these everyday examples of how these technologies are being used:

Bobak organizes the protest in Iran from his bedroom in Copenhagen where he works in a men’s health center. He uses his Blackberry to organize protests and he circulates pictures of violence against protestors from his school friends in Tehran to western media.

The Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) partners with women’s organizations in Zambia through online chatlines, e-messaging, Skype, and texts. From their centers in Toronto and Mexico City, they remain in daily contact with the women in Lusaka to fight against religious fundamentalism (see Harper, English, & MacDonald, 2010).

The Coady International Institute in Nova Scotia offers online courses in microfinance to students in Egypt, India, China and Philippines. Their process is challenging as they are dealing with students in regions that have intermittent technological access.

The Africa Leadership Forum, located in Nigeria, set up in 1988, has a Digital Library with full text books online such as “Empowering Women for the 21st Century,” “Leadership Challenge in African Agricultural Production,” “Police
Clearly, ICTs are an integral part of how we do our work in the community sphere, especially in issues that have global implications and meanings. Yet, these ICTs are not neutral objects or inventions that stand apart from their teachers and students. Indeed, Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) maxim that the medium is the message is as pertinent today as it ever was. This chapter takes on these ICTs asking critical questions about their use, misuse and the ethical implications for the practice of adult education. In the same way that Neil Postman (1993) was asking about technology in the 1980s and 1990s, when there really were only the rudiments of computers, we ask them now as a way forward for our field. We do so knowing that the ordinary sphere of adult education is the community. Although adult education does happen in higher education, its main concentration is in the informal pockets of civil society, whether it be non-profit organizations, community based groups or in social movement organizing. Communication and how it is done is a central concern then for adult education because much depends on the ability not only to transfer information but to do so in a way that builds civil society and creates community.

The use of Internet-based community radio in Ghana and Uganda, for instance, has allowed local conversations about development strategies for climate change to go global. ICTs then can help further interactions among civil society, market and state actors. It must be said that the way in which we teach and learn outside higher education and official institutions may change but the concerns for people and access remain paramount.

ASSUMPTIONS IN THE FIELD

It is hard to be a naysayer in the face of such innovation. Indeed, innovation would appear to be the catchword of our times. We want there to be newness and freshness, and who could possibly say no to improvements? Indeed, the solitary professor image in front of a lecture theatre of 100 students seems somewhat quaint in the face of teaching and learning across the Internet.

One of the first assumptions is that ICTs actually improve education and learning, yet we have little evidence that is the case. One who has made a career of critically assessing the impact of technology is Neil Selwyn (2011) who makes