ACE IT Computer Training

Background

Following its launch in May 2001, ACE IT has rapidly become one of the central providers of community based computer training for older people both within the Edinburgh area and beyond.

The average age of each learner is 75 years old and to date over 8000 + older people have benefited from the training courses.

One of the core roles of ACE IT has always been to encourage new and non confident users, specifically in the 50+ age group, to learn basic computer skills, Internet access and email thus broadening education, offering other leisure interests and finding information on many issues and topics.

What makes the ACE IT computer training sessions so successful with learners, is the friendly & relaxed atmosphere where overcoming the fear factor and realising the fun that can be achieved from the computer is seen to be one of the key objectives.

Using email and Skype the learners keep in contact with family and friends throughout the world – an important factor, especially if they live on their own.

Increasingly our learners tell us if they do not keep up with technology and learn to make informed choices via the web, then they will be marginalised and isolated.

Quotes from learners

“I have no family in Edinburgh (I use to phone them) but now I’m in contact with them every day using Facebook”

“Please go to a class – the skills I’ve learnt at ACE IT are too numerous. I love my weekly visits.”

“I think I’ve bored too many friends going on about the advantages of having a computer. I love Skyping family members”.

The Moose in the Hoose Project

This is an outreach project started in 2005 by ACE IT to reduce the social isolation felt by many older people living in care homes in Edinburgh. The main purpose of the project is to
introduce care home residents to the benefits of computers and information technology to keep in touch with friends, family, their interests and hobbies.

The project uses specially trained volunteers who make weekly visits to six care homes. The approach is not to run computer classes but to explore what access to the technology can offer residents on an individual basis. Some residents type their own emails whilst others take part in Skype calls to family set up by volunteers. Other activities include making cards and calendars on the computer, using jigsaws and drawing apps on iPad and enjoying songs on YouTube.

By engaging with residents in using Skype, email and mental stimulation on a weekly basis, their quality of life is significantly improved.

Another important element in every Moose session, is taking the time for a cup of tea and a chat. This not only helps residents to maintain their social skills but helps friendships to develop between volunteers and residents.

In 2011 the Moose in the Hoose Project underwent a Social Return on Investment review which concluded that for every £1 spent on the project there was £8.13 social return.

**Quote from a relative**

“The project enabled our mother to interact with family members, who were less able to visit her as frequently as she, or they, would have liked. She enjoyed her regular Tuesday Skype sessions with the family members in England; and receiving the many family news updates and photographs by email. Despite her advanced years, and the fact that she had never used a computer before, she adapted to it without difficulty and it added a much valued dimension to her contact with the family.”

**Introducing Older Unpaid Older Carers to the Benefits of the Internet**

In 2014 ACE IT ran a free, 6 week training course for older unpaid carers to introduce to them to the benefits of Internet access. The main aim was to reduce carers’ feelings of isolation and enhance the quality of life for them and those they cared for.

The course was tailor made for the particular needs of this group focusing on useful websites, carers’ on-line forums, claiming benefits and shopping on-line as well as using Skype, email and leisure activities such as photography and games. A significant part of the project also concentrated on assisting carers with actually getting on-line at home when the training ended.

Due to their caring role many carers experience significant isolation and the 24 hour nature of Internet access can assist this group feel more connected to friends, family and other sources of support. Building confidence in a supportive environment was vitally important to this group, as well as meeting others in a similar situation.
“I am so grateful for this free course – solved my main worries at this time, with the potential of lessening the stress of caring. Overall this course has been of very significant benefit to me.”

“I shall be able to keep in touch with my children more who are electronic savvy. As I gain confidence I will use more as I can see it’s the only way forward.”

**Awareness of Social Isolation and Loneliness**

Since its’ inception in 2001, ACE IT has been tackling social isolation, loneliness and age-related issues surrounding the use of computers.

Many learners have come to ACE IT classes because younger family members have moved overseas or they have been recently bereaved. Other learners have become aware that not having computer skills to email friends, book holidays on-line or shop on-line has made them feel not part of the rest of society and that they are missing out.

The social environment of ACE IT’s classes has led to new friendships being formed and support being given, whilst acquiring new computer skills has led to feelings of achievement and empowerment.

The Moose in the Hoose project main aim has been to reduce feelings of social isolation among care home residents. Having weekly access to a broad range of activities on laptops and iPads has provided stimulation for residents. The added benefit of being able to keeping in touch with family overseas has helped to maintain family links and reduce feelings of being cut off from the outside world.

**Current ACE IT Activities**

- Weekly iPad classes
- One to one sessions with volunteers on a wide range of equipment from smart phones to tablets and laptops.
- Skype classes.
- Approximately 40 older learners have tuition every week
- The Moose in the Hoose project – an outreach project based in 6 care homes in Edinburgh which uses specially trained volunteers to help residents keep in touch with friends and family via email, Skype and the Internet.

**Conclusion**

ACE IT has always been about reducing isolation, increasing social capital, building digital capacity and improving health literacy for older people in Scotland. These principles still remain for us through our ACE IT Computer Training project, the Moose in the Hoose
project, the Older Unpaid Carers’ project, our volunteering opportunities and our ever expanding social networks. These values underpin our current funding contract with CEC’s Health & Social Care Department, as part of our planning and service targets.

ACE IT is a multi award winning charity that has championed the inclusion of older people for 14 years. During this time we have witnessed the positive impact access to computer technology can have on reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation among older people.

The importance of online social networks for older people cannot be understated. With the main demographic of Facebook users increasingly tending towards the over 50’s, connecting with family and friends online can be a powerful tool to overcome social isolation. The use of Skype to communicate with family and friends abroad or in care settings can also be transformational for older people.

While we acknowledge the need for actual human contact cannot be replaced by technology alone. Giving older people the skills to use new technology which the rest of the population takes for granted, is still vitally important if older people are to take an active part in all aspects of life today and to make their own informed choices.

Finally as a reminder, here is what I said back in 2003! –

“The relentless advance of technology is being paralleled by the phenomenon of the ‘greying population’. If older people are not helped to catch up and use the technology, we will be faced with a serious ‘digital divide’, whereby a growing proportion of those whom technology would help to remain independent and ‘connected’ members of the community, become instead isolated and disenfranchised.”

Jenny Ridge
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ACE IT
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