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First Year Report to the
Spencer Foundation

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During this year we have conducted Phase 1 of our project as outlined in the proposal submitted in the spring of 1986. The overall goal of the project, it will be recalled, is to study the reconfiguration of educational activity by helping to set up a self-sustaining after-school educational activity system linking several community organizations with each other and with the research/teaching program of U.C. San Diego.

The goal of Phase 1 has been to establish a mutual knowledge base for the researchers and the community and to create a superstructure for the operation of the after-school activity centers in Phase 2. To this end, we began making regular visits to the four proposed sites in the fall of 1986, and have conducted three of the four planned "short seminars" with staff members of the participating institutions. As anticipated, several "reconfigurations" of our plans, as well as community involvement, have taken place.

The purpose of Phase 1 was to help local people enter into the problem solving process that would eventuate in their own proposals for the structure and content of their local activity systems in Phase 2. In the initial proposal we spoke of three needs that Phase 1 activities would fulfill: task understanding on the part of the community adults who staff each institution; baseline information on the part of the University researchers who would be working with them; and, practical preparation focussing on the use of computer and

human resources available in the group for conducting the Phase 2 activity systems. Field notes were kept of all visits as a means of specifying the entering understandings of all concerned.

The first thing that became clear, by dint of the force of practical scheduling needs for the seminars, was that our baseline information and the understanding of the first year task by the community people did indeed need to undergo change and development! Although the proposal itself, written summaries of selected portions of it, and face-to-face meetings to discuss it, were conducted with staff members of each institution, there were misunderstandings on both sides; there was no lack of good will, even enthusiasm, nor lack of attention to the details; there was however an inability on everyone's part to convert the "words" into the concreteness of who would attend the first "short seminar." Our knowledge of the institutions and negotiations with them at the time of planning for the proposal led us to propose (and them to accept and support the idea) that separate seminars be held for each institution, each to be attended by four staff members who would be the nucleus for the Phase 2 activity systems in the local sites. The outcome was different:

The library could fill the "letter" of the plan and produce a full constituency for the seminar, but two members would come from those who work at libraries outside the focal community, one was not a staff member and had a heavy commitment to coursework for a degree and could not guarantee continued intensive involvement in this Phase;

The school re-examined its situation and its understanding of Phase 2 and concluded that one staff member should attend since it appeared that the school district support of the day-care center's after-school program would be the best way for them to participate;

The day-care center and the boys' and girls' club were undergoing staff changes (which emerged over the year to be a stable characteristic of these institutions) and resolved the problems this created for participation in this project by "drafting" staff who would not be heavily involved in Phase 2, but who, in each case, were less likely to be transient members of the institution (the administrative secretary of the day-care center and the area and local administrators for the club).

Throughout the fall, the field notes testified that the situation was different than we originally understood. As we probed more, we negotiated to combine the institutions in the first three seminars and work separately with each institution for the last session -- the concrete planning for Phase 2. Essentially this is a reversal of the participant structure depicted in the proposal, but is one much more in line with our more developed "base line information" about the institutions.

The Institutions.

We have visited each site on the average of two times a week; we have followed up on special notices regarding the sites that appear in local newspapers and on bulletin boards and fliers at the sites; we have worked with the equipment (and potentials and limitations regarding equipment) at each site. The picture that we have now is quite different than our entering one.

The boys' and girls' club (henceforth, club) and the day-care center (henceforth, center) are complementary institutions in many respects. While the center has a rigid structure about child participants (attendance lists and a follow-up on absences), it has a very informal structure of activities. The opposite is true of the club: a very rich structure of activities and a

very loose arrangement for who comes when. Staff responsibility is to a specified group of children in the center and to specified activities in the club, exactly in line with the structuring. In both places, staff turnover for those with direct contact hours with the children is quite high. Also, in both places, there is a strong positive value on helping in the development of the children and a strong negative attitude toward being "school-like," "not fun" or "stressing." Some children go to both institutions, being acceptably absent from the center at the times of certain activities at the club.

In both places, the atmosphere is pleasant and the staff and students from the university were welcome. In the course of the year, the project has "recruited" participation qualitatively better than that which could be arranged for in the first seminar. The director of the center, a very involved and innovative educator, is herself now involved and is working very carefully to involve a "group-leader-teacher" most likely to stay at the job for a longer time period than is the norm. From the club, the main participant is now the education director, and although she will be leaving the club in the fall, she is following up on arrangements so that the education director to be hired will be able to be integrated into the activity.

In both places, support from school institutions may be arranged for conducting the Phase 2 activity with the children. In the case of the center, this is already accomplished. As the school redefined its role in the project from a main institution in its own right to a supporting one, it has arranged for the use of space and equipment to support the center's involvement in the project. In the case of the club, there has been a long-standing arrangement with the junior-high next door, although to date it has been a one-way

arrangement. The club facilities (basketball court and swimming pool) are regularly used by the school for its extra-curricular activities. The plan is developing that reciprocity can be arranged so that the club can make use of the school's computer resources after school. The more we think about it, the more sensible this outcome appears: for after-school educational activity systems the role of school districts should be supportive rather than operational.

The library contrasts sharply with the center and the club, the other two institutions that remain as central operational institutions in the project. Instead of "recruiting" stronger participation over the course of the year, the project staff involvement with the library enabled participation that was more narrow and more focussed; major responsibility toward the project is now undertaken by the local branch head. In another contrast, the structuring and staff responsibilities at the library "follow" neither activities nor groups of children, by and large; they follow the materials. The exception to this rule is the part of the library work that goes on outside of the physical location: outreach to elementary schools or particular segments of the community. However, true to the general rule, the materials were important for the library in our project this year. A donated computer, the furniture for it, the policies for it, supplies and equipment for it -- these were regular topics that had to be dealt with seriously. The plans for Phase 2 around the library also seem to be developing around materials: There is great interest in software that calls upon reference material (like a mystery game that calls for the use of an atlas and an almanac) and interest in developing new computer materials that expose participants to the varying services and materials available in the library. In harmony with the "outreach" services and the

"drop-in" nature of client participation, and the interest in telecommunication that we saw grow this year, we hope to develop a tele-coordinating role for the library with respect to activities at the club and the center in Phase 2.

In each case, the three institutions that remain as operational ones and the school which has moved out of a major role and into a supportive role, the appreciation of the role of University students in their activities has grown. Early in the fall we had only one undergraduate regularly involved although four others worked with the first seminar. Later, three undergraduates became regular members of the scene. They were accepted and appreciated; their special role as people who were learners but also resources for others' learning became clear. At first there seemed to be some expectation that the University could simply deliver knowledge about using computers in educational activities in out-of-school settings; after some period of work, and particularly work with the undergraduates, the view changed to one that included more symmetry of resources and more need for exploration and building of the systems that would work in that particular community in those particular institutions.

The seminars.

The first seminar/workshop held in December introduced community personnel to a wide range of overarching metaphors that educators have used for educational activity settings that involve computers and telecommunications. Particular emphasis was placed on metaphors that had grown up around LCHC including a "mental gymnasium," "communication experts," "computer chronicles," "the fifth dimension," and so on. A brief summary of the kinds of activity

organized around each metaphor along with information about local experts who had experience implementing the metaphors was provided seminar/ workshop participants. It was clear that there was a strong relation between these ways of organizing activities and the institutions' interest in promoting learning and development that was still "fun."

This first workshop also introduced participants to computer-mediated communication and word processing. Electronic mail, computer conferences and real-time computer "conversations" were used, emphasizing the idea that reading and writing could be undertaken without a "school" lesson atmosphere intruding. We carefully constructed the introductions to three different word processing systems so that participants would see how introductory sessions need not start with "the basics" nor exclude people who were judged deficit in the basics. Instead of beginning with rudimentary aspects, like inserting characters, we began with the "fancy" aspects that allow dramatic changes in texts and do not require that any one individual's past history with writing stand in the way. In addition, we developed further a special "internal mail" system for our UNIX system that had originated in earlier work at our laboratory so that each participant could have access to a limited but economical electronic mail-box. For the rest of the year we promoted the use of this facility by the participants in a variety of ways. This system then began to serve as both a means of inter-connecting the various system parts and as a natural repository for data about the system operation (since we automatically save all mail).