



The New Old Age

Caring and Coping

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Helping Seniors Learn New Technology

By PAULA SPAN

Several years ago Garrison Phillips, a retired actor, bought himself a Dell computer. He soon recognized that he didn't know what to do with it. "I needed instruction," he told me in an interview conducted — perhaps surprisingly — by e-mail. "The technology of the Internet, cell and iPhones was like a foreign language."

Mr. Phillips then attended one of the first classes offered by [OATS](#), a New York City nonprofit (the acronym stands for Older Adults Technology Services) that provides free tech training for seniors.

Despite serious hearing loss from an injury in the Korean War, Mr. Phillips learned his way around his desktop, went on to more advanced OATS classes and now, at 83, uses his computer (his third) to blog, write stories and theater pieces, and to communicate with friends and family from England to California. It's become "the most important activity and creative outlet in my life," he wrote.

Would that more older adults could follow suit. A few weeks back, I noted that [only 54 percent of Americans over age 65 have access to the Internet](#), according to Pew Research studies. Among those 77 and older, the proportion drops to about a third.

In an era when everything, from personal health records to nursing home quality ratings, is moving online, when the best way to stay in touch with grandchildren may involve texting, this amounts to slow progress. The tech analyst Laurie Orlov of the [Aging in Place Technology Watch blog](#) has called for a national campaign to bring 100 percent of seniors online.

Teaching skills only addresses part of the problem, of course; the costs of devices and of Internet service also keep older people offline, and so do physical limitations or cognitive impairment.

Still, learning the technology is key. As Mr. Phillips pointed out, "the Internet was a whole new world for me." Everyone exploring a new world needs a guide.



OATS

Anita Monik, standing, and Emilia Rysinka attend a technology class for seniors offered by OATS (Older Adults Technology Services) in New York City.

Though lots of communities offer computer classes for older adults, the response has been mostly local and small-scale. But since my previous post brought lots of comments from frustrated adult children, I thought I'd pass along some time-tested national and about-to-be-national programs. Researchers have learned a fair amount about the ways seniors learn and have documented that computer and Internet training works well when it incorporates those findings.

First, thanks to reader D. Solomon from San Jose for reminding us about [Senior Net](#), a player in this game since 1986. Supported in part by tech giants like Adobe, Microsoft and IBM, as well as local governments and foundations, Senior Net has established about 50 learning centers around the country, a laudable accomplishment. (Look [here](#) to see if there's one near you or your parent.) Still, it's not enough. For instance, there's one center in all of New Jersey, my state, and none in several other states.

The [Connections program](#), developed by the nonprofit Oasis Institute, fills in some of those gaps. Bolstered by grants from AT&T, it offers classes in 23 metro areas — including suburban Pittsburgh, where volunteer Harvey Schoenman, 72 and retired after a long tech career, teaches his peers at the Community Library of Castle Shannon.

His students, Mr. Schoenman finds, often suffer from computer anxiety. (Oh, how I remember.) “But they've heard about Facebook; their grandchildren are on it, and they want to be a part of it,” he told me. “They want to learn how to get junk out of their houses and sell it on eBay. They want to be better able to function in today's world.”

Connections' curriculum includes more than 30 courses ranging from basics to digital photography and online job-hunting. It keeps classes small and of manageable length (two hours, with a break in between), with lots of repetition and hands-on practice. Workbooks are tailored to seniors — large fonts, multiple illustrations.

That approach seems to pay off. After [comparing a small sample of Connections students with a control group](#), researchers at the University of Miami found that after completing introductory courses, older adults were significantly more comfortable with and knowledgeable about computers and the Internet, and more likely to use them.

In Manhattan, OATS just opened a snazzy 2,700-foot Senior Planet Exploration Center in Chelsea, the country's first tech center specifically for those over 60.

OATS also teaches a range of senior-tailored courses in 70 locations across the city (libraries, public schools, senior centers and senior housing developments). Now it's thinking big, planning to tackle other cities.

“We have a lot of infrastructure that wasn't there before,” said the executive director, Tom Kamber, noting that federal stimulus funds had helped build 3,000 computer labs around the country. “We're right on the cusp of creating a powerful national program that will reach hundreds of thousands of seniors a year.”

Make it so. When seniors succeed in taming technology, it can make an enormous difference in their lives.

Ask Muriel Beach, an 85-year-old OATS alumna. In her career as a labor economist, she had used electric typewriters, so computers were terra incognita.

Not any more. “These classes provide a doorway for seniors to the wider world,” she told me. She sent that e-mail to me from her iPad.

*[Paula Span](#) is the author of “*When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions.*”*



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