Wednesday, March 24, 4 pm

Prof. Edwin Blake,
University of Cape Town
Redesigning Ourselves

Can we move the debate on "Design-for" Development to being "Designed-with" Development? Can we envision a flexibility in ourselves to redesign ourselves as much as we design artefacts outside? Do we accept that transformation needs to happen to us and our methods as much as the community we seek to develop? Are our methods and beliefs

as much up for grabs as the cherished values of the community that we are trying to transform with our technology?

I present a (South) African perspective where the challenge is to re-vision western methods to accord more closely with the multi-facetted local values. For Africans the challenge is how do we turn the insight, captured in the term ubuntu, that our humanity is intimately interconnected with, and dependent on, the community of the living and the dead, into something that helps us design computer artefacts? More formally: can we extract normative values for design from the implicitly held views of a community?

Further: is it not probable, once we accept the community as co-designers that we might not even have the last word in design? Can we accept that, as designers, we might never be able to remove uncertainty in purpose and functionality and thus we leave it up to the users to appropriate our artefacts for their own, unanticipated, uses? Uses that are literally and of necessity situated outside the perspectives which we are able to entertain?

About Prof. Edwin Blake

My awareness that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) needs to be firmly based on community values arose from my involvement with the South African National Information Technology Forum in the mid-nineties. This organization's finest contribution was the South African position paper at the G7 conference on the Information Society and Development that was held in 1996 in South Africa where the notion of an Information Community was first formulated.

It rapidly became clear that I was not suited to the boring frustrations of governments and policy. I came to believe that knowledge that does not lead to effective action is not really knowledge and that failure of implementation is equivalent to a failure of understanding. By that definition most of the fine policies announced by government were failures.

A small project illustrating some concrete action was preferable. The first such project (1996) was a system called CyberTracker that allowed semi-literate animal trackers to reveal their deep understanding of nature.
My research has focussed on the interaction of people and computers applied so that it bridges the way ICT has to be applied in a Developing Country. Specifically my work covers flow, presence, storytelling and heritage work in Virtual Environments and Computer Games, visualization and ICT for Development (ICT4D). In the field of ICT4D my work has covered tele-health projects, location aware computing to support animal trackers and ICT applications to assist deprived Deaf communities.

I am a South African with a Computer Science doctorate from Queen Mary College, London University, and I am currently Professor in Computer Science at the University of Cape

Town.