

Do you know anyone lacking basic computer skills? Or someone who has never used the Internet? Do you happen to know which mobile service is 18 meters long, bright yellow and moves on wheels?

Learning the basic skills of the information society Netti-Nysse – the Internet bus in the City of Tampere

Netti-Nysse put the Web on wheels and took it to its users. The purpose of this mobile service is to encourage the residents of the City of Tampere in Finland to start using computers and the Internet by giving them some basic lessons.

Netti-Nysse can be booked for groups of citizens or individuals who can sign up to open tuition groups or may just enrol in Internet training courses for small groups. Groups of neighbours, clubs, societies - any group of citizens who want to learn how to use computers and the internet can book the Netti-Nysse for their use and have it come to their own neighbourhood. Instruction is very much user-oriented: there is always someone to help, but the users proceed at their own pace. Interactive learning methods, learning by doing and getting used to the Internet are the cornerstones of Netti-Nysse. Elementary instruction is free of charge.

How did it all start?

In January 2000, teachers from three countries with a common wish to offer opportunities for people to enter the world of computers came together in Wales. The idea of an Internet bus was born. The original idea was to have one bus in Amsterdam, Holland, one in Roskilde, Denmark and one in Tampere, Finland.

The idea of internet bus was presented to companies and to the council of Tampere. We established co-operation agreements and also received computers, mobile phones and some financial aid besides activating a lot of volunteers for our project. The media were keen on the project right from the start, which helped us make the project known to the general public.

In the city of Tampere, the right people were found and the timing was good. The e-Tampere programme was launched at the same time as Netti-Nysse idea was being promoted. The objective of this programme was to make Tampere a global leader in the research, development and application of issues related to e-government and e-commerce. The e-government programme deals with e-commerce, technology and enterprises, but also touches issues concerning citizen participation in public decision-making (read more about e-Tampere at www.etampere.fi and the interview section at www.uwe.ac.uk/bbs/sglg). Netti-Nysse proved as a concrete, living example of e-Tampere, which in turn has been a good framework and support for the project.

Thanks to the flexibility and quick decision-making of the city council, an old, articulated bus was bought for this purpose in the autumn of 2000. Local vocational schools converted it into a wireless Internet bus during the winter. The transformation process itself was a joint effort of various experts from different fields. The people participating were really excited about the work and all the problems were gradually solved. With a small opening ceremony in June 2001, the bus was launched for the public.

Netti-Nysse is financed almost fully by the city of Tampere. Only a minor percentage of the project budget is coming from our co-operation partners.



What is the bus like?

Netti-Nysse used to serve as a city bus. It is a model 1982, 18,5 meter-long articulated bus. Netti-Nysse is a unique hybrid of the familiar citybus combined with the latest technology. It also has a very up-to-date exterior. There really should not be anything to be scared of - even the name of the bus is of local origin and, in fact, just another dialectal way to express 'Internet bus'.

The bus consists of two parts. "The computer classroom" has 11 computers with the basic software installed. "The auditorium" has 10 seats, a big screen and a data-projector. Good audio-visual facilities as well as a coffee machine and a fridge are also provided.

There are 9 permanent (W-LAN) antennas around the town for Internet access. When near to those antennas it is easy to get a working Internet connection, but beyond the reach of those antennas we can use the high-speed GSM or GPRS mobile connection. That connection, however, is much slower.

Large batteries or our own generator provide the necessary electricity for the bus but it is also possible to plug in the electricity network. There is an additional heating

system and air conditioning in the bus. If necessary the bus can carry 13 people. Technically, Netti-Nysse is registered as a minibus, though it is probably the biggest minibus in the world.

How do we work?

The goal of Netti-Nysse is to serve and help people in getting started with computers and the Internet. People gather together groups of 7-10 people and call us. We normally offer them a package of instruction including 4 sessions 2 hours each. We fix the schedule to suit them as best we can. Normally our first group starts at 9 am and the last one is out at 7.30pm.

When people first come to us they seem to be very curious about the bus but the fancy car alone doesn't take you far. Our tutors, the people who help the customers, are a very important part of the experience. There are five people working full time for the bus. With one group there are 2-5 tutors available, depending on the case. Individual support, someone to ask, is very important for the people who are entering a world they do not know. Although our tutors are not teachers by profession, they are experienced customer service professionals aged 35-55 with good basic computer and Internet skills.

Our tutors represent a whole new kind of professionals. They know how to support and solve everyday computer problems or other information society –related matters. They have an encouraging attitude, empowering the learners and doing it in plain, understandable language. The whole idea is that the tutors must be easily approachable by anyone. We also hope that our bus is a place where difficult terms of information society are translated into understandable language. For us there is no such thing as a silly question.

With our groups we focus on the Internet, but to get there we normally need to practice using the computer mouse first. After that we very soon start surfing on the Internet, making use of search engines, opening new e-mail accounts and studying the web banking systems. Very soon people get so excited about what is there on the Internet that they forget the actual computer.

Of course we encourage them to carry on learning and using computers even after our meetings. We tell them how to access the Internet from their homes and inform them about other elementary computer courses available.

According to the feedback of our customers and demand we have succeeded in our work. The bus is usually fully booked for at least 3 months ahead.

Who are we working with?

During the first year, 85 different groups have attended the elementary courses. There has been a range of different groups - a lot of senior people, groups of mothers, truck drivers, young unemployed people, immigrants, entrepreneurs, extended families, etc. There has also been a growing interest on the part of associations. It is obvious that a familiar group supports the learning experience and creates a relaxed atmosphere.

Last year, 70% of the course participants were women, 45% between the ages of 31-55 years, 50% over the age of 55, 90% had never used a computer before or only knew how to play solitaire with it. 95% were going to go on using the computer after the course. 50% had a computer at home, but there was mainly someone else using it.

During the first year we also took part in various happenings and exhibitions and also arranged open doors days to make the service and the bus familiar to people. The number of visitors totalled 12 000.

Netti-Nysse also received some public recognition. Last November the European Commission awarded Netti-Nysse and the city of Tampere with a recognition for the "Best eGovernment Practise". Another recognition came from the Ministry of Education as Netti-Nysse won a national price for being an "innovative adult education practice".



How to lower the barriers to participation in the information society?

The need to learn is there. In Finland people seem to feel a social pressure to learn to use new technology. But often the barrier to participate in computer classes and other formal education is too high. Courses are long, there are tests and you have to keep up with the pace of the teachers etc. Safe, easy-going, informal introductory courses are needed. Positive learning experiences empower as they feed curiosity and courage.

Supporting people's computer literacy plays an essential part in building the information society. But it's not nearly enough. Giving the people opportunities to use the computer and offering reasonably priced and fast Internet connections are equally important. In the city of Tampere there are a little over 100 computers available for public use free of charge. In addition, public schools are quite well equipped as to computers. It is being examined whether the computer classrooms of public schools could be opened for the public in the evenings and during the weekends.

As to Internet connections for households, the number of alternatives to choose from has gone up while the prices have come down with the increased competition. However, meaningful content is needed to supplement the faster connections and increased knowledge and skills of the people. What adults expect from using the Internet is some kind of added value for their everyday life or at least a certain kind of pleasure factor. To make this true the city of Tampere is actively developing new web services for its citizens.

What we and Netti-Nysse are aiming at is mostly to evoke discussion, create co-operation and show the need for new practices in the sector. It is our goal to help people understand their options and then make their own choices concerning their role in today's information society.



Bio

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