Draft proposal for a Linux Skill-Share project in Durham

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Introduction

This is a working document, for the purpose of generating feedback, inviting participation and broadening inclusion of other people and groups who might want to get involved. Please let me know your thoughts on it ASAP so I can try to get a final version sorted out within the next few weeks. Please circulate to any person or group who might be interested *and discuss it with people who don't have access to a computer.*

The Problems

1. There are lots of people with low incomes who are excluded from the on-line world by not having easy access to a computer. This results in a democratic deficit, because so much exchange of information and communication is done electronically these days. Even getting involved in a local community group is much harder if you don't have an email address and social networking.

2. There are also lots of people who are mistakenly convinced by marketing that they need to buy a new computer every couple of years. This results in great waste, as perfectly good computers are discarded into the waste stream (disposing of electronic equipment is highly toxic).

3. Excessive consumption of electronic goods creates social problems. Many of the minerals used to make computer chips are mined in appalling conditions with blatant disregard to the safety of the miners. Much of the trade in these minerals fuels regional conflicts, especially in central Africa; the welfare of these miners and their communities should be a concern to all of us. The conditions in which computers are manufactured (usually in far-eastern countries) are so bad that there are very high suicide rates amongst the workers.

4. The manufacture, distribution and disposal of computers uses a lot of energy, which contributes to carbon emissions and global climate change. Anything we can do to slow this down has to be a good thing.

5. The software that runs on your computer is probably made by one of two large corporations called Microsoft (who make Windows, which is installed on most PCs) or Apple (they make Macs, Ipads etc.) These operating systems are *defective by design* in ways that limit the user's right to privacy and security; limit the user's choices of what they can do with their computer; tie you in to buying more of their product, like an addiction; and limit your ability to learn about and modify how the computer works.

The Solution

There is a free Operating System which can replace Windows on your computer, called Linux. "Free" in this sense means that it's been developed by people in an open, collaborative way, and you can share it and change it as much as you like, without having to ask or pay anyone; also it's available free-of-charge in several different varieties.

Some of the advantages of using Linux are:

1. It can extend the life of old-ish computers that would otherwise go to waste

2. By doing so, it reduces excessive consumption and waste, with all the problems they cause.

3. You can get a few-years-old computer for free from someone who doesn't want it anymore, install some free software, and you've got a useful computer even if you've no cash to spend.

4. Because the software was developed openly, you can be more confident that it doesn't contain "back-doors" which enable people to spy on you. There are also much fewer problems with viruses and the like.

5. You get access to a vast amount of free software that runs on Linux – everything from web-browsers to games to music-making and graphics.

6. You become part of a friendly, global community who are happy to help you if you get stuck with something – you won't need to pay for technical support (unless you want to).

7. Because of its open nature, Linux actively encourages you as a user to learn about its internal workings, so you can learn how to fix it yourself just like you can learn to fix your own bicycle.

The Proposal

Some people can figure all of this out for themselves, but most of us could use a bit of support when we take our first steps in a new way of doing things. And even if you can do-it-yourself, doing-it-with-others can be more fun. This is my suggestion, based on having done similar things before in other places:

- Find a venue that's easy to get to by public transport, who have an internet connection and will give us free use of a room one day a month (e.g. 2nd Saturday 9-5)

- Recruit volunteers – you don't need to be an expert, as long as you've managed to install Linux once, you can show someone else how to do it. Experts of course will be very welcome, to help the rest of us when we get stuck...

- Involve local groups who can help get the news out to the people who need to hear it (with a particular emphasis on women, the unemployed and the elderly, who are groups traditionally the most excluded from these things)

- In order to maintain interest, develop a programme of sessions looking at how to do different things with linux once you've got started. For example, a session looking at office software; another looking at how to get printers working properly; one on networking; another on information security; and so on...

- Strengthen our communities, by fostering a spirit of mutual aid and cooperation, between people who might otherwise never have met, whilst we build each others' skills and abilities, both technically and socially.

Next Steps

1. Please contact mark@aktivix.org if you have any suggestions for improvements to this draft document.

2. Please contact mark@aktivix.org if you would like to volunteer your time (a few hours a

month, probably at a weekend) for this kind of project – any level of expertise, as long as you've installed linux before

3. Please contact mark@aktivix.org if you have access to some unwanted old computers that could be put back into service

4. Please contact mark@aktivix.org if you, or someone you know, wants to go on a "waiting list" for coming along to the first session, when we get it sorted.

5. Please contact mark@aktivix.org if you know of any community groups who might want to be involved with this – either by offering use of a venue, helping circulate publicity, and so on. Definitely let me know if anyone is already doing something similar, so we can help each other.

6. Also, let me know if you'd like to help out with designing posters, fliers, social media presence, or just general organising.