

# Information Literacy for Telecenter Users in Low–Income Regional Mexican Communities

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to propose a methodology to increase information literacy among people who attend telecenters in low-income communities in Mexico. The Mexican government created telecenters, or community technology centers, as part of a national project under which adults lacking basic education who are isolated and living under economically and technologically marginal standards are granted access to educational materials and work training in the form of printed, audiovisual, and electronic media (CONEVyT, 2001). Our research group evaluated the Mexican telecenter program as part of a nationwide qualitative diagnostic study, which represented the initial stage of a three-year research project conducted by the Information and Communication Technologies for Education and Community Development research group at the *Universidad de las Americas-Puebla* in Mexico for the National Institute for Adult Education. The results of this study combine with the concepts of information literacy and socioconstructivist pedagogy to form the basis for the present proposal.

This article is organized in three parts. The first is centered around a discussion of current literature treating technology for social development, including the aforementioned diagnostic study on telecenters, or *plazas comunitarias*, as they are called in this Mexican project. The purpose of the second part, which is to explore a different perspective on the subject at hand, is developed during a discussion of information literacy and social constructivism. The third part fleshes out ideas broached in sections one and two and proposes a methodology for technology community centers, as the *plazas comunitarias*, under which information literacy and personal development are promoted.

## BACKGROUND

In this section, the traditional view that access to technology leads to social development is analyzed and criticized. This view may be considered limiting as it might hinder potential benefits from reaching users of technology; to illustrate this point, results of the diagnostic

study on the *plazas comunitarias* project in Mexico will be presented and discussed.

## Technology for Social Development

In most developing countries, providing access to information and communication technology (ICT) to low-income populations—that is, bridging the digital divide—is a high priority since it is widely believed that ICT can be a tool “for social action and positive social change” (APC, 2003, p. 12) as well as a facilitator of “more productive and rewarding lives” (McNair, 2000, p. 9). However, in developing countries, the ICT revolution remains an unfulfilled promise to low-income populations due to obvious access inequalities and the conviction of developing societies that access to technology implicitly leads to social development (Moghaddam & Lebedeva, 2004; Curtain, 2004). It makes perfect sense then that most efforts made by these governments are dedicated to supplying the technology with the expectation that this is enough to decrease the digital divide.

According to Hewitt (2001), these expectations are simply too high, and it is an overstatement that just giving people access to the Internet broadens their employment opportunities and improves their chances at achieving sustainable economic growth. In the same vein, León (1999) accepts the importance of access to information and communication technology, but agrees with Hewitt that this alone does not constitute entrée into a new stage of social development. During an OECD roundtable discussion of ICT and the digital divide, participants commented that the gap is not digital, but rather educational, and they stressed the need to empower people with educational, cognitive, and behavioral skills instead of just supplying them with equipment (OECD Secretariat, 2000). Steyaert (2000) adds to this list the need to develop information skills in order to become fully information literate. And finally, in a 1996 UNESCO report, Delors worries about the high hopes for social change that are imposed on technology. He declares that the so-called information and communication revolution is not purely technological and that it is important to situate it in a greater social and economic context, a comment that

touches on one of the chief criticisms directed at the supply of technology in an effort to diminish the digital divide.

## A Diagnostic Study on Plazas Comunitarias

A prime example of a project under which a one-dimensional, causal relationship is asserted between technology and social development is the *plazas comunitarias* project in Mexico. To clearly understand how this linear view prevents users from exploiting the full potential of ICT, the results of the diagnostic study conducted by our research group are explained here (for the full research report see Salinas, Porras, Santos, & Ramos, 2002).

### Problem Statement

The *plazas comunitarias* are being opened nationwide to allow low-income populations the opportunity to: 1) attend literacy and non-formal basic education programs; 2) receive continuing education; and 3) become technology literate.

However, due to lofty aspirations on the part of the government at the project's outset, the *plazas* were opened at a hectic pace. Thus, the Institute did not have time to develop a basic model that would aid them in integrating the objectives they hoped to achieve. Understanding the need for such a model, the Institute contacted our research group to aid in the development of an educational model.

### Research Design

The main objective of the qualitative study was to diagnose how the *plazas* were functioning during their first year in operation. It was an exploratory qualitative study done in a sample of 17 *plazas* in six Mexican states over a six-month period. Researchers employed observation and in-depth interview as data collection methods as well as a number of informational sources. To encourage inclusion and expand the sample's variability, the *plazas* were selected using purposive sampling. Questions asked during the study included: How do students learn? How are ICT being used? How are all its physical areas being used? How are the *plazas*' services being promoted? How are the *plazas*' personnel performing their job tasks? And how are the *plazas* relating to their local communities? All observations were recorded in research journals. Finally, the constant comparative method of inductive data analysis was used to identify patterns that might help us understand how the *plazas* were functioning.

## Results

1. Although the *plazas comunitarias* project was something new for the Mexican population, it was not entirely an educational innovation as the project lacked a systemic perspective and failed to consider many of the complexities of the social system related to the *plazas*.
2. The *plazas* were operated as traditional schools, not as center of adult education. The opening of the *plazas*' buildings caused employees and adult students to feel that they were in a formal learning environment, and technological materials were used in the same way as in traditional schools. That is, ICT served only as a vehicle of information and not as a mind-tool (Jonassen, 1996).
3. Telecenter users frequently engaged in cognitive processes of the lower orders. In fact, most observed teaching, learning, and utilization of technology practices were focused on the memorization of content for answering multiple-choice exams. Therefore, these adults were not developing higher order skills that would improve their everyday lives, such as learning to learn, problem-solving capabilities, and collaborative learning methods.
4. The role of ICT in the *plazas* was basically to teach its users the essential functions of the equipment and how to manipulate it in order to extract information. Thus, there was no clear understanding of the potential of ICT to improve quality of life or teach life-long learning skills. For the *plazas*, using technology meant only the rote learning of software applications, so ICT was not really perceived as part of the whole knowledge construction process.
5. The *plazas comunitarias* are not decreasing the social inequalities and exclusion of the poor because the people that need these services most are not stepping forward to become telecenter users. They do not recognize any link between the services offered at telecenters and their own personal needs. On the contrary, individuals with more education and belonging to a higher socioeconomic class go to the *plazas* without outside encouragement since the benefits of ICT are more obvious and credible to them. Thus, traditional economic and social inequalities and exclusions are simply replicated at the *plazas* rather than decreased (Steyaert, 2002).

## A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

The literature previously cited in this article suggests the employment of an alternative perspective on the use of

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