Trends in Distance Education in South America

Luis Barrera
Cesar Vallejo University, Peru

INTRODUCTION

This article reviews the history, state of the art, and future trends in distance education, in South American countries, through an overview of the main experiences in the region.

South America is in the western hemisphere, connected to Central and North America by the Isthmus of Panama. Twelve countries form this continent: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela. As reported by the United Nations Development Programme (2007), all of them are developing countries, characterized by a difficult social reality as a result of political and economic crisis in the course of its history.

South American countries' basic indicators (see Table 1) show an average gross domestic product per capita 3 to 30 times lower than those from developed countries. Despite the sustained growth of access to information and communication technologies, with an average DOI (digital opportunity index) of 0.39 (ITU, 2006), a bandwidth growth rate of 479% between 2001 and 2002 (Parkes, 2004), and an Internet use growth rate of 374% between 2000 and 2007 (MMG, 2007), only 13.99% of the South American population has access to Internet.

Multiethnic, multicultural, and geographically disperse nations cause a gap, a social inequality between urban and rural population; therefore, governments, as well as international institutions and nongovernmen-

Table 1. South American countries' basic indicators (2006)

Country	Population	GDP (gross domestic product) per capita in 2004	Telephone Lines	Cellular Mobile Subscribers	Internet Users	Personal Computers in 2004	DOI
	(millions)	(U.S. $)	(per 100 inhabitants)				
Argentina	38.59	4,007	24.47	57.41	17.78	9.07	0.47
Bolivia	9.18	967	7.04	26.37	5.23	2.33	0.30
Brazil	186.40	3,278	21.38	46.25	17.24	16.09	0.42
Chile	15.59	6,166	22.04	67.79	28.93	14.75	0.52
Colombia	45.60	2,152	16.84	47.92	10.39	4.15	0.38
Ecuador	13.23	2,295	12.7	47.22	7.32	6.55	0.36
Guyana	0.75	1,051	14.66	37.45	21.3	3.86	0.29
Paraguay	6.16	1,018	5.2	30.64	3.25	7.47	0.30
Peru	27.97	2,513	8.05	19.96	16.45	10.01	0.39
Suriname	0.45	2,484	18.04	51.82	7.12	4.55	0.33
Uruguay	3.25	4,078	30.95	35.54	20.55	13.27	0.43
Venezuela	26.75	4,164	13.48	46.71	12.37	8.19	0.43
South America	**373.92**	**2,848**	**16.24**	**42.92**	**13.99**	**8.36**	**0.39**

Source: ITU (2007). Note: The ITU's Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) measures the overall ability of individuals in a country to access and use new ICTs on a scale of 0 to 1, where 1 is the highest opportunity. (ITU, 2007).

tal organizations, have been using different kinds of technologies to increase access to education (see Table 2) as a way to improve the standards of living and to reduce poverty.

BACKGROUND

South American countries have been involved in distance education since the beginning of the last century. Different approaches have been applied in the implementation of distance-education projects: government managed, privately sponsored, branches

Table 2. Some distance education projects in South America

Country	Project	Technology	Educational Level	Year	Approximate Number of Involved Learners
a. Colombia	Acción Cultural Popular Radio Sutatenza	Radio + Texts	Basic education for rural adults and children	1947 - 1989	8 million over the years
b. Bolivia	Radio Mathematics	Radio	Mathematics: primary grades 2-5	1986	250,000 in 1994
	Radio Health	Radio	Health orientation	1992	
	Early Childhood development	Radio	Child development for careers	1994	
c. Brazil	Fundação Roberto Marinho - Rede Globo Telecurso 2000	Television + Texts	Primary, secondary, and vocational education for out-of-the school people	1995	7 million by TV 5.2 million texts sold 200,000 formerly enrolled in 1999
d. Venezuela	Maths	Radio	Basic math	1991	3 million in 1999
e. Chile	Enlaces	Computers +Internet	National primary and secondary school network	1992	3.08 million in 2007
f. Brazil	Proinfo	Computers +Internet	National primary and secondary school network	1997	258,560 teachers in 2004 6 million students 7.5 million projected
g. Colombia	CRECE Escuela Virtual	Computers +Internet	Computer-based learning in some primary and secondary schools	1998	10,949 rural students in 2002 1,000 urban students in 2002
h. Peru	Huascarán	Computers +Internet	National primary and secondary school network	2001	2.53 million students in 2005 48,267 teachers in 2005 7.45 million projected for 2010
i. Venezuela	Fundabit	Computers +Internet	Basic education	2001	40,543 teachers 357,453 students 197,070 other users
j. Argentina	Educ.ar	Computers +Internet	Primary and secondary schools national network	2002	5 million students in 2007
k. Colombia	CERES	Computers +Internet	Higher Education Regional Centers	2005	10,297 rural students in 2007
l. Bolivia	Telecentros Educativos Comunitarios TEC	Computers +Internet	National primary and secondary school network	2006	150,000 projected for 2009
m. Uruguay	CEIBAL	One Laptop per Child +Internet	National primary and secondary school network	2007	300,000 students and 16,000 teachers projected for 2009

Source: for a, b, and d, Perraton & Creed (2001); for c, Wolff et al. (2002); for g, Cardona, Arango, & Trujillo (2003); for k, CERES (2007); for e, f , h, i, j, l, and m, Web sites for each project.

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