

Chapter 2.8

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

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