E–Learning as Social Inclusion

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INTRODUCTION

When talking about excluded people and how to develop programs towards digital and social inclusion, there has been little research to individuate targets. So far, there seems to be only two main subdivisions:

- People with either sensorial or motor disabilities who may benefit from specific technologies in order to assure accessibility to digital content.
- People that are digitally illiterate and therefore have to be taught the basics on using the computer and basic applications.

Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the digital divide is a multidimensional phenomenon, and therefore, that digital inclusion strategies will benefit a lot if more specific strategies are developed, individuating problems and solutions related more closely to individual experiences. The aim of this article is to show how e-learning can be used as an e-inclusion tool to help excluded people improve their lives and be socially included.

BACKGROUND

Most public projects backed by governments, concerned with digital inclusion, tend to centre their focus on issues of hardware: donation of computers, cabling homes, the use of wireless devices, and so forth. Though such issues are obviously unavoidable, they are not the end-all be-all of the digital inclusion matter.

Moreover, as stated in the introduction, the ultimate beneficiary targeted is all too often ill-defined. Generally benficiaries are of two types:

First, we have people with disabilities, in which case, the targeted beneficiary is usually well analysed and segmented into specific groups, given that considerations are different for the blind, the colour blind, the visually impaired, and so on. A quick and serious introduction to accessibility and the Internet can be found at Lawrence and Giles (1999).

Then, we have the general fall-out of the so-called digitally excluded, in which case, the single identifying characteristic is one of computer illiteracy. Thus, one finds little distinction made among such diverse targets as senior citizens, the unemployed, convicts, disadvantaged youth, and so forth. The blanket approach taken for all these groups is to organise practical courses wherein these diverse individuals are taught the how to of surfing the Net, e-mailing, and like activities.

Considering the undifferentiated reasoning underlying such tactics specious, governments should consider alternative approaches to develop e-inclusion processes. A good possibility, which starts to be seen in several European Union (EU) co-financed projects, is to create ambitious e-inclusion programs based on the following imperatives. One of the best introductions for understanding these news imperatives is Warschauer (2003).

1. Overcoming mental barriers as opposed to simply technological ones. Most analyses, like several studies from the Eurobarometer, show that the major causal factors of marginalisation from the information society are those such as the mistrust often felt toward new technologies and the lack of any content attractive or useful to either the socially excluded or those at risk of being so.
2. An approach based on empowerment. It can be held that what is important is not so much knowing how to use, for instance, Netscape or Outlook, but rather the educational and liberating potential of new technologies. We seek to make the Internet an instrument for integrating the socially excluded by using it to equip them with the skills that will make them employable in the information society. Furthermore, we seek to develop their capacity to think critically, to form their own political views, and to organise themselves as citizens and cultural groups. The potential realisation of such substantial goals advocates thinking about ICT (information communication technologies) in more social terms rather than through a reductive technical approach.

STRATEGIES TOWARDS SOCIAL INCLUSION USING E-LEARNING

The following is a list of the five strategies that, at this stage in the research, seem the most promising in terms of

establishing the best practice in the use of e-learning for social and digital inclusion.

First, the strategy of combining teaching ICT with other non-digital knowledge is equally important to social inclusion. An example of this approach is the case of a gypsy community wherein computers were used as a tool to prepare for a driving exam. The usefulness of this tool was enough to convince several adults from the community to participate in e-learning activities. Similarly, it has been found in other best practices that, in order to motivate adults to use such tools as Microsoft Office or a Web browser, it was vital to show to them how such knowledge would help them find employment. You can see that strategy more clearly described at www.5d.org, which describes in detail the specific e-learning devices and methodology used. This is an effective strategy for three reasons. First, the students are much more motivated, since they associate learning ICT with something of genuine concern to them, obtaining a driver's licence, a job, and so forth. Second, there is an efficiency factor to combining learning purposes; that is, at the same time the learners acquire Internet skills, they also acquire others such as learning how to drive. Third, the fulfilment of the goal of social inclusion is greatly enhanced, given that not only digital skills are imparted, but also other skills which, though not digital, are nonetheless vital to social inclusion.

The second key strategy is communication. Our analysis of failures has demonstrated that if the proposal is not properly communicated, it will not fulfil its objectives. There are innumerable Web sites dedicated to helping women or immigrants that, however well they may be designed and organised, do not succeed in doing so because the 'target' does not know they exist. Communication needs to be appropriate to both the target and its geographical situation, that is, if it is local, national, or international in character. Furthermore, it must make use of non-digital means to deliver the message, given that the target group is precisely the digitally excluded.

A third strategy is to establish peer to peer teaching systems. That is, in the degree to which it is possible, it is desirable for the students to teach each other. This can be structured either formally or informally. In the former case, the students are 'promoted' to the level of teachers; the important implication here is that if enough students are inspired to adopt a teaching role, sustainability is guaranteed. Meanwhile, in less formally structured situations, the help the students offer significantly reinforces the cognitive relevance of what has been and is explained and greatly boosts motivation. Again, the 5D project (www.5d.org) used this strategy also with impressive results within the gypsy community.

The fourth strategy is to create informal environments and has the advantage of being applicable for various target groups. For instance, the traditional class environment for teaching computer skills can be very boring for children who are not used to it. Organising something more informal and experimental, where the children use the computer as a toy, can be highly effective. Likewise, such formal teaching environments might be intimidating for immigrants whose cultural background is significantly different from the host country's. They may feel more comfortable in less formal circumstances. Moreover, much the same can be said with regard to certain groups of women and senior citizens. A very interesting example is the collective Herein in Austria who adapt Web sites for e-learning projects with migrants to the cultural specificities of the migrant's culture, making it therefore easier to access and use (www.herein.at).

The fifth strategy is to use teachers similar to the students themselves, something that is particularly well documented in cases of e-learning focused towards women. Since digital technology tends to be thought of as man's world, adolescent girls often do not feel motivated by it. Hence, it can be advantageous to use female monitors to explain the use of a given e-learning environment, as well as female avatars to present content. Though the effect may be a subconscious one, it can be important nonetheless, as it goes towards breaking the stereotype that only men can handle ICT. A similar phenomenon has been observed in the case of immigrants; an instructor from the same culture tends to be more motivating, however well the immigrant speaks the local language. A good example of this is the Eclectic Technology Carnival organized by Genderchangers (www.genderchangers.org) who arrange specific events for women, using female professors, arranging more relaxed environments, and selecting content and ways to present them which appeal more to women.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

After a careful analysis of real e-learning practices towards e-inclusion, considering the key strategies and analysing where information and technological advances were more needed and relevant, we have found the following five key areas which are good starting points for both implementation and further research:

Social Solutions to Social Problems

Although there is always some co-influence between technology and social practices, we should not forget that social practices define how technology is finally used, and not the opposite. A good argumentation of this thesis can be found in Marzo (2003). We should neither forget that digital technologies are never neutral. If not

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