

Chapter 12

Perspectives on the Influences of Social Capital upon Internet Usage of Rural Guatemalan Teachers

Douglas Tedford

Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Guatemala

ABSTRACT

The Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum and the researcher collaborated to identify the influences of bonding, bridging and linking social capital upon teacher Internet usage in the rural Guatemalan town of San Lucas Toliman. The Participatory Rural Appraisal was employed to draw upon community perspectives for identifying the study problem, designing interview questions, and evaluating data, with the researcher in the role of facilitator. Of 34 teachers invited to participate in online coursework free of charge, only 5 completed it. Among them, 20 were interviewed by a native Spanish speaker, and 42 local community educators synthesized interview responses into recommendations for improving local engagement of teachers in online learning. Bonding and bridging social capital influences of family, friends, technology experts and school administrators were shown to levy significant positive and negative effects upon teacher decisions to use the Internet in a region challenged by inadequate buying power, and limited telecommunications infrastructure.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum (FRMT), named after the recipient of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, was established for the purpose of promoting and sustaining the educational and social progress of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala, the Americas and the world (Cifuentes, 2007; Duque Arellano,

1999; FRMT, 2007b; Zapeta, et. al., 1998). It is a fully non-profit organization with a small paid staff and large cadre of volunteer professionals within Guatemala and worldwide, all dedicated to the development and progress of indigenous peoples as equal participants in education and industry, for which computer and Internet literacy is essential (Koss, 2001; Organization of American States, 2006; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2008) and skills are required

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Figure 1. An English teacher of San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala receives guidance for using the Internet at a community technology center of the Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum, a non-profit educational and social services organization led by the 1992 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.



for speaking English and Spanish, as principal languages of commerce (Barshefsky, 2002; Douglas, 2006). The FRMT's secondary vocational school, the Centro Educativo Luciano Pavarotti, situated in San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala is also the site of a community technology center (CTC) which houses 22 Internet-ready computers donated by friends of Luciano Pavarotti, the municipality of Alcobendas, Spain, and the Quetzal Club of France, with technical support supplemented by the Republic of China (Taiwan) (Cifuentes, 2007; Galvez, 2007). Access to computers and the Internet is limited by a number of factors, but it was found that issues other than access affect engagement in online learning. The researcher, a volunteer educational consultant, facilitated the development of a study which explored the social influences upon decisions of rural Guatemalan teachers relative to participating in distance education via the Internet- a study called for in academia, and the first of its kind in research linking relationships between social capital, teacher education and online learning in the developing

world (Creed & Joynes, 2005; Lorenzetti, 2004; Trucano, 2005).

SETTING THE STAGE

From 1960 to 1996, a civil war was waged in the mountain highlands and jungles of the Republic of Guatemala, in Central America (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006). Difficulties imposed by the war upon transportation and communication disrupted the development over time of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructures in remote areas of the nation, and of knowledge and practices for the use of ICT in education, constituting a digital divide between metropolitan and rural regions (Attewell, 2001; Caniz, 2006; Koss, 2001). The rhetoric of the 1996 Esquipulas Peace Accords (Conciliation Resources, 2007) and of subsequent agreements demonstrated a commitment of the Guatemalan government to support equal educational opportunities for its indigenous peoples. A few years

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