Chapter II

Empowerment of Marginal Communities Through Information-Driven Learning

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Abstract

Effective use of information technology can play an important role in learning processes among constricted-bandwidth-inflicted countries with bare minimum information infrastructure. The Internet can act as the learning tool for providing appropriate content with easier access at lesser effort. When communities interact through any effective means of communication to gain access to relevant information, raise their knowledge, develop their capacities, mobilize resources, establish knowledge network, and empower themselves, penetration of the Internet must be ensured at acceptable state. However, the information-driven learning system requires more than these, so that information becomes truly a value-added product for the marginal community.
Introduction

When groups of users interact intensively through some medium, they progressively constitute a community. However, community feeling does not automatically emerge just because groups use electronic communication. It takes a lot of time and a lot of interaction. It requires sharing goals and sharing experiences (Dillenbourg, 2000). Information sharing can help groups develop community, and information-driven learning can empower those communities as they emerge.

Effective use of electronic communication technology and Web-based techniques can play an important role in the learning process, especially in the absence of a dependable information infrastructure. The free flow of information, and easy access to it, are primary ingredients of information-driven learning.

The Internet is supposed to be a deductive tool to promote awareness, provide content, raise skills, and act as the catalytic agent of empowerment. However, the actual picture reveals that, although the non-English-speaking population comprises almost 90% of the world population, only 8.4% have Internet access, and only 4% access the Internet in Asian languages. Of the entire world population, only 12% has Internet access. About 35.2% of the Internet Web sites are in English (Global Reach, 2004).

During August to September 2004, Isoph (2004) carried out an online survey on non-profit associations providing Internet-based learning, or e-learning. Out of 697 respondents, more than 54% claimed that either they are using e-learning technology or plan to use it within the next 12 months. However, this number would be very different in the context of developing countries.

Thus, to raise the knowledge system platform for use by marginal communities, penetration of the Internet to the third or fourth tier of the communication channel (Figure 1) has to be made mandatory. Whether communication initiates through networking within organizations (1st tier) or through huge national networks (5th tier), penetration of communication among cities and networking among regional communication channels (in 3rd tier) are essential to create information-based communities in a country.

Along this channel many countries have adopted the top-down approach, but it has been found that the bottom-up approach is more pertinent for designing the information infrastructure in developing countries. Establishing networking within an organization without sufficient knowledge about its outer peripheries, interface capability with the next higher tier, and routing possibility to the next higher level of communication channel often creates complexities in extending the network, incurs higher cost, and restricts their smooth operation. Hence, the communication channel should be extended down to earth by establishing national networks in modular form at first, and then they can reach the next lower level by interconnecting lower level networks through necessary piggybacking.
Investigating the Role of Electronic Planning within Planning Reform
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