Distance Education in South America

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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 (2004), 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 three to 30 times lower than those from developed countries. Despite the sustained growth of access to information and communication technologies, with an average DAI (digital access index) of 0.47 (ITU, 2003) and a bandwidth growth rate of 479% between 2001 and 2002 (Parkes, 2004), only 8.7% of the South American population has access to the Internet.

Multiethnic, multicultural, and geographically dispersed nations cause a gap, a social inequality between urban and rural populations, therefore governments as well as international institutions and nongovernmental 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.

Table 1. South American countries’ basic indicators (2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population (millions)</th>
<th>GDP (gross domestic product per capita in 2002 (U.S. $)</th>
<th>Telephone Lines</th>
<th>Cellular Mobile Subscribers</th>
<th>Internet Users</th>
<th>Personal Computers</th>
<th>DAI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>36.98</td>
<td>11,180</td>
<td>21.88</td>
<td>17.76</td>
<td>11.20</td>
<td>8.20</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>175.96</td>
<td>2,603</td>
<td>22.32</td>
<td>26.36</td>
<td>8.22</td>
<td>7.48</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>14.71</td>
<td>4,413</td>
<td>23.04</td>
<td>42.83</td>
<td>23.75</td>
<td>11.93</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>43.78</td>
<td>1,874</td>
<td>20.03</td>
<td>14.13</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>1,076</td>
<td>11.91</td>
<td>18.41</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyana</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>828</td>
<td>9.15</td>
<td>9.93</td>
<td>14.22</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>29.85</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>27.42</td>
<td>2,124</td>
<td>6.71</td>
<td>10.61</td>
<td>10.39</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suriname</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>15.17</td>
<td>31.95</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3,640</td>
<td>27.96</td>
<td>19.26</td>
<td>11.90</td>
<td>11.01</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>25.70</td>
<td>5,105</td>
<td>11.27</td>
<td>25.64</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>356.72</td>
<td>3,050</td>
<td>15.10</td>
<td>21.95</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The ITU’s digital access index 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 access (ITU, 2003).
### Table 2. Some distance education projects in South America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Approximate Number of Involved Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Colombia</td>
<td>Acción Cultural Popular Radio Sutatenza</td>
<td>Radio + texts</td>
<td>Basic education for rural adults and children</td>
<td>1947-1989</td>
<td>8 million over the years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Brazil</td>
<td>Fundação Roberto Marinho-Rede Globo Telecurso 2000</td>
<td>Television + texts</td>
<td>Primary, secondary, and vocational education for out-of-school people</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>7 million by TV 5.2 million texts sold 200,000 formerly enrolled in 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Chile</td>
<td>Elnaces</td>
<td>Computers + Internet</td>
<td>National primary and secondary school network</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>2.87 million in 2002 3 million projected for 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Brazil</td>
<td>Proinfo</td>
<td>Computers + Internet</td>
<td>National primary and secondary school network</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>150,464 teachers 6 million students 7.5 million projected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Colombia</td>
<td>CRECE Escuela Virtual</td>
<td>Computers + Internet</td>
<td>Computer-based learning in some primary and secondary schools</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>10,949 rural students in 2002 1,000 urban students in 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Peru</td>
<td>Huascarán</td>
<td>Computers + Internet</td>
<td>National primary and secondary school network</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2.25 million in 2003 7.45 million projected for 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Venezuela</td>
<td>Fundabit</td>
<td>Computers + Internet</td>
<td>Basic education</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>40,543 teachers 357,453 students 197,070 other users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Argentina</td>
<td>Educar</td>
<td>Computers + Internet</td>
<td>Rural schools national network</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6,000 in 2002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

### HISTORY

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 management, private sponsors, branches from public or private universities, and management and sponsorship by nongovernmental organizations or some mixture of them with the help of international institutions like the Catholic Church, UNESCO, The World Bank, UNDP, FAO, and so forth. As on the rest of the world, each form of technology, from the postal service to Web services, has been used as delivery systems.

In 1904 International Schools from the United States started to sell correspondent courses through a branch office in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 1923 Edgard Roquete Pinto, one of the pioneers of distance education in Latin America, created the Rádio Sociedade do Rio de Janeiro (Radio Society of Rio de Janeiro, later renamed Radio Ministry of Education) with the aims of “bringing every place some education, teaching and enjoyment” (Vianney, 2003, p. 74). In 1947 clergyman (later monsignor) José Joaquín Salcedo founded Radio Sutatenza in the Andean mountains of Colombia, where 80% of the people were illiterate at that time. For more than 40 years, Salcedo’s goal to help people in their self-development was accomplished (Gumucio Dagron, 2001). When the project was closed in 1989, 10 million books were distributed, and 25,000 rural leaders and 8 million people were trained in basic education, health, and agricultural techniques. Through its existence, Radio Sutatenza was a model for distance education projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Gumucio Dagron, 2001).

In 1961 in Lima, the capital city of Peru, the Catholic Church established Panamericana Teleeducacion, the first telescuela (teleschool) using television programmes as a complement to formal education; 3 years later in 1964, Manuel Benavides