Case Study V

Computer Technology and Native Literacy in the Amazon Rain Forest

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Education programs among indigenous peoples throughout South America vary greatly in terms of content, instructional objectives, quality and level of instruction and the nature of the participants as well as the educational setting. This case study describes a relatively new component of an ongoing education program that involves Yanomami communities in the Amazon rain forest of northern Brazil. While the use of information technology (IT) in the classroom has become standard in most of the so-called “developed” world, the use of computers in remote indigenous villages is surprising to many observers. In the case of the Brazilian Yanomami, IT represents simply the latest stage in the process of acquiring Western means, such as written language, to strengthen their languages and culture and to provide access to information and knowledge of the outside world. IT is a potentially very powerful tool in their struggle to preserve their economic, political and cultural autonomy and ultimately to ensure their survival in a rapidly changing, globally interconnected world.

What makes the use of IT among the Yanomami so incredible is the rapid pace at which participants mastered reading and writing in their native languages and
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