Chapter XV

Open Sourcing E-Learning for Developing Countries

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Abstract

A critical success factor for developing countries is advancing their intellectual capacity. Nearly all aspects of economic development depend on the ability of individuals to extend their understanding of their business, suppliers, customers, laws and society from a local perspective to a broader, more international one that is able to assimilate change brought by new technologies and respond with innovations that bring competitive advantage. The Internet offers countries information access to the entire world — if only one can understand it. That same Internet also offers fantastic educational resources — effectively a global knowledge base. However, much of Internet content is oriented towards the needs and interests of industrialized countries. Here we propose an approach for developing countries to pool efforts to create a digital commons of e-learning resources that are appropriate and relevant to their specific needs.

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E-Learning for the Developing World

Education as Antidote to Poverty

“Education is the only antidote to poverty.” – A.R. Bawa, Dep Minister Education, Ghana (Bawa, 2003)

While cheap, universally available education is desirable everywhere, it is most desperately needed in the developing world, especially in rural areas where access is most limited. For most people in developing countries, education is not only a goal in itself, but is also instrumental to fulfilling other needs. In addition to the direct costs of education, there are also opportunity cost — time lost for other kinds of employment. In many poor countries, this applies even to children, for they are also working assets of the family (e.g., to work the fields). The benefits of sending children to school must be seen to clearly outweigh the costs. These benefits are seen most clearly as offering new economic opportunities, which is itself an educational challenge.

E-Learning as Enabler for E-Business

There are a variety of related definitions of e-business — most include the notion of business processes that exploit Internet technologies. A somewhat broader notion suggested by the Gartner Group (www.fourthwavegroup.com) is that e-business is “a phenomenon involving a significant change in the cultural, economic, societal and market interactions that people and businesses experience in dealing with one another.”

For the purposes here, let us assume that e-business involves the enhancement of economic opportunities via Internet technologies. In this sense, one typically imagines the ability to start new enterprises, opening access to international markets, linking to venture capital, etc. In short, enabling access to (the positive features of) globalization.

But many people in developing countries, this comes as a culture shock. They have lived in relative isolation, familiar only with their local culture and practices. Thus, the transition to e-business requires adaptation and learning about the outside world and its business practices. The focus in this chapter is on e-learning support to facilitate this adaptation to e-business.

A Vision of E-Learning for Development

Like most new technologies, e-learning has had its initial impact mainly in the industrialized countries. The developing world so far lacks the infrastructure and availability of computer resources to make serious investments in e-learning developments. When governments in poor countries face shortages of food and medicine, investment in education may be seen as a luxury.
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