

Community Learning Centers (CLCs) are known by a variety of names around the world—telecenters, telecottages, digital clubhouses, cyber cafes, *cabinas públicas*, *espaces numérisés*, and *telestugen*, to name a few.¹ Just as the post office or telegraph center provided people with public access to communication services, CLCs today serve a similar purpose. However, today's CLCs are digital, with access to email, the Internet and the World Wide Web. Some think that CLCs are a fad that cannot sustain operations once external funding ends. Others argue that they are not appropriate for developing countries given the multitude of other, more basic and important needs. Furthermore, few CLC projects have tried to quantify their impact, prompting evaluators to conclude that, "until adequate tools are developed to effectively assess the social impact of the application...efforts to demonstrate how people are empowered by knowledge will lack credibility."²

Here is a story from Paraguay that sheds light on these and other important issues.

AMIC@S IN ASUNCIÓN

LEAPFROGGING DEVELOPMENT

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Two years ago, Mayor Martin Burt spoke at a signing ceremony in Asunción. Celebrating an agreement between USAID and the municipal government, the Mayor welcomed the establishment of Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in neighborhoods throughout Paraguay's capitol city. "With these Centers," he said, "we are pursuing a hypothesis and a dream." By giving communities greater access to information and opportunities to solve their own problems, he postulated, they can leapfrog development, moving into the 21st century while skipping some of the stages and sidestepping some of the struggles that industrialized countries experienced during the 20th century.

Asunción's CLCs are known affectionately as *amic@s* (*aulas municipales de información, comunicación y aprendizaje*, loosely translated as "municipal classrooms for information, communication and learning"), a play on the word "amiga" or "friend" in Spanish. The original goal of the project was to provide less advantaged communities with the benefits of computers and communications technology for civic development purposes. In particular, the project sought to contribute to an overall process of democratization by decentralizing municipal systems and services, improving communication between citizens and government officials, and strengthening popular participation in civic activities.

A Picture of Paraguay

Paraguay is South America's 'empty quarter,' a country little known even to its neighbors. For much of its history, it has distanced itself from the Latin American mainstream, and for a substantial period of this century was South America's most notorious and durable police state. PJ O'Rourke summed it up bluntly when he wrote, "Paraguay is nowhere and famous for nothing," and then, on a short visit to cover elections, promptly fell in love with the place.

Destination Paraguay, Lonely Planet, <http://www.eskimo.com/~krautm>

Paraguay is relatively new to the concept of democracy and the practice of participatory governance. Since the turn of the last century, periods of instability were followed by 34 years of limited political freedom and isolation from the global community. A military coup in 1989 led to free presidential and congressional elections, followed by political, legal and economic reforms. In 1992, a new constitution was drafted, establishing a democratic republic. Today, despite an unstable political and institutional system, a high level of government corruption, and a low level of public confidence,

the government is starting to implement democratic systems, reform the economy and enhance human rights.

Economic challenges include a thriving informal commercial sector unconnected to the formal economy, underemployment, and a low level of basic infrastructure—roads, sewer services, running water, electricity, trash collection and telecommunications. As a member of the *Mercosur*, a group of trading partners in the region, Paraguay must run to catch up with Argentina, Brazil and Chile, its big, aggressive neighbors.

Paraguay is home to approximately 5,300,000 people, 60% of whom are under the age of 30. One million live in Asunción, the administrative, economic and commercial center of the country. Though schools are crowded and lack learning resources, the literacy rate is 90%, with six years of compulsory education and an attendance rate of 86.6%.

When the CLC were launched in 1998, Paraguay was facing more challenges than usual. El Nino had devastated the country, especially Asunción, causing emergency situations that had to be addressed with municipal funds earmarked for other projects. This weakened the implementation of a variety of projects, including street repair, trash collection—and the CLCs.⁴

A Place To Pay Taxes?

Initially, the *amic@s* suffered from an image problem. Designed by development people and municipal authorities, the Centers baffled many of the local residents. Pressing issues confronted poor communities, especially in the wake of El Nino. Yet word spread that the centers were either places to pay taxes, which excited no one, or free schools, which disappointed those who came expecting to find teachers and a classroom.

Unfortunately, even the practical services that Asunción's CLCs were intended to provide—such as automated voter registration, fee collection for licenses, permits and bills, and distribution of tax forms—were delayed. El Nino changed the municipality's budget, diverting funds for CLC activities to other, more immediate needs and delaying production of official materials that were to be available through the Centers. Moreover, the local government's computer network was found to be inaccessible from the Centers without the purchase of new, expensive equipment that exceeded the budget for the *amic@s*. All of this left the Centers largely unable to provide the services that originally had been planned.

Bless This Project!

The first lesson from the *amic@* experience is one that development professionals already know. It is to consult the community, enable local decision making, promote popular ownership, and make sure the project meets the needs and has the blessing of the beneficiaries. Though more of this was needed at the outset of the *amic@* activity, project personnel made up for it fast.

As Sergio Aranda, Coordinator of the *amic@s*, explains, "It became clear that the framework of this project needed to be looked at in terms of social demand. It needed to be tied into the daily lives of the residents of the city."



The entire neighborhood celebrates, along with the local priest who blesses the center.

Using his notebook computer and information from the municipality, Aranda divided the city into districts. He then conducted a needs assessment in each neighborhood, canvassing communities and engaging local people, community groups, churches and schools to help determine the design and services to be provided at their *amic@*. With that information, he publicized the project, tailoring the message for each community and involving influential members of the municipality and communities in his outreach activities.

Aranda's efforts proved so successful that in one area, a poor neighborhood known for the active involvement of its residents in community projects (it boasts 17 community groups), an association of bricklayers, carpenters and builders literally built the center, voluntarily, from the ground up. Today the *amic@s* are so popular that the launch of each new CLC is a major community event, complete with dancing, music, food, and speeches from local dignitaries. The entire neighborhood celebrates, along with the local priest who blesses the center.

Where Are the *amic@s*?

Nine *amic@s* are now operating, with three more in the works. **Located throughout the city**, each site has taken on the personality and character of its surrounding neighborhood, offering different services depending on what the local community wants.

At the bus station, shoeshine boys and girls and children from a nearby homeless shelter come daily to the *amic@*, which is now competing favorably with the video game parlor next door. The children talked recently with Mayor Burt via a video teleconference, have learned to surf the web

and explore interactive, multimedia learning materials. Commuters stop by on their way to and from work.

At the library, part of a cultural complex that includes a museum and a theater, patrons take virtual visits to museums and libraries around the world every Wednesday afternoon, organized and hosted by local artists.

The *amic@* at the largest **market center** in the city provides vendors with email access and a web site and introduces the merchants' children, at the nearby municipal kindergarten, to computers.

Amic@ Banado Sur, located **inside a public school** (and near the main city garbage dump), will serve as a technical training center at night, using the equipment for adult education.

In a poor and dangerous neighborhood near the river, the *amic@* was placed inside a Catholic Church, where an elderly but enthusiastic nun runs the show for orphans and delinquents.

In a school near the country's principal prison, *Amic@* Tacumbu is operated by a network of collaborators, including the church, police, military, and educational and municipal officials.

At all the *amic@s*, teachers and students are among the most enthusiastic visitors, taking advantage of the computer training sessions that most centers offer and the access to information that their resource-poor schools cannot provide.



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If This Guy Were a Company, I'd Invest In Him.⁵

Another lesson from Asunción is the importance of finding a Sergio Aranda to run the project. A systems engineer, who owns a computer-consulting firm, Sergio has strong technical skills. More important for the *amic@s*, however, are his abundant social, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills, which he does not use sparingly. Considering every person and group in town a potential partner, he has forged alliances on behalf of the centers that are expected to prove invaluable to their long-term sustainability.

When Peace Corps volunteers wanted to use an *amic@* computer to send emails home, Sergio worked out a deal with them whereby their online time would be exchanged for work at the center to train community members in basic computer functions. Planet Internet, a local Internet Service Provider, gives free Internet connectivity for one year in return for placing advertisements and other PR materials in the Centers. With Catholic University, one of the *amic@s* is designing a course in training and facilitation, and with the police station in the Chacarita neighborhood, the local *amic@* offers professional development courses to officers. Another barter deal enables college students to use the center in exchange for designing web sites for the municipality. Current efforts are focused on the private sector, a critical partner for the long-term viability of the Centers, where Aranda hopes to close corporate sponsorship deals.

Exploring innovative ways to keep the Centers going with limited funding is one of Sergio's fortes. Another is his commitment to ensuring that the project reaches its target audience. As with similar activities involving technology, the first visitors to the Centers were municipal employees, friends, computer professionals and the educated elite—the "haves." The intended beneficiaries, the "have nots," were not even aware of them. Sergio and others worked proactively and effectively to correct this. Aranda relays an anecdote: "I met with a man who was a poor auto mechanic. He scoffed at the idea of computers helping him in his daily life. So I showed him how to buy distributor caps through the Internet, where he discovered significant cost savings between those from Brazil and the ones he had been purchasing from Venezuela."

Thank you for not giving us more books. Thank you for giving us all the libraries in the world.⁶

Sergio Aranda is not the only local champion who has befriended the *amic@s*. Mayor Burt has been described as one of the most progressive mayors the city has ever had. He also has ensured strong support for the Centers from the

municipal government, which has been crucial to their success. Despite funding problems that have plagued the project, the government has been able to cover basic maintenance costs for the Centers, including electricity, telephone, water and rent, and today the *amic@s* appear as a line item in the municipal budget. Moreover, useful official functions now have evolved to the local level. Common forms are available at the CLCs, eliminating the need for people to travel downtown and stand in long lines at the city center office. Even a CD-ROM was produced to inform people about the location of their local voting place during the April 1998 election. In addition, Mayor Burt participates in low-end video conferences with constituents gathered in *amic@s*, where topics of interest and importance to the people can be discussed.

Bravo Asunción

While the initial vision of an electronic municipal center has changed, the *amic@* project is proving what Mayor Burt and others have said about the possibility of leapfrogging development stages and coming out ahead. Students who have never seen a good school library are using CD-ROMs and the Internet to help with their homework. Public market vendors who know little about advertising are posting their wares, services and fees on their web site. Individuals who have never traveled are making friends in cyberspace from around the world.

Currently, the project is still fairly new and experimental, and the *amic@s* are undertaken on a pilot basis. After the implementation phase is over, in June 2000, a complete assessment is planned to measure the impact of access to information and communication technologies on local communities. In the meantime, one has only to look around Asunción—at schools, the bus station, community centers, markets and the public library—to see the positive impact the *amic@s* have had in a short time. As one commentator noted, “the *amic@s* are slowly changing people’s attitudes, not only due to the benefits of technology that is at their disposal, but also due to a growing confidence of the active forces of the community in their capacity to work and learn with the municipal government.”⁷

Although the *amic@s* have evolved differently than what was initially conceived, the project is successfully achieving some of the original goals set out by USAID and the municipality. What better example of the growth of the democratic process than the manner in which each *amic@* ended up being planned, inaugurated and used in relation to its immediate neighborhood and under the direction of its immediate community. Bravo to the Municipality of Asunción for having the wisdom to allow the *amic@s* to develop as they have.

¹ Steve Cisler, “Telecenters and Libraries: New Technologies and New Partnerships,” August 4, 1998, <http://home.inreach.com/cisler/telecenters.htm>.

² “Enchanted by Telecentres: A Critical look at Universal Access to Information Technologies for International Development,” paper presented at the conference “New IT and Inequality,” University of Maryland, February 16-17, 1999, Ricardo Gomez, Patrik Hunt, Emmanuelle Lamoureau, International Development Research Center (IDRC), Canada.

³ LearnLink, USAID Contract HNE-I-96-00018-00, is funded by the Human Capacity Development Center in the Global Bureau, the Africa Bureau, and other Bureaus, offices and missions.

⁴ Aranda, Sergio and Steve Cisler, *Amic@s: Public Access Centers in Asuncion, Paraguay*, INET 99, Internet Society’s Annual Conference, June 22-25, 1999, San Jose, California.

⁵ Steve Cisler, “Letter from Paraguay,” October 1998. <http://home.inreach.com/cisler/paraguay.htm>.

⁶ Dr. Martin Burt, Mayor of Asuncion, January 1998.

⁷ Aranda, Sergio and Steve Cisler, *Amic@s: Public Access Centers in Asuncion, Paraguay*, INET 99, Internet Society’s Annual Conference, June 22-25, 1999, San Jose, California.