Technology and Life Skills Education

Some time ago, Juan, now nine, was badly burned during a fire at his family's modest home on the outskirts of Reynosa in northern Mexico. With his face and parts of his body scarred, Juan was often excluded or ridiculed at school. That is, until he and a group of his fellow students made a short film that tells of how Juan asked a girl out and was rejected in favor of a more handsome suitor. The video concluded with a strong message about respecting others — and their differences.

"Through this one video, the young people opened up their eyes to seeing how others are discriminated against," explains Luz Elena Aranda Arroyo, Program Coordinator at Rostros y Voces, a partner organization of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) in Mexico. The video had a profound impact, not only on the team that produced it, but on dozens of other students and community members who viewed the film at special events.

The documentary is one of more than 150 videos produced through Cámara! Ahí nos vemos, a program developed through a global youth development initiative of Nokia and IYF. Over the past four years, more than 2,800 young people have benefited from the program, which uses technology as a tool to teach life skills.

Whether it be e-mail, the Internet, digital cameras, video and audio-recording equipment, computer software, or mobile phones, technology can be a valuable asset in delivering life skills programs. Of particular benefit is that young people find working with such media exciting and creative. Today's technologies offer youth a means of expressing their views, of connecting with the wider community, and acquiring 'hard skills,' ranging from increased computer literacy to proficiency in operating a video camera. Other essential life skills developed through technology-oriented programs include self-confidence, communication, decision making, problem solving, and teamwork.

Captured here are the experiences of three programs receiving support through IYF's collaboration with Nokia. Each offers candid assessments of the opportunities — and challenges — of using technology effectively.

Technology Benefits

IYF partners cite a range of benefits to incorporating technology into life skills programs, including:

- **Technology excites and engages young people.** Youth welcome the opportunity to be creative and to work in trendy mediums that produce tangible results, relatively quickly.
- **Technology is an effective tool for teaching life skills.** Such skills include self-confidence, creative and critical thinking, responsibility, goal setting, and teamwork.
- **Technology skills are extremely valuable in today's job market.** Program participants often develop useful technical skills, with some going on to pursue technology-oriented careers.
- **Today's technologies offer young people a means of expressing their views on issues that affect them.** Youth media programs, in particular, actively engage young people in exploring issues in their community.
- **Youth frequently stay involved in technology-related programs, even after the program ends.** After "graduating," program alumni often serve as trainers or peer educators.
- **Approaches involving technology can be a good fit for corporate donors.** Companies relate to and understand the value of today's technologies.
- **Technology can help enhance your program's sustainability.** Technology-related programs often result in the creation of 'products' — be it videos, websites, or audio-recordings — that continue to be used even after those who made them graduate.

Technology: A Means to an End

IYF partners point out that when it comes to life skills programming, technology is a valuable tool; yet teaching technology skills is not their primary focus. "Our emphasis is on using technology to develop life skills," says Aranda. "The quality of the video is not as important as the quality of the process."

Through Cámara! Ahí nos vemos, which is delivered in school settings during the day and after classes, youth (ages 14 to 29) train children (ages 7 to 12) to produce videos. While some participants opt to learn how to use the camera and editing equipment, the group as a whole identifies issues in the community, builds consensus around a particular theme, and develops a strategy for illustrating that theme on film. Some do research. Others conduct interviews. Still others edit the footage. In the process, all learn to cooperate and work as a team.

In the case of the Youth Press Agency (YPA), a youth media program managed by IYF's partner Jantje Beton in the Netherlands, the goal is much the same. "It's not only about the television they're making or turning them into journalists," emphasizes Project Manager Malou Durve. "Our focus is on youth self-expression." A lot of decisions are being made for young people without consulting them first, she adds. "The YPAs offer youth a chance to explore their neighborhoods and to utilize a broader platform to communicate issues to their parents and community members."

Using Technology to Teach Life Skills

In Mexico, the Netherlands, and the U.S., programs are offered in diverse locations to diverse youth populations. In each case, the approach used has been modified to reflect the needs and interests of local youth.

In the Netherlands, for example, seven YPAs have been established in various areas of the country. In Amsterdam, the program targets disadvantaged youth, many of them from immigrant backgrounds, while in others parts of the country, YPAs reach out to middle class youth who lack productive ways to spend their free time. Participants in the ten-week program meet for two to three hours per week at community centers, with group size limited to 10 to 12 young people. The instructors are professional journalists who have been trained by Jantje Beton's implementing partner, GO4Media, in how to use journalism to develop life skills.

Participants are given the option of creating a video, a website, a radio broadcast, or a newspaper. "There's something for everyone," says Durve. "You can choose to do photography, interviews, or whatever else interests you." Over the past 18 months, YPAs have used technology to explore issues ranging from homosexuality to careers to how community members coped during a major heat wave. In the process, participants learned to work together to achieve a common goal.

"They grow. You see them grow," says Iris Weerd, a broadcast journalist and YPA instructor in Amsterdam. "When they first arrive, they're shy and just want to be with their friends. Then they start working together."

Asked what she learned in the program, Shelley, a YPA participant, responded, "I learned to listen to others and work with people I didn't like at first."

The Cámara! program in Mexico also operates in diverse contexts — targeting disadvantaged youth in Mexico City, indigenous youth in Puebla, and at-risk youth in Reynosa, a city on the U.S. border. In each location, the themes participants choose to explore reflect their local realities. For example, videos produced by youth in the rural community of Puebla often focus on cultural issues. One video documented a traditional wedding celebration as a means of celebrating the area's indigenous heritage. In Mexico City, video projects tend to focus on the harsh realities — e.g., poverty, crime, and pollution — that participants experience every day in their communities. One of the greatest benefits of the program, observes Aranda, has been engaging young people in the life of their communities and addressing the alienation experienced by youth who often feel marginalized in their societies.

In much the same way, the U.S. program, called Make a Connection Thru Art, makes it possible for young people to work with professional artists to create visual art and written works that share their view of themselves and the personal and community issues that matter to them.

Although their work takes conventional forms—paintings, designs, poems, and spoken-word performances, for example—participants share their final creations online and on CD and DVD. As a result, they can experience, discuss, and learn from the works of their peers. Families and friends may also view participants' artworks at home and at year-end celebrations.

"As the name of our program would suggest, giving young people the chance to share their ideas and their interests is really important," explains Lisa Schmidt, Program Director at Big Thought, the non-profit that is implementing the program. "Technology doesn't drive the artistic process, but it makes the sharing of young people's work possible and helps expose them to the ideas and concerns of others."

The Challenges of a Technology-oriented Approach

While many ways exist to incorporate technology into life skills programs, IYF partners emphasize that more technical and time-intensive approaches can be challenging.

In the Netherlands, for example, a key priority has been reducing the amount of technical skill building required. Participants are urged to experiment with the camera right away and practice

> " Technology is an enabler: it becomes more powerful when in creative, free hands. Throughout our Community Involvement projects worldwide, we have seen that no hands are more creative and no thoughts are freer than those of young people. When their potential meets the opportunities offered by the right technology tools, the results can be amazing, and this is what we hope to see happening more and more. "
>
> *– Riccarda Zezza, Community Involvement Area Manager for Europe, Middle East, and Africa, Nokia*

filming each other. Also important is allowing participants to see tangible results fairly early in the program. For example, rather than spend six to seven weeks making a website from scratch, the YPAs try to provide youth with web templates to build on. Jantje Beton also learned to manage participants' expectations of the quality of their final work. Many come into the program hoping to create what they see everyday on TV. "They could be very critical of themselves, so we needed to set realistic goals," says Durve.

The costs of technology-oriented programs, particularly those that rely on computers, can also be a limiting factor. Whenever possible, IYF partners recommend working in collaboration with schools or community centers that already have the bulk of equipment needed. In some cases, IYF partners purchase equipment, such as video cameras, for implementing organizations to use.

Lessons Learned

While today's technologies offer a valuable means of developing key life skills among youth, they must be employed with care —

Using Technology: Questions to Consider

To determine whether and how to introduce technology into your program activities, consider:

- *The technology know-how of your staff and potential partner organizations that can provide training and assistance.* If your program operates in multiple areas of the country, identify implementing organizations that can help you reach your beneficiary groups in these areas.
- *How you will go about developing training and curricular materials for your program.* Programs that incorporate technology benefit greatly from simple 'how to' guides that participants and trainers can follow.
- *Where your program can best be delivered to accommodate the technology infrastructure you may need.* Rostros y Voces in Mexico, for example, started by offering the Cámara project in

community centers and eventually switched to schools where young people were easier to access.

- *Determine whether, how, and to what extent you want to engage the wider community in your project (e.g., families, teachers).* In Mexico, for example, Cámara's youth videos are shown at public schools, museums, and cultural events.
- *In the case of youth media programs, determine whether you want to gain greater visibility for participants' work through developing relationships with media outlets.* In both the Netherlands and Mexico, a small subset of program participants were successful in publicizing their work through the mainstream media.
- *Ways of maintaining the involvement of program alumni.* Past participants are often eager to serve as mentors or peer educators for future participants.

and often with outside assistance from technical experts. Each of those interviewed for this report emphasized the learning curve involved in employing technology and the importance of remaining flexible and adapting one's approach based on what's working — and what's not. IYF partners also advise to:

- **Be clear about your program focus and its intended impacts.** While participants in youth media projects, for example, learn to use technology tools like video cameras or editing software, the ultimate goal is to learn life skills so that young people can excel in school, and eventually in the job market.
- **Limit the amount of technology training needed.** Some partners provide participants with various options for engagement (e.g., learning how to conduct research or interviewing skills) so not all youth need to develop technical skills. Also important is designing your program so that adequate time is available for participants to familiarize themselves with the technology.

- **Exercise care in selecting implementing partners.** Make sure that there is compatibility between your goals and your way of reaching them. Talk to several potential partners before making a final decision and clarify expectations up front. Don't be afraid to terminate a partnership if it isn't working.
- **Encourage program participants to set realistic goals for themselves.** In the Netherlands, some YPA participants grew frustrated when their videos lacked a professional quality. Be sure to clarify the main goals of the program at the beginning.
- **Be realistic in setting beneficiary goals.** Technology-related programs require a relatively high trainer/participant ratio and often don't have the reach of other programmatic interventions.
- **Explore how you might formally acknowledge participants' completion of the program.** Jantje Beton, for example, gives all YPA graduates a certificate.

Other Technology Tools

Additional options for harnessing the power of technology to strengthen life skills programs include:

- Blogs – A blog is a web-based journal or log. Establishing blogging functionality within your organization's website can enable program participants to reflect on and communicate about their experiences.
- Podcasts – Podcasts are audio blogs. You might consider posting motivational speeches from local experts or celebrities for download on your program website, or enabling participants to post their own audio stories.
- Polls/Surveys – Your website can serve as a valuable means of collecting information about youth needs/trends in your country, and the impact of your program on beneficiaries.
- Digital stories – Collecting stories about program participants and posting them online can help illustrate the impact of your program, engage other youth, and educate the media about your efforts.
- Text messaging – With the proliferation of mobile phones globally, IYF partners have used text messages to communicate with program participants and send news updates to alumni.
- Data tracking – Several IYF partners have benefited from the development of online tools that help them track progress in achieving program outcomes.
- Online recruitment forms – IYF partners have also created online application forms, thereby streamlining the process for recruiting participants.
- Online training courses – You might consider how a portion of your program content could be delivered or reinforced through online training courses, although Internet access and costs can pose a serious obstacle.

Additional Resources

Following are organizations and online resources that may be helpful as you consider ways of integrating technology into your program:

Using ICTs for Development

Communications Initiative (CI) — Through its website and regular e-mail updates, CI (www.comminit.com) provides resources, electronic publications, and discussion platforms offering insight into communication for development purposes.

Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) — A multi-stakeholder network of over 100 organizations, GKP (www.globalknowledge.org) promotes innovation in information and communication technologies for development.

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) — Stories of innovative social applications of ICTs are profiled at: www.itu.int/osg/spu/wsis-themes/ict_stories.

Youth-led Media

UNICEF — UNICEF's Magic website (www.unicef.org/magic) features a range of resources and examples of youth-led media projects around the world.

Blogging Tools
www.civiblog.org
www.blogger.com
www.livejournal.com
www.sphere.com

Digital Diaries
www.unicef.org/voy
www.beyondthefire.net

Podcast Tools
www.blogmatrix.com
http://audacity/sourceforge.net
www.apple.com/itunes