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Editorial: Five Years eLearning Africa

Rising to the Challenge – Bridging the Digital Divide

For five years now, the eLearning Africa conference has helped to build a platform for technology-enhanced learning and training in Africa.

The lives of street children in Africa tend to be violent and short. But in the city of Eldoret, Kenya, these children now connect with each other via email. "It fascinates them", says Joseph Langat, who helped to initiate the local "drop-in" centres, where street children learn basic computer skills. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) motivates them to study and take part in society.

The Eldoret project is just one example of how eLearning can facilitate Education for All, the Millennium Goal of the United Nations. It shows that the use of ICT in Africa is not an extravagance, but a pre-condition in order to accelerate development efficiently. Or as the Ethiopian Minister of Capacity Building, Tefera Walwa, put it, "While ICT may be a luxury for the rich, for us, the poor countries, it is an essential tool for beating poverty that kills and a means for ensuring our survival."

Spirit of Optimism and Enthusiasm

The huge potential of ICT in Africa has been mirrored by the spirit of optimism and enthusiasm felt at the eLearning Africa events in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2006), Nairobi, Kenya (2007), Accra, Ghana (2008), and Dakar, Senegal (2009). It will certainly be continued at this year's meeting in Lusaka, Zambia (May 26-28, 2010).

The Conference has established itself as the largest pan-African networking event to link decision makers from national, regional, and local governmental agencies with universities, schools and private training providers as well as development cooperation projects and investors in the field of technology-enhanced learning. Richly diverse, its workshops, sessions and best-practice demonstrations cover all aspects of eLearning. Special sessions like "speed networking" or Ghanaian "Nnoboa networking" (at the eLA 2008, named after the Twi word for "working together for the common good") provide new stimuli and fresh ideas – a celebration of what eLearning can achieve.

A Major “Wake-up Call”

The first meeting 2006 was characterised as a “major wake-up call to African governments and stakeholders” (Beth Mugo of the Kenyan Ministry for Education, Science and Technology). Since then, the participation rate has rocketed: 832 professionals took part in 2006, 1,350 in 2009, and 1,500 are anticipated this year.

At the same time, the number of sessions has almost doubled, from 32 in 2006 to 60 in 2009. For the 2010 conference, the organisers have received the highest number of proposals ever in a record-breaking range of topics.

In terms of geographic distribution, there are usually around eighty countries represented. However, with eighty percent of the participants coming from Africa, the Conference is truly a pan-African event.

Rebecca Stromeyer, managing director of ICWE, the company that organises the Conference explains, “When starting with the first eLearning Africa, we estimated approximately 350 participants, a number that was far more than doubled in the end. We did not really know what to expect, but we took the risk. We had the energy, the enthusiasm, and the passion for it, and we involved a whole bunch of stakeholders and created strategic partnerships with different types of organisations. The focus was that it should be a distinct African conference. Accordingly, the focus of the programme we developed was mainly on African input. The input from abroad dealt with projects that have taken place in Africa or with people active in Africa who have African partners.”

Infrastructure and Connectivity

At the first eLA in 2006, a lot of the discussion focused on the fact that Africa had long been disadvantaged by the lack of fast and affordable connectivity with the rest of the globe. In the meantime, the focus has changed because the situation has gradually been improving: In 2009, the first undersea cable to bring high-speed internet access to East Africa, Seacom, went live, and similar large-scale submarine initiatives are under way (Teams and EASSy for East Africa and WACS connecting West Africa). Even though the overall internet penetration in Africa is still low – 6.8 percent compared to 28.9 percent in the rest of the world (as of September 2009, www.internetworldstats.com) – the diffusion of ICT in education throughout Africa has made remarkable progress.

At the same time, due to the lack of high-speed internet access and computers, a lot of activity has focused on mobile technology. The mobile-phone sector has been growing faster in Africa than in any other world region, and innovative services have been created. One is the “Fish Detector”, which, with the aid of a mobile phone, is able to detect schools of fish acoustically and alert nearby fishermen by SMS.

These developments have had implications for the eLearning Africa conferences: Great emphasis has been put on the use of mobile devices, with general technical and connectivity topics receiving less attention.

Focus on Content rather than Technology

Simultaneously, the eLA conferences have seen a shift towards issues of content, and the topics have become more and more specialised and local.

While in the early days quite a few sessions took a general perspective – e.g. “Setting up and Implementing a Sustainable eLearning Project” – the 2010 conference will address topics as specific as “Mobile Learning in African Rural Health Care Settings for Undergraduate Medical Students” and “Gender Exclusion in Finance and Business Transactions: New Innovation in Banking in Nigeria”.

In addition, the overarching issue of eInclusion is playing a more important role than ever, promoting inclusivity in all segments of the population. Presentations at eLA 2010 will include battling illiteracy in Southern Africa, promoting gender equality in Mali and establishing participatory communication in East African refugee camps. A more political perspective started at the 2009 eLA conference in Senegal, with its very interesting debate on eLearning in post-conflict situations. This will be continued, with various presentations on the role of ICT in building a peaceful and stable society.

Sessions on Web 2.0 as well as on edutainment and gaming were also newly established in 2009. They continue to draw attention, and other issues remaining high on the agenda are fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other health problems, as well as professional teacher training.

Although the Conference programmes have reflected steadily growing increase in the local generation of content, they also demonstrate that Open Educational Resources and Open Content Solutions using international material are still vital for Africa. Many countries on the Continent are using Open Source as a key part of their ICT strategy.

Collaboration and Public-Private Partnerships

Two trends in the use of ICT to benefit education in Africa remain to be mentioned: the strong interest in pan-African collaboration and the shift from a “decade of experimentation” to a “new phase of systemic integration informed by national government policies and multi-stakeholder-led implementation” (infoDev 2007).

Universities have formed partnerships like the African Virtual University. At the school level, too, endeavours like the Global Teenager Project indicate true evolution in several African countries. And of course, governments and various stakeholders have launched public-private cooperation projects – like the NEPAD schools initiative, which provides ICT equipment for schools and involves governments and more than fifty private-sector businesses led by the five major ICT companies AMD, Cisco, HP, Microsoft and Oracle. All these projects have been or will be presented at the eLA meetings.

Other examples of public-private partnerships include the projects of eLearning Africa's Gold Sponsors Intel and Nokia. While industry leader Intel supports maths and science education in Ghana, mobile-phone supplier Nokia has spearheaded initiatives for mobile learning.

Conference Boosts Community Building

All-African “community building” and “systemic integration” have surely been facilitated by the eLearning Africa conferences. They have linked top governmental decision-makers, leading development organisations such as UNESCO-UNEVOC, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Global Development Learning Network and the World Bank, as well as private companies. At the meetings in Kenya 2007 and Senegal 2009, a record number of ten ministers took part. Major international and African corporations and donor and development agencies hold their own meetings before and after the eLA gatherings.

Finally, a peripheral – but profound – contribution made by the Conferences has been fostering ties between anglophone and francophone African countries. The meeting in Senegal 2009 was the first pan-African conference on technology-enhanced learning in a francophone land. Due to its huge success, a number of francophone projects will be presented at the upcoming eLA 2010 in anglophone Zambia. The Conference will take place in Lusaka, Mulungushi International Conference Center, May 26th -28th, 2010. See you there.