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RANDOM NEWSBYTES

Lessons learned in IT training

Teaching project shows anyone can learn IT

Tony Waltham

An initiative that pioneered low-budget IT training to children in the Northeast of Thailand has demonstrated that anyone, regardless of their background, can learn about computer technology, although motivation is a key factor and there is a need to convince the older generation not to oppose young people in their community learning about technology.

Adopting the principle that people learn best when they are engaged in activities that interest them, Swedish management consultant Sven Mauleon and a small group of volunteers late last year set out to discover in the most practical way whether or not IT could be a friend of people living on the wrong side of the digital divide.

In the process they learned a lot about attitudes to learning, the realities of the language barrier and how cultural issues had a bearing on the pick-up of IT.

The experiment was "generally positive," in the view of Mr Mauleon, who said that the IT learners had acquired considerable computer skills quickly, while their success hinged more on motivation than their intelligence. He noted that some had gone from no computer knowledge to web design within a couple of months.

They also found many "early adopters", whom Mr Mauleon believes could be the vanguard to the local diffusion of IT knowledge as role models, and he also suggested that success stories would be key in persuading the many parents, community leaders and teachers that learning IT would be worthwhile for the children.

He also noted that it would be important to provide attractive and obvious job opportunities to provide an incentive to learn new IT skills.

Language had posed no barrier to mastering IT - "young people are visual" - and children quickly learned the meaning of graphical icons and were generally curious, although he found that the traditional deference to authority initially hindered the feedback process.

"Learners would hesitate to ask questions before really knowing us, still too polite and shy to express their problems and feelings," he said.

From a technology standpoint, the programme, which used "quite old" computers, also demonstrated that up-to-date technology, powerful computers with graphical programs and an Internet connection did enhance the learning experience, while the technical problems associated with the failure of some of the computers used and a lack of resources to repair them was a problem.

The children in the Northeast who were participating in this project lacked an experience of teamwork and so their learning had been more of an individual process than had been planned for, although girls tended to work together better than boys.

But a challenge lay in the fact that village leaders would often take a dim view of the project saying: "we have already tried computers in our villages and it did not work" or, sometimes, that "it's better to leave the villagers to themselves."

Mr Mauleon said that he believed that a national ambition to raise the knowledge

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levels of the poor should include a campaign among local authorities to make them aware of the new opportunities of learning, as is practised elsewhere in the world.

From an educational standpoint, he said that there was no correlation between more education and computer learning. However, he had seen a correlation between school performance and computer learning among girls _ the "clever" girls would be more interested. For the boys, this was less so, where it seemed more a matter of whether a boy was "techno-" oriented or was interested in sport.

But he noted that attitudes to knowledge here posed a problem, and Thais seemed to be poorly trained to do independent thinking and learning.

So-called rote learning or learning by heart was frequently practised, he observed, noting how "our participants often perceived teachers as autocratic, with some saying "my teacher gets angry with me if I ask him about something I don't understand or he doesn't know."

This kept some boys and girls away when they thought our project was just another school, but on overtime, Mr Mauleon said, adding:

"Our young IT learners did not have any clear view of how computer skills might be useful later in life. Motivation was based on fun and curiosity.

"The social, 'sanuk' (fun), ingredient may be used initially to attract many kids who might later find computers as such fun," he suggested.

But the Swedish consultant noted that there was a strong case to start computer training at an early age, basing this observation on the fact that the learners did not show the same respect for new technology as their parents and teachers.

"Learning was natural. They set out disrespectfully to explore the computer opportunities, making progress the same way as their Western peers."

However, "local leaders, teachers and others to whom we introduced our ideas... frequently had difficulties understanding our approach.

"They kept asking questions about this teaching method, finding it difficult to appreciate the difference between teaching and learning pedagogies," he said.

From this experience gained in the Northeast, Mr Mauleon said that he believed his approach worked and that many third world countries and emerging economies could, if they wanted to, pioneer low budget efforts to provide teacherless training and self-learning opportunities to the poor, helping them to learn the basics of computer use.

"International assistance to support local adopters and initiators at the grass roots level would be good value for money if these people were motivated to do their own knowledge building, he concluded.

More information about this project can be found at
<http://openmindprojects.nu/webIT>.

- Tony Waltham is editor of Database.

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