

LearnLink

NEWSLINE

CyberSonghai: Mushrooms on the Internet

"We grow these mushrooms in dried palm leaves," the young African microbiologist says. His laboratory pose belies the smiling pride that illuminates the greenhouse, kept cool under the shade of Acacia trees. There is a revolution going on in West Africa. It's rural. It's sustainable. And now it's online.

What do mushrooms and palm leaves have to do with revolution and cyberspace?

The Information Economy is a double-edged sword for Africa and much of the developing world. Developing countries are condemned to technological pre-history if they do not adopt computer and network technologies. Too often they also face difficulties if they do. The balance of trade in information so favors the industrial North that, once connected, traditional cultures, practices and institutions can become imperiled by the Internet juggernaut.

Not so in Benin, West Africa! The Songhai Center has partnered with LearnLink to turn Damocles' sword into a plowshare. With guidance, support and technical assistance from USAID's Global Communications and Learning System's initiative, Africa's celebrated zero-emission research institute is about to go digital. The Songhai Center will now bring the knowledge and skills of its amazing agricultural ecologists to West Africa, the continent and the world.

Three CyberSonghai Community Learning Centers (CLCs) are being established in Porto Novo, Parakou and Savalou in Benin. LearnLink consultant Richard Fuchs, who recently returned from a technical assistance mission to Benin, refers to the CLCs at Songhai as "a Kinko's with an information, communications and education attitude."

The CLCs will be operational in a year, after which they will develop an Internet-based, distance education program to reach out to learners in Africa and throughout the world. Like everything else that goes on at the Songhai Center, the CLCs will be based on a sustainable financial plan.

The LearnLink consultant, who operates a digital business from a rural island on the Atlantic coast of Canada, is impressed by what is happening at Songhai. "I've worked with telecenters and CLCs on every continent. What's happening at the Songhai Center is special. They've got a dynamic and progressive organization, a talented and seasoned support team at LearnLink, and amazing commitment and intellectual curiosity.



Messieurs Moustapha and Leonce (left to right) chat over coffee and a laptop. Mr. Moustapha is the coordinator of the CyberSonghai CLC in Savalou and Mr. Leonce is the overall coordinator of the CyberSonghai program.

The Songhai Center represents the awakening of an entirely new agricultural revolution—one that's sustainable, reproducible and remarkable. The balance of trade in information just got a bit fairer and more balanced."

LearnLink's CyberSalon Presentation Series

In early November, LearnLink will host its ninth CyberSalon. Frank Odasz, noted teacher educator and popular speaker on building online learning communities, will lead a lively discussion on "Empowerment through Self-Directed, Web-Based Learning," with a focus on practical application.

The CyberSalon will be held at AED's National Demonstration Laboratory.

A leader in developing rural community technology centers, Odasz has authored dozens of articles on distance education and communication. He served as a teacher educator for 13 years in Dillon, Montana, and from 1988 to 1998 directed the Big Sky Telegraph Network. Now president of Lone Eagle Consulting, Frank travels extensively presenting state-of-the-art Internet workshops for educators.

LearnLink's ongoing CyberSalon presentation series features internationally known speakers specializing in the use of modern communications technologies to foster social and economic development.

For more information about this and previous CyberSalon events, visit our Web site at www.aed.org/learnlink.

Implementing the Presidential Initiative in Haiti

The Haitian Internet Service Provider (ISP) industry is dynamic but young and small. Currently, there are no more than eight telephone lines per thousand citizens in Haiti, compared to an average of 65 per thousand throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Penetration of telecommunications services to secondary cities and rural areas is extremely scarce.

In keeping with the Presidential Initiative on Internet Economic Development, LearnLink's newest Task Order aims to increase access to communication and e-commerce in Haiti through improved, expanded Internet services. Contributing to USAID/Haiti's Strategic Objective to reduce poverty, this activity is designed to support economic growth and increased human resource capacity. Access to communication will be improved by reinforcing the technical capabilities of ISPs to expand geographically and by creating community-based information and communication centers (telecenters) in key cities.

Telecenters are secure sites with workstations connected to the Internet where individuals may go to learn about and use email, the Internet and instructional technologies. Fees are usually charged to sustain the center's operation, with advertising and outreach conducted to bring in potential clients. A small telecenter with up to 10 networked workstations connected to the Internet can provide a community with unprecedented access to information, communication and training services. In Haiti, the centers are viewed as precursors to the country's eventual participation in the global e-commerce phenomenon.

LearnLink will implement this Task Order to achieve the following overall goals:

- Provide direct technical assistance to ISPs to speed-up the deployment of the "back-office" infrastructure required for commerce over the Internet
- Provide the technical assistance and equipment needed to promote the healthy development and self-regulation of the Internet in Haiti

- Spearhead the process leading to the creation of Community-Based Information and Communication Centers (Telecenters) in secondary cities

The project will focus on achieving the following results:

- Internet access will be more available throughout the country as a result of improved capacity among Haitian ISPs
- A minimum of three telecenters will be established and operating
- Telecenter staff will have received training to operate and maintain the facility
- Telecenter staff will be trained in the use of the help-desk to be made available through this activity
- Communities surrounding telecenters will have received training in computer use and Internet navigation
- Staff will be trained to use the new and manage the equipment

The Haiti ISP Access program is part of the Presidential Initiative for Economic Development (IED) Strategy for Haiti.



Using Technology to Train Teachers in Morocco

Morocco has twenty-seven million people, over a third of whom are under 15 years of age. It also has a population that is expected to double in 30 years, an adult literacy rate of less than 50 percent, and a 22 percent school enrollment rate for rural girls, 40 percent of whom drop out before the fifth year.

Supporting the Ministry of National Education's efforts to improve primary education, LearnLink will implement the Computer Assisted Teacher Training (CATT) project funded by USAID/Rabat. CATT aims to strengthen teacher training and support capacities in five Moroccan provinces—Sidi Kacem, Ouarzazate, Errachidia, Al-Hoceima and Essaouira. Working within the Centre de Formation des Instituteurs (CFIs or teacher training institutes) in each province, the project has four primary objectives:

- providing CFIs with learning technologies and appropriate pre- and in-service training in their use;
- developing communications networks that facilitate the work of the teacher trainees, the trainers and the inspectors, as well as collaboration and information sharing among peers across the provinces;
- building local education technology capacity through the development of frameworks for "Master Information Teachers," who will sustain local development of learning technologies; and
- contributing to national policy discussions on the use of learning technologies in education.

LearnLink will leverage the potential of available, low-cost, electronic networking technologies to create dynamic learning environments that will encourage Moroccan teachers, trainers and Ministry staff to engage in substantive collaboration.



Much of the training and project monitoring will be done via the World Wide Web, and Internet-teleconferencing software will be introduced in each of the CFIs to facilitate interaction with advisors.

The CATT project will support the Ministry's initiative to introduce the use of computers throughout the education system by 2008. By using technology in their own training, teachers will be better able to prepare their students for computer use in the classroom.

LTNet Receives Extension through September 2000

USAID has awarded LearnLink an additional year of funding for the U.S./Brazil Learning Technologies Network (LTNet) program. This will allow LTNet's staff to continue and expand program activities.

A low-graphics version of the LTNet web site (www.LTNet.org) will be launched soon to help people with limited or slow Internet access to make the best use of the site. In addition, to enable the many teachers in Brazil without access to the Internet to use LTNet's resources, a "portable" version of the site on a CD-ROM will be available for distribution by the end of the year. Anyone with a computer that has a CD-ROM drive will be able to browse the LTNet web site and about 80 percent of its resources without being connected to the Internet.

In mid-November, LTNet will convene a half-day roundtable on the challenge of integrating the interactivity of the Web with educational television. A group of education media specialists from Brazil will meet with counterparts from major U.S. educational television organizations to compare strategies.

In an effort to ensure the sustainability of LTNet beyond USAID funding, a sustainability strategy and business plan is being prepared for April 2000. It will explore a mix of approaches from corporate sponsorship, user fees, foundation support and government grants to enable the program to expand and grow.

Amic@s for the People

The Municipality of Asunción, Paraguay, with technical assistance from LearnLink and funding from USAID, has nearly completed its goal of establishing 12 Community Learning Centers (CLCs) throughout the city. Locally, the CLCs are affectionately known as *amic@s*, or *aulas municipales de información, comunicación y aprendizaje*, loosely translated as municipal classrooms for information, communication and learning, and are a play on the word "amiga" in Spanish, which means friend.

The two newest *amic@s* opened in September, their inauguration ceremonies attracting the local press as well as the usual crowds of city officials and local residents, sometimes numbering in the hundreds.

Amic@ Tablada Nueva is housed in Catholic Church in a poor urban neighborhood on the banks of the River Paraná, where an elderly but enthusiastic nun runs the show for orphans and juvenile delinquents.

Amic@ Tacumbú is located in a public school near the country's largest prison. A large number of organizations and agencies—the church, police, military, school and municipality—cooperate in the center's management.

A total of nine *amic@s* are now operating, with three more scheduled to open before the end of May 2000. Residents of *amic@* neighborhoods use the facility for computer training, email communication, homework and research projects, accessing municipal information and materials, distance education, and even e-commerce.



No one misses an amic@ inauguration celebration!

LearnLink is a five-year, Indefinite Quantities Contract (No. HNI-1 00-96-00018-00) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). It is funded by the Human Capacity Development Center in the USAID Global Bureau, the Africa Bureau, and other USAID Bureaus, offices and missions. It is operated by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), which also houses the National Demonstration Laboratory for Interactive Information Technologies (NDI). The NDI fulfills the demonstration and information exchange obligations of the LearnLink contract.

For additional information contact:

Dr. Dennis Foote
Project Director
(202) 884-8708
dfoote@aed.org

Steven Dorsey
Deputy Director
(202) 884-8724
sdorsey@aed.org


LearnLink Project, AED
1825 Connecticut Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20009
Fax: (202) 884-8979
E-mail: learnlink@aed.org
www.aed.org/learnlink

Dr. Anthony Meyer
G/HCD/BELS
(202) 712-4137
ameyer@usaid.gov

Dr. Luis Rodriguez
G/HCD/BELS
(202) 712-0168
lrodriguez@usaid.gov

