



## CHAPTER 13

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# GHANA'S COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRES

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### LOCATION AND CONTEXT

Ghana lies at the intersection of the prime meridian and the equator in West Africa. Bordered by the Gulf of Guinea to the south, Burkina Faso to the north, Côte d'Ivoire to the west and Togo to the east, the country covers an area of 238,533 square kilometres and is home to some 20 million people. Half of these people earn their livelihoods from farming, fishing and mining, but business and commerce are increasingly important in the richer, more urbanised south. Ghana achieved independence nearly 50 years ago — the first black nation in sub-Saharan Africa to do so — and is a fledgling fragile yet peaceful democracy with an elected president and a social system marked by strong family and tribal ties. About 50% of the people are Christian, 25% follow indigenous beliefs and 20% are Muslim. The official language is English, and the literacy rate is around 65%.

Economically, Ghana ranks 89th in the world GNP ranking system with a GDP of US\$2,000, an inflation rate of about 25%, and an unemployment rate of 10% – 20%. Like other African nations, Ghana is urbanising at tremendous speed and this is placing enormous demand on the municipalities for increased services. One strategy adopted to address this demand is decentralisation, placing more responsibility for sustainable development in the hands of the municipal leaders. Building local capacity to assume these new responsibilities is an enormous task: by the end of 1997, there were already 18,000 newly elected local officials.

One project designed to support such capacity-building is the U.S. Partnership for Local Development initiative, implemented through LearnLink. LearnLink was established in 1996 and is funded by the Human Capacity Development Centre of the USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) Global Bureau, African Bureau and other USAID bureaux, offices and missions. It is operated by the Academy for Educational

Development in Washington, DC. Known officially as the Global Communications and Learning Systems initiative, LearnLink is a five-year Indefinite Quantities Contract. It has helped design and implement more than 15 projects in as many countries, focusing on developing information and education and on applying information and communications technologies (ICTs) in support of development objectives in virtually every sector (for further information on LearnLink, see [www.aed.org/learnlink](http://www.aed.org/learnlink)).

LearnLink has established three pilot Community Learning Centres (CLCs) in Ghana. These are in Kumasi, Accra and Cape Coast. Kumasi, in the south-central part of the country, is the ancient capital of the Ashanti Kingdom. It is Ghana's second largest city, with a population of almost 1.5 million, and is a bustling commercial, transport and cultural centre and home to one of Africa's largest markets. Accra is Ghana's seaside capital, with many major organisations, educational institutions, industries and places of entertainment. It has a population of 3.5 million, and another 500,000 to 1 million people commute daily into the city to work. Cape Coast in the Central Region was traditionally a petty trading, cottage industry and fishing community. Today, many of its 800,000 residents are employed in government, education and tourism.

The LearnLink project goes beyond merely offering basic ICT services. It aims to set up the CLCs to be "learning laboratories," centres where elected officials, municipal managers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), students, teachers, business people and others in the community can develop their knowledge and skills through Internet-based courses, Web access and sharing experiences face-to-face and online, building their capacity to handle the multitude of development issues they are currently facing.

## **HISTORY**

The Partnership for Local Development project in Ghana was launched in 1997 with the local recruitment of a USAID-funded Resident Advisor to help implement the CLCs. With back-up from LearnLink, the Advisor's initial responsibilities were to identify suitable NGOs for the project, set up and equip the CLCs, select the Internet service providers, train the NGOs and CLC staff in managing and operating the centres, assess the communities' needs, design community outreach and develop programmes, services and plans for the CLCs' ongoing operations.

In 1997, computers were rare in Ghana, limited to the private sector and government agencies. People were generally mystified by, wary of, or indifferent to ICTs, and there was no outreach infrastructure. Much has changed over the last three years. Interest in the Internet has grown at an astronomical rate, and the CLCs are well on their way to becoming the fully functioning learning laboratories originally envisioned, to the point that demand is almost outstripping their capacity to provide.

## **AFFILIATIONS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES**

Each CLC is managed and operated by a local NGO. The NGO responsible for the centre in Kumasi is the Centre for Development of People (CEDEP). Seeking to build human capacity through training programmes, CEDEP is one of the strongest NGOs working to promote sustainable development in Ghana, and it has a long history of community development work. The NGO running the centre in Accra is the Partners for the Internet in Education (PIE), a recently formed association of primary and secondary school teachers dedicated to widening the technological knowledge and skills of teachers and students in the Greater Accra Region. The third centre is run by the Central

Region Development Commission (CEDECOM) in Cape Coast, which spearheads private-sector development, focusing on small-scale enterprise, rural housing, poverty alleviation, environmental management and tourism development.

Entering the telecentre business was a dramatic departure from the traditional roles of these NGOs, but their leaders showed no hesitancy in taking on this challenge on behalf of their constituents, their communities and the country, and making them work. In local parlance, these leaders now “stand tall” in the community.

## FUNCTIONS

Each local NGO, and therefore each CLC, has its own distinct vision and targets different groups of primary users: for CEDEP, it is community development agencies; PIE primarily targets primary and secondary students and teachers; CEDECOM targets small-, micro- and medium-sized entrepreneurs. However, in all of the CLCs, the priority need was to train people in computing skills. Typing is taught to aspiring secretaries in Ghana’s tertiary institutions, but is not a subject in the secondary curriculum. It is therefore very unusual to find people with even the most basic keyboarding skills. Thus, touch-typing as well as computer training were needed to develop proficiencies in the Microsoft suite of programs and other applications software that were provided for use in the community groups, schools and offices served by the CLCs.

As the CLCs’ reputation has spread, so people from all walks of life have come to use their services: university students and lecturers, health workers, legal practitioners, women’s groups, business people and district or municipal officials. Some come to research or browse the Internet for information about educational or employment opportunities. Small- and medium-sized enterprises come to find sources of goods and services. Entrepreneurs use the CLCs to seek information on market opportunities and price trends. School children come into the centres to link with their counterparts in schools across the globe, for example, in the UK and France through the Oxfam-sponsored On The Line project. Private companies, government agencies and NGOs contract with the CLCs to provide staff training in computers, and the Internet and educational institutions are beginning to use the CLCs for distance education. And some people — tomorrow’s clients — come simply to e-mail friends and loved ones, and out of sheer curiosity.

## COSTS AND FUNDING

To receive the basic start-up, staffing and operational funding, the NGOs hosting the CLCs were required to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with USAID, agreeing to provide:

- accommodation (no specifications were laid down and each CLC established a different type and size of facility);
- computer workstations, shelving, bookcases and other furniture;
- air-conditioning, blinds, carpets, power outlets and other fittings; and
- telephone connection.



Once this was agreed, USAID provided each centre with:

- 4 – 10 computers loaded with Windows 95/98 plus equal numbers of surge protectors, two printers, one monochrome laser printer and an ink-jet colour printer;
- applications software: Mavis Beacon for typing, Microsoft Office Suite, Microsoft Project, Corel Draw and educational CD-ROMs;
- one year's salary for two staff;
- dial-up Internet installation and subscription for the centre's first year of operation; and
- funds to purchase stationery, cartridges and other supplies for the first year of operation.

USAID also provided the salary and onsite costs of the Resident Advisor.

The CLCs were expected to charge subsidised fees for their products, services and programmes, generate revenue to purchase additional equipment, and work towards self-sufficiency.

## **ACCOMMODATION**

Each CLC is differently accommodated, but they all have managed to provide good workspaces for the users. These work areas are used both for Web browsing and computer training, which means that browsing has to be temporarily suspended during training sessions to avoid distracting the trainees. Each CLC also provides an office for its Manager and support staff.

In one centre, a large room has been partitioned to form two work areas, one for training/Web browsing via four networked computers and the other, with a single computer, for use by the Manager and for the occasional seminar or meeting. The second centre has two smallish rooms, one used for training/Web browsing via six networked computers, and the other, equipped with one computer, as the Manager's office. The third centre originally was made up of one room with six computers for training/Web browsing, and a second room, containing two networked computers, used for administration. This centre has recently managed to add another room for the office, enabling it to convert the former office into a training area and dedicate the third room to training/browsing, 12 hours a day.

All three CLCs are experiencing increasing demand for their services and will soon require additional space. Unfortunately, all of the centres are currently located on the upper floors of multistoried buildings, which presents access problems for physically challenged people wishing to use these services.

## **MANAGEMENT**

Establishing and maintaining the CLCs has required management at the international, technical, institutional and local levels. USAID/LearnLink provided the resources and overall support for the project, and the liaison between these international aid agencies and the NGOs and CLCs was managed by the locally recruited Resident Advisor.

The Resident Advisor also co-ordinated the other three levels of management, carrying out the following duties:

- Technical management:
  - procuring and setting up equipment;
  - planning, installing and configuring networks;
  - connecting to the Internet;
  - recruiting technically competent staff; and
  - developing programmes, products, services, learning systems and operating manuals.
- Institutional management:
  - developing business plans;
  - coaching CLC staff in administrative procedures, reporting systems and report writing; and
  - designing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation system.
- Local management support (which is ongoing, provided mainly by the host NGOs):
  - assisting CLC clients in registering for programmes and services;
  - conducting client needs assessment, developing training materials and training clients;
  - organising seminars at secondary and tertiary institutions;
  - promoting the CLCs through radio announcements, partnerships with local media, and flyers, posters and banners;
  - day-to-day bookkeeping; and
  - preparing quarterly financial statements for USAID and monthly and quarterly reports for USAID and the Resident Advisor.

## STAFFING

Each CLC has a woman as a Manager and a male “techie” as her assistant. This staffing pattern was intentional, designed to encourage females to feel comfortable visiting the centres. This has proved a wise strategy because more men than women use the CLCs and the CLCs have had to take steps to encourage more female patronage.

Each staff duo is responsible for the short- and long-term planning for, and management of, their centres. Two of the CLCs also have the services of other staff to assist Internet browsers and first-time users of e-mail.

Some of the real heroes and heroines in the CLCs have been the National Service Volunteers. Without the enthusiasm and expertise of these recent graduates who have offered their services without charge in the CLCs, the centres might never have attained their present status, stability and income levels. There have been mutual gains in this arrangement, because through this work these volunteers have gained new skills and new perspectives. One volunteer working at the Kumasi CLC comments, “My life has completely changed from an unknown to a known world!”

## TRAINING MANAGERS, STAFF AND USERS

Much effort has gone into providing training and support for the CLC staff and the communities. It has always been the aim to involve as many staff from the host NGOs

as possible in the training programmes, and to ask unit heads to assign their staff to the CLCs on a rotational basis. Unfortunately, that has not always happened. Some of the unit heads have not been adequately informed about the benefits of training. Not all of the NGOs are equipped with computers, so the immediate benefits of the training have not been self-evident. And the already overworked staff have found it difficult to make time for their training. Responding to these challenges, the centres have developed self-tutoring materials that are now being translated into computer-based multimedia training courseware. Those who have received training are most appreciative. One grateful trainee says, “More grease to your elbows, but make sure you don’t soil your beautiful shirts!”

Upon advice from the donor, the NGOs and their CLCs were also trained in developing business plans and then required to prepare their own operational plans. This approach was found to be invaluable in helping those running the centres develop comprehensive and realistic working guides, estimates of costs and income, ways of measuring performance against standards, and realistic timelines for implementing programmes and services.

## **PUBLICITY**

Each CLC devises its own particular approaches to publicising its products, programmes and services within its community. However, some common strategies can be identified. During the start-up phase, each CLC sent out introductory letters to its partners and potential clients announcing the new services. All of the centres organised public launches, which were presaged by announcements in the electronic and print media. The opening ceremonies were major events featuring music, drama and dance. At one of the openings, 150 people came to celebrate: academics, students, business people, local dignitaries, USAID mission officials, community leaders and a representative of the Asantehene or Ashanti King, who acted as chairperson for the great occasion. At another opening ceremony, the Queen Mother of Mampong Kronko — Nana Aboagyewaa Kente — cut the ceremonial tape to the CLC facility.

Each centre has developed a flyer describing its services to prospective clients. One centre has entered into a partnership with a local radio station which advertises its services on air in return for information and news items provided by the CLC. The three centres collaborate in publishing a quarterly newsletter, and two CLCs have developed Web sites to showcase their NGOs and their services.

“Open weeks” have been found to be a particularly powerful marketing tool. These are designed to introduce specially targeted groups, such as medical practitioners, women’s development organisations or merchants, to the potential of the CLCs and ICT generally. The centres are now planning radio talk shows to educate the wider community about the Internet and what it offers.

## **ACCESS**

All three CLCs have flexible opening hours. Officially, two of the centres are open from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., Mondays to Fridays, but in practice they remain open until the last client leaves, typically between 8:30 and 9:30 p.m. Currently, two of the centres also open on Saturdays and Sundays.

All three centres are located in well-secured places with security personnel regularly on duty.

## TECHNOLOGY

The amount of equipment originally allocated to each centre depended on the needs, capacity and financial and human resourcefulness of the host NGO. On this basis, one CLC ended up with four Intel Celeron 366 MHz multimedia computers and a monochrome laser printer, colour ink-jet printer, CD-ROM writer and zip drive. The largest of the CLCs has 10 computers plus a monochrome laser printer and colour ink-jet printer.

All three CLCs have Ethernet networks with dial-up connectivity to an Internet service provider with a speed up to 33.6 Kbps. To improve on the slow and often interrupted Internet connections, all three centres are currently considering alternate connectivity arrangements, wireless radio links providing speeds of 64 Kbps at each node on the network. At the time of writing, negotiations were well advanced for this and so it should not be long before all of the CLCs are able to provide faster and more reliable Internet access via these links.

The centres have developed training manuals to help the users master the technology and have recently started converting these into multimedia format, incorporating video, audio and animation. These computer-based materials will make the training more interesting and offer the trainees the option of learning at their own time and pace. The centres are also building up collections of CD-ROMs on history, geography, anatomy and other topics in which clients express interest.

## RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

LearnLink's involvement with Ghana's CLCs officially ended on June 30, 2000. During the last two months of the project, a series of evaluations and assessments were undertaken. The interim findings reveal the following critical lessons for creating, operating and sustaining an effective CLC:

- Make sure the CLC's mission, goals and targeted groups are agreed to by both the sponsor and host organisation.
- Tap the resources of the sponsor to determine what products and services the CLC might offer, but do not bind the CLCs by these suggestions.
- Ensure that the sponsor is aware of the specific technological infrastructure required to make the CLC function effectively.
- If a CLC is to be managed by a local NGO, train its leadership and staff in the fundamentals of business management, with an emphasis on managing information utilities.
- Ensure that there is a business plan for the CLC that is in accordance with the objectives agreed to by the sponsor and host NGO.
- Gather data about potential user requirements directly from the host NGO, local community and intended beneficiaries right from the outset, while recognising that those lacking experience of ICT must first be introduced to its potential before being consulted on how it might meet their needs.
- Ensure that the CLC's location presents no physical or psychological barriers to the users.



- Ensure that the CLC staff have the requisite skills to provide the training and the CLC Managers the necessary managerial training.
- Make sure that the Resident Advisor has the capacity to empower people and that he or she is appropriately trained and resourced for the job.
- Delegate responsibility and accountability for the initial management of the CLC to the Resident Advisor and heed his or her advice.
- Design specific and creative interventions to ensure gender equity in the use of the CLCs.
- Do not expect too much during the early phases of the CLC.
- Ensure that staff remuneration is sufficient to avoid losing competent, trained personnel to the increasingly active private sector.
- Monitor the following on an ongoing basis and with regard to local contexts and circumstances:
  - the appropriateness of the training topics/styles/approaches;
  - the effectiveness of the billing system;
  - the effectiveness of the outreach programmes;
  - the efficiency of the technology; and
  - the usage needs of clients, constituents and patrons.

## CONCLUSIONS

Everyone is optimistic about the Ghanaian centres' futures. They are all developing new products and services for other NGOs in their communities, and Oxfam has recently contracted them to train high school students. USAID in Accra may launch six more CLCs in Ghana, managed along the lines of these three pilot centres.

One of the most impressive aspects of the Ghana CLC initiative has been the sheer determination of the host NGOs to be partners and drivers in the project. A second positive factor was the "local champion" — the Resident Advisor — helping the NGOs establish, manage and operate the centres. The donor's initiative in providing grant funding, equipment and other support was also critical because the three NGOs were seriously strapped for cash, especially at the start of the project before there was any other source of income.

In Ghana, as in all countries, rich or poor, the Information Age is increasingly accepted as a reality and there is rapidly growing need and demand for computer literacy. People from all walks of life are coming to accept the Internet as a source of information and tool for conducting business. Recent media hype about ICTs has caused large numbers of secondary school students and tertiary graduates to flock to the CLCs for computer and Internet training. The CLCs are also providing opportunities for ordinary people to satisfy their curiosity about the new technology, connect with their loved ones and join virtual communities, forming action groups that are based on common interest rather than geography. According to TechKnowLogia (May/June 2000; [www.techknowlogia.org](http://www.techknowlogia.org)), using ICTs to create these learning communities may result in the telecentres becoming the watering holes of the 21st century.

The Ghanaian CLC staff see it as their moral responsibility to reduce the level of ICT ignorance in their communities and reach out to as many people as possible. They have

faced daunting challenges in terms of time, funding and resources, but these have never dimmed their eagerness to spread the word. The strategy of hiring female Managers at all three centres has helped to make them female-friendly, to demystify ICTs and to overcome female “technophobia.” As a result, a considerable and growing number of girls and women are now using the centres.

Setting up the CLCs was certainly no “walk in the park.” There were several early glitches in the relationship between the donor agency and the local NGOs. For example, the equipment initially procured for the CLCs was of poor quality, which led the people setting up the first CLC to wonder if this was not all one big fraud. At that time, Ghana was going through an energy crisis that slowed down commerce and business. As a consequence, having expended considerable funds setting up the CLCs, the host NGOs were uncertain about their ability to recoup their investment. Another great hurdle was the absence of skilled staff to manage the centres. The unreliable telecommunications system was, and still is, a threat to the smooth operation of the centres. At one CLC in particular, dialing into the Internet service provider is constantly difficult. Funding is sorely needed for all three centres to have dial-up connectivity to the Internet. All centres have five or more Ethernet networked computers with a single modem, which also slows down access time and causes concern to providers and users alike. And, as if this were not enough, the Internet installation and recurrent costs, plus time spent on the telephone, are quite prohibitive.

On the basis of the Ghana experience, our advice to others thinking of establishing such centres would be as follows:

- Only establish a telecentre where there is societal/organisational readiness to reform the social, economic or educational order, enter the Information Age, and change the traditional communication patterns and organisational cultures.
- Maximise the links between management, community groups, stakeholders and “powerbrokers.”
- Identify trusted organisations, “local champions” and “early adopters” who can serve as intermediaries and spread the word among local communities and potential partners.
- Ensure that there is some individual like the Resident Advisor or a support group to provide advice and support for establishing the centres and services.
- Unite with others in establishing co-operatives or strategic alliances to address such political issues as establishing the telecommunication infrastructure, achieving fair and healthy competition among telecom and other service providers, granting licences to Internet service providers, and generally achieving efficient, reliable and affordable services.
- Develop business plans for sustainability and monitor their implementation and impact.
- Carefully design outreach to local groups and individuals, and particularly women.
- Select a strategic and easily accessible location and ensure that the facility is accessible to both able and physically challenged persons.
- Seek professional advice on the design and layout of the workspaces, and designate rooms for training, Web browsing, meetings and self-study.
- Define a major part of the mission as making ICTs available to all in support of human capacity development.

- Acquire quality state-of-the-art technology, fast processors with better connectivity than single dial-up, and possibly wireless connectivity with high access speed at each node to minimise the cost when clients connect to the Internet, and network computers to provide multiple access points for the clients.
- Get the best technical advice possible from experts and by subscribing to ICT periodicals.
- Provide relevant programmes based on carefully conducted community needs assessments, but at the same time be proactive and anticipate needs.
- Incorporate traditional methods of communication into ICT applications.
- Design effective monitoring and evaluation instruments to track progress.
- Recruit high-calibre staff who are committed, competent and technically skilled in the relevant areas.
- Provide the staff with adequate remuneration, positive feedback and other incentives.
- Develop a systematic training programme to enhance capacity-building.
- Anticipate setbacks — things always take longer than planned!

Looking to the future, it seems likely that there will be a proliferation of “pseudo-learning centres” as the telecentre concept is cloned and otherwise taken over by commercial providers, sometimes for quite unscrupulous for-profit motives. Because they have been set up for all the wrong reasons, the programmes and services in such fly-by-night centres may be poor, and unsuspecting clients may be provided with poor tuition, half-truths or misleading information because the staff are poorly qualified and lacking in experience.

On the other hand, the growing demand will undoubtedly spur many honourable people to establish legitimate centres and help others upgrade their knowledge and skills through online and distance learning. This will result in growing competition for well-qualified ICT persons, and so there is the need, right now, to identify and train more specialists in this area. This should be a national priority but, sadly, some developing nations may not see it this way, so computer literacy rates may be as slow to develop as have been other forms of literacy. However, there is growing interest in acquiring ICT knowledge and skills, and if word processing and Internet usage can become second nature to the new generation, they will be well equipped to take advantage of opportunities for distance education, e-commerce and other development activities. The Ghana CLC experience has shown that telecentres can have a critical role in advancing the community and creating the technology culture to help this happen.

