ICT-Based Informal Learning Approach for Semi Literate and Illiterate People in Rural Areas of Bangladesh

Farzana Akther

Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, farzana@hum.aau.dk

Abstract

The rural areas of Bangladesh are inhabited by several semi literate and illiterate people. Furthermore, it is an enormous challenge to enhance the basic education, literacy and livelihood of rural people. It is worldwide expected that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can provide real value of life to such populations through ICT development within different information domains. GrameenPhone Community Information Centers (GPCICs) in Bangladesh have been initiated with the aim of bringing the benefits of new technologies providing information of different domains to the rural area people. This offers an opportunity to build up social networks among the rural peoples and GPCICs can thus constitute potential informal learning centers in the form of networked ICTs. In order to be used, the Community Information Centers require their users to have certain literacy skills. In rural areas, marginalized/ disadvantaged people in developing countries often lack these skills and therefore they are not able to fully benefit from ICT. The lack of literacy skills is often considered to be at the heart of this problem. Another way to approach this problem is to determine how the technology can be ready for this specific semi literate and illiterate user group - in other words - developing ICTs that can easily be used without such skills. In this context, the aim of my study is to explore an improved understanding of how semi literate and illiterate people can access information through ICT. I will also investigate how ICT-based informal learning can empower the rural semi literate and illiterate peoples. The aims, objectives and research problems of my study will be addressed through a multi methodological approach that combines an ethnographic research and an action research approach. Here, the ethnographic research method will be used to process new understanding of ICT for semi literate and illiterate people and the action research method will be used as a framework for my research project that will link to the plans and activities of the project as well as assist in bringing new activities through new understandings of situations. The Social learning theory Communities of practice (CoP) is considered as a theoretical framework to create ICT-based informal learning environment for low literate people which can build a sustainable ICT development.

Keywords

ICT for Development, Semiliterate and illiterate people, Ethnographic Research, Action Research, Developing Country, Communities of Practice

Research Background

It is true that Information and Communication Technologies open significant, vast areas and tools for learning and development. But in the rural areas of Bangladesh, literacy is a big obstacle for accessing this information. The literacy rate in the rural area of Bangladesh is very low. According to the Literacy Assessment Survey 2008, about 50% of the population is non literate and semi literate. It is expected worldwide that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can provide real value of life to such populations through ICT development in different domain of information. But the direct transfer of "First World" technology has not been successful in most cases, primarily because of the mismatch between the intended environment for which the technology was designed, and the ground realities of the environments in which they are deployed [2]. The GrameenPhone Community Information Center (GPCIC) project in Bangladesh has 560 Community Information Centers in the rural areas. These CICs are providing updated information in these areas regarding health, education, agriculture, environment, jobs, etc and they also offer access to Email, word processing and printing services, which can be treated as milestones for providing the benefits of information technology to

Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on
Networked Learning 2010, Edited by: **961**
Dirckinck-Holmfeld L, Hodgson V, Jones C,
de Laat M, McConnell D & Ryberg T

ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

isolated regions [3]. But the CIC projects have some crucial issues. They have context-neutral ICT applications, i.e. the absence of an ensemble view.

Currently, the direct users of CICs are middle class educated people. These people are unable to maintain the cost of Internet and computer at home which is why they depend on CICs. At the rural level, ICT is for communities, not just for individuals. It is essential for the low literate and illiterate community to be involved in the ICT development activities.

Research Objectives

The general objective of my project is to contribute to a better design of communication technology for supporting informal learning processes related to healthcare and adult education systems in the rural areas of Bangladesh. More specific aims of this study are:

1 To develop an improved understanding of how semi literate and illiterate people can access information through ICT
2 To analyze how ICT has changed and is going to change both the scope and nature of informal learning processes in rural areas

Research Questions

1 Which vital factors are associated with empowerment of semi literate and illiterate people through ICT in rural area realities?
2 How can ICT-based lifelong or informal learning empower the semi literate and illiterate people in rural areas?

Methodology

The aims, objectives and research questions of my study will be addressed through a multi methodological approach that combines ethnographic research [1] and the action research [4] approach. For collecting and evolving information regarding the informal learning associated with semi literate and illiterate people, a large proportion of my research will focus on interviewing, observing, speaking with rural end users of ICT and entrepreneurs who are directly or indirectly involved with community information centers and with village women health workers. Here, the ethnographic research method will be used to process new understandings of ICT for semi literate and illiterate people and the action research method will be used as a framework for my research project which is linked to the plans and activities of the project. Action research will also promote new activities through new understandings of the situation.

Expected Outcome

The goal of this research is to develop a guideline for ICT-based informal learning projects designed especially for low literacy people in rural areas and this guideline will explore the environments, technologies and requirements for ICT to support rural development.

Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on
Networked Learning 2010, Edited by: **962**
Dirckinck-Holmfeld L, Hodgson V, Jones C,
de Laat M, McConnell D & Ryberg T

ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

References

Atkinson, P. (2001) Handbook of ethnography. London: Sage.

Feagin J., Orum, A., & Sjoberg, G. (Eds.). (1991). *A case for case study*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

GrameenPhone Community Information Center. Retrieved March 10, 2009. http://www.grameenphone.com/index.php?id=86

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1988) *The Action Research Planner*, Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Literacy Assessment Survey 2008 completed by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) with technical and financial support from the UNESCO. Retrieved March 10, 2009 from URL http://www.scribd.com/doc/12688717/Bangladesh-Literacy-Assessment-Survey-2008.

Wenger, E. (1999) *Communities of Practice. Learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Networked Learning 2010, Edited by: Dirckinck-Holmfeld L, Hodgson V, Jones C, de Laat M, McConnell D & Ryberg T

963

ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2