

Book Review – Telecentres: Case studies and key issues

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April – 2003

Book Review

Telecentres: Case studies and key issues

Editors: Colin Latchem and David Walker (2001). *Telecentres: Case studies and key issues*. 256 pages, softcover. Vancouver: The Commonwealth of Learning. ISBN 1 8953 6988 6

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In the wake of globalization and the current deluge of technological innovations, the *digital divide* that is now appearing and the fact that virtuality sometimes seems more real than reality itself, this book on telecentres has placed itself as a perfect bridge, which spans the past, present, and future.

Telecentres can be defined as strategically located facilities providing access to ICT-based services and applications. Depending on rural or urban location and whether they reside in a developed or developing world (p. 3), they vary in size, facilities and services, ranging from a basic telecommunication service such as “phone shops,” to fully interactive Internet-based training. In this book, Latchem and Walker treat readers to a buffet of endeavors, which can be relevantly adapted to specific educational contexts.

The book presents 14 case studies chapters within a framework that captivatingly documents the essence of telecentres. It achieves this by highlighting the location and content, history, affiliations and strategic alliances, functions, costs and funding, accommodation, management, staffing, training managers, staff and users, publicity, access, technology, research and evaluation, conclusions and references, of each telecentre examined. Personally, I was enthralled by the depth and relevance of each telecentre case study captured in this little book.

The history- and information-rich content of each case study is, indeed, impressive. The book presents a global showcase of telecentre concepts that examine a diversity of economic, political, and social backgrounds, as well as the interplay of socio-economic, political-economic, and social engineering in local, regional and global community settings. In sum, the authors call for accessibility, sustainability, and global networking. For me, this book is a testament to the realization of the July 2000 Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society, aptly pointed out by Jonnie Akakpo and Mary Fontaine in Chapter 13. According to TechKnowLogia (May/June 2000), telecentres may well be the “watering holes” of the 21st century, which I contend is a well put statement both in terms of the essence and physical nature of the various telecentres.

Nonetheless, I was still left with this nagging feeling that the five chapters outlining the various key issues could have been better consolidated by the editors. Indeed, some marvelous points raised in the various case study chapters, could have been used to illustrate salient issues raised in prior chapters. The appendix of valuable print and online resources, however, is excellent.

Technology lies at the core of the telecentre concept, and launching from this technological-core, we are witness to fascinating tales from each contributor. It would be impossible for me to cite individual chapters, as each one contributed generously and significantly to the book, but I shall focus on some highlights as I see them.

Psychologically, telecentres can work to dispel the fears and myths about technology (p. 137). It was hilarious to note that at the Gaseleka telecentre in South Africa, the first telecenter in the region tested some years ago, the sound of the telephone's ringing was so terrifyingly foreign, that a volunteer ran out of the center in a panic! But times have changed. Today, there are telecentres working towards an ISO 9001: 2000 certification (p. 39) and Australia's Queensland Open Learning Network presented a plan of a typical Open Learning Centre (p. 36). The Hungarian telecottage movement adopted a bottom-up approach in its development (p. 64), and the WREN telecottage in Warwickshire, UK are already toying with the idea of "virtual organizations and communities" (p. 73). The multipurpose community telecentre in Nakaseke, Uganda, maintains a database of all users' names, addresses, ages, gender and occupation (p. 109), and the Daimler Chrysler distance learning support centre in Maseru, Lesotho, serves both the on-campus and distance education students (p. 132).

The in-depth deliberations of Heather E. Hudson, which focus on telecentre evaluation in Chapter 16, must be taken seriously to help ensure the quality control and quality assurance for the sustainability and functionality of telecentres. These are crucial feedback loops designed for appropriate stakeholders, which also help disseminate various findings for the benefit of others.

This book is, indeed, timely and should make a comprehensive reference for economic, social, political, and educational planners; it is truly an informational asset that can help in the formulation of any blueprints used to address the acculturation, inculcation, and integration of ICT in both formal and informal settings that encompass communities, schools, colleges, universities, and training institutes. Clearly, no one should be left behind in the emerging digital era!

To sum up, I was struck by the somewhat simplistic, but nonetheless powerful, overview written by Santosh Panda and Sohanvir Chaudhary in Chapter 14. These authors say India needs both jet engines and bullock carts – a divergent DE delivery system of global connectivity and local delivery. Clearly, this is an almost nonchalant statement that, in reality, reveals the increasing of penetration of ICT in India versus the nation's divergent levels of literacy, cultures, individual and community needs, and implementation mechanisms, which when combined, spiral into function-focused and economically-driven telecentres – a system which will help pave the way for large-scale deployment in a global information network.

