The Road to Employability

Austrian Pilot Program Brings "Computer Driver's Licenses" to Vienna's Most At-Risk Women

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The ICTD field is filled with individual success stories extolling the benefits of ICT access and fluency. These stories are often highly influential because they are rhetorically powerful, memorable narratives that create lasting frames to contextualize and interpret other data. Unfortunately, they are often driven by the demands of public relations as opposed to rigorous analysis.

When the goal is to share the story of a super star and tug heart strings, important details can be omitted. To understand how ICT programs work for *typical* trainees, to spread narratives that illuminate deeper dynamics and to amplify broadly useful lessons, stories should be researched and constructed with intention and rigor.

CIS is developing a methodology and story series that attempts to tap the rhetorical and qualitative explanatory power of detailed, contextualized, and personalized ICT case studies. While tension may sometimes exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, a methodology built on intensive questioning and storytelling rich in the right details can uncover and communicate evidence of successful programs.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities. Properly constructed, evidence-based stories can serve the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs.

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When twelve of her students enrolled in the final stage of the Caritas Austria "Computer ABC Programme" in Vienna, their trainer Sophie Wogenstein was nervous. These women had overcome great odds to make it this far, and now were nearing an important test: certification via the European Computer Driver's License (ECDL). The ECDL certifies that holders possess basic ICT literacy. For the women Caritas serves, it represents the prestige of accomplishment and a key to the workforce--the Austrian Labor Market Service requires the ECDL in order to access its employment services.

Many of the women served by Caritas come from the ranks of what Austrians call "the hidden homeless." "I failed at my work, my family, and at school, so I will fail at this too," Sophie recalls one student lamenting.

They have a long road home. Caritas takes anyone who walks in the door, precisely because no one else will. The women either live in Caritas housing facilities, or they are in severe financial straits and at risk of homelessness. Many are immigrants who also face a language barrier and cultural separation. Many others have little formal education, come from broken homes or violence, and have children but not the means to care for them. They have fallen through the cracks, and Caritas facilities are their link back into society. The Vienna office is one of nine offices nationwide, serving scores of different service centers. Through its urban setting Caritas Vienna encounters clients with the greatest challenges. And now ICT training and ECDL certification are part of the story.

> *"I failed at my work, my family, and at school, so I will fail at this too."*
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> *Sophie, Caritas ICT trainer, recalling a student's psychological state prior to ICT training. Caritas is committed to serving women with the greatest need.*

"This Learning Thing"

In late 2006 Caritas Vienna began an ambitious program to bring ICT skills to these Caritas women. The pilot program consists of trainings delivered to the women where they are, often housed with their children or in centers receiving services. Elizabeth Miltner, the project coordinator, has worked with Caritas for five years and has learned that successful programs often must go directly to the women in need. When the programs do arrive, Elizabeth explains, they provide "a step out of the exclusion."

Exclusion from family, exclusion from society, and exclusion from "this learning thing" that they especially fear.

Rather than setting up yet another opportunity to fail – offering the courses at a single training center, and trying to get students there – Caritas devised a mobile training center. They were able to match the support of Microsoft Unlimited Potential with an in-kind donation from Fujitsu and Seimens to acquire several laptops. Together with software, salaries for trainers, childcare, and the existing Caritas service infrastructure, the trainers designed a program

Caritas Austria Trainer Sophie Wogenstein, left, takes a breather with Elisabeth Miltner, the Computer ABC Programme project coordinator. Sophie and Elizabeth, and their team at Caritas, have just completed the first year of their pilot program to deliver ICT skills to Viennese women on the brink of homelessness.

to address the unique needs of their clients. Training was broken into three phases: an introductory "Coaching" unit, Training I, which begins ECDL studies, and Training II, which leads students through the final steps and into the exam itself.

Elizabeth, the project coordinator, emphasizes the need for a slow approach. With a masters degree in education, she underscores how research shows that the most marginalized women – when placed in the right setting, and given enough time – can succeed where they previously faced insurmountable odds. She emphasizes "fun and playfulness" in order to reduce fear. "They are afraid of breaking the hardware" Elizabeth explains. Fear, and the psychological weight of formal education, requires programming that addresses gender and culture, according to Elizabeth. One strategy is to use women instructors, she says, students "feel more confident in asking questions, less fear of failing, and have better role models. 'Oh, I can do that' the students think," if their instructor is also a woman.

Sophie, the lead trainer, describes the Coaching unit as an essential period of confidence building for the 130 students who began the Coaching unit in the first year. Sophie started lessons by simply introducing students to the elements of computers and basic software: touching the mouse, playing card games, surfing the web, and building their comfort zone within the classroom setting itself. Following the Coaching unit, Training I and Training II teach applications, such as Microsoft Word, and Internet Explorer. Slowly the students realize "I don't have to be a technician to work a computer," Sophie says of this "encountering" process. "Do you need that in your work?" they begin to ask her.

> *"After taking part in our course, they had much better communication with their children."*
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> *Sophie, Caritas ICT trainer, on the benefits of exposing immigrant women to the symbols of modern social inclusion--ICT and the Internet.*

With a growing familiarity of the many ways ICT connects them to society, the students begin to see "this learning thing" not as another dead

end, but as a gateway to inclusion. Some of the women read newspapers from their home countries. For mothers alienated from their teenagers, family bonds are strengthened. "After taking part in our course, they had much better communication with their children," Sophie reports. Caritas shows the students ways to continue their relationship with ICT out in the world, such as through free computers and Internet access at public libraries. And when the students return from the library complaining that they often must wait at length, the Sophie reminds them: "it's a library, why not use it while you're waiting!"

Earning A License

Twelve women progressed through all three levels of training, and enrolled in the formal ECDL examination. Many of their fellow students did not make it this far, and even though they were taking the test, certification was still a long shot. Sophie, the trainer, recalls the days leading up to the exam: some were ill, some had family obligations, and the overriding barrier of fear. She was nervous too. Ultimately, eight students earned the ECDL.

Like many programs offered for those on the edge of society, attrition in ICT courses is high. Women who find themselves in "the hidden homeless" are especially strained, and consistently attending classes is a challenge. Many experts in the field consider certification a great success. "BIT" or Best in Training, an organization that administers the exam, is an example. BIT usually teams with the Austrian government's Labor Market Service, and receives referrals for clients who have been trained by the agency. When BIT worked with the Caritas students, they were "impressed and astonished at how motivated the students are," Sophie recalled with pride. BIT found the Caritas graduates enthusiastic, motivated, and different from those usually referred by the state agency.

These students are "the toughest of the toughest" according to Microsoft Austria Community Affairs Manager Ute Hennig. Caritas was picked "to really make a difference" for these students, something that Ute believes is possible as the program enters its second year. This training, Ute insists, "can really change their lives."

Regardless of certification, benefits of training are noticeable. The combination of a full suite of offerings: housing, child care, counseling and ICT training create a welcoming environment that gives immigrant women the peace of mind to focus and grow. Many have tasted success in a welcoming community, with a new positive model of education and care services to look back on. The mobile classroom with a low student to faculty ratio (8 to 1) – creates a rich environment for learning. And because of the strong community bonds and the "take all comers" philosophy of Caritas, participants that were not certified this time around will be able to find their way back to Caritas when the timing is right. "Society is too fast for them," Elizabeth explains of these women. "In order to see the benefits of these programs you need to understand the larger changes in their lives. They need time, not just a year."

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> *Elizabeth Miltner, Computer ABC project coordinator, on the supporting role of ICT training in the lives of Caritas trainees.*

Yet others have developed usable ICT skills that will benefit them in concrete ways. They have knowledge of word processing, the Internet, and e-mail. They have a better understanding of the technologies that

are second nature to their children and they have the ability to communicate and cull information from sources "back home." All of them now have gained first-hand experience in the information society. For those that have never had this experience before, the realization can be simple, yet profound. As Sophie quoted one of her students: "Finally, I know where I can look for jobs."

AUTHOR

Mark West is an ethnographer whose international research and work in the development field is based in South Asia and in Central and Eastern Europe. Mark's fieldwork has centered on the use of critical ethnography to bring a more participatory connection between local communities and international development projects.

In South Asia, Mark's research and work focus on the resistance networks of rural Dalits, or "untouchables," with a particular interest in the grassroots campaigns of barefoot lawyers. In Central and Eastern Europe he has worked to improve the transparency and communications of newly developing court systems. Since 2007, Mark has begun conducting fieldwork with the CIS on the economic and social impact of ICT programs in marginalized communities around the world.

Mark has served as a rule of law consultant with the United States Agency for International Development in Eastern Europe, and as a Human Rights Field Mentor with Stanford Law School. He holds a J.D. from the University of Washington, and is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication and Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University.