

Generational Solidarity

Slovenian youth centers open doors to all
for ICT job skills training

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

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, accumulating evidence that serves 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. Direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by Andrew Gordon of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Joe Sullivan, staff researcher at the Center for Information and Society, is the lead editor for this project.

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Returning to her old training room, Agata Gribens walks past a large conference table with five laptops facing each other, like place settings for dinner. Passing by, thinking, Agata says to herself: “it was different at that time, we had desktops not laptops...” Then she stops and points to a separate work station. “That was the one.”

I had asked Agata to show me her old work station before we stepped outside for a talk in the sunny courtyard of her ICT training center, located in a housing complex in the suburbs of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Now a member of European Union, Slovenia has been the fastest of the new states to integrate and succeed. Of the ten former communist countries to enter the EU since 2004, only Slovenia has adopted the Euro currency. Its economy is strong and has quickly adapted to the West. But unemployed Slovenians still suffer, despite the economic and social renaissance sprouting up around them.

Agata, a divorced mother in her mid-40s, recalls the many years before her new career finally took root. “What was it like being unemployed?” Agata asks. “If I could be alone, I could survive. It’s not so hard to survive. But as a single mother, it’s really hard.”



With the assistance of ICT courses at MISSS in Ljubljana, Agata Gribens was able to make the transition from an unemployed single mother to a full time social worker and arts therapist.

Transitions to Economic Independence

Sitting in the courtyard, Agata recalled the difficult transition from a decade of unemployment and public assistance to a newly re-invigorated profession as a social worker. Three years earlier, when her son was finishing high school, Agata’s receipt of state benefits began a conversion common for many other unemployed Slovenians: a move to public works projects, and then to a search for employment on their own in the marketplace.

“Because the people working in my field are social workers and educators, they do not have a lot of computer skills. Companies like mine are aware of that, and it is now a policy to only employ people with at least basic computer skills.”

Agata, on the growing edge that ICT skills offer job-hunting social workers

During her public works transition, Agata was assigned as a receptionist at a youth center called MISSS, or the Youth Information and Counseling Center of Slovenia. Soon she learned that MISSS – a national NGO providing social services to youth for over a decade – had begun a new program aimed at ICT training and job skills. And, she noticed, this training was open to all ages. During the final months of her assignment, Agata signed up for the two month beginner course and then the one month advanced course offered under the Microsoft Unlimited Potential curriculum.

A creative artist with a background in social work years ago, Agata was looking to combine those two interests into a job that could both inspire and sustain her. After 18 months of part time work, Agata finally

located her ideal position: as a social worker in the arts therapy division of a convalescent home for mentally disabled persons. An organization called Altra. Back on the market, she realized the e-skills gap in her profession and the advantage she had gained. “Because the people working in my field are social workers and educators, they do not have a lot of computer skills. Companies like mine are aware of that, and it is now a policy to only employ people with at least basic computer skills. At my job interview with Altra, I explained that I had computer skills – that I knew how to use Excel and Word. They had put very directly the question about my computer skills, so they said this is great.”

Agata’s new e-skills have served her beyond just the interview. As a coordinator of community activities, Agata researches places for arts field trips and the Internet has been a key tool. “I check out all the community events and programs in the city which are suitable for our users,” she explained, and “communicate with possible sponsors, to get materials for grants.” Agata’s art therapy work involves taking clients to experience art in the community, but also the creation of art themselves. Then, when their projects are complete, Agata brings the clients full circle: “Because we are a creative program, I search for locations where we can make exhibitions for our clients. So we can show our actual results.”

In addition to research, Agata learned quickly that her newfound ICT fluency is essential for regular office communication, and for report writing and scheduling. After over ten years away from office culture, Agata was surprised at how much the work world depended on computer skills, and how much her training had brought her up to speed. “Because I work in a daily center, which is in a location away from the headquarters of Altra, I use computers to communicate with my co-workers and the management,” she said. Agata’s day-day-organizational abilities also improved. Monitoring her clients needs and activities, for example, is more efficient with her new spreadsheet skills: “I use most of the different programs, I use Excel, PowerPoint. Mostly I use Excel, to organize different groups, and to write down all the notes for the different categories for the each group or each individual. That really helps me to stay organized, and to make reports.”

Job Skills Training through Teamwork

As an expansion of its programs traditionally targeted at youth, the MISSS ICT trainings follow its core philosophy aimed at supporting the whole person. The small training groups arranged around a table are both a method and a metaphor for the program’s approach. Students “sit around the table like a family dinner,” explains program coordinator Matjaz Medvesek, a MISSS veteran since the mid-1990s. “We’re trying to put people together as an informal team.”



The integrated approach of MISSS emphasizes the individual needs of students, and supplements its group courses with one-on-one mentoring. Here mentor Jurij helps student Rebeka learn to navigate online art galleries, a potential market for Rebeka’s work as an artist.

The ICT trainings are structured around two types of instruction: groups of four to seven students



For over a decade, Matjaz Medvesek has been a coordinator of the Slovenian Youth Information and Counseling Center (MISSS). Recently he has helped apply an integrated services approach to the new ICT trainings at twelve centers nationwide. In addition to his work in social services, Matjaz is an accomplished violinist.

move through the several modules of the Microsoft UP curriculum, and one-on-one mentoring is also available to those who request it. Trainings and mentoring are free, and Matjaz explains that the public service orientation of the programs is important to their success: “It’s a philosophy, not a policy, that youth centers don’t charge. It changes the atmosphere if you pay.” It also changes the eligibility of NGOs like MISSS that apply for EU grants, many of which require that programs be free of charge.

The employment goals of the ICT program are – like other MISSS offerings – woven into the broader aim of the social development of the

students. Trainer Tanja Novakovic says that her courses focus on a mix of self-esteem, employability, and social integration, and that her background in counseling and learning disabilities is useful because the groups are so diverse. The importance of jobs skills, however, is not lost in the mix. Tanja emphasizes the practical elements of job hunting in her curriculum in order to meet her students’ needs: “Many of them, they came with their own CVs, they maybe wrote it theirselves. Also on the computer, or maybe someone helped them write it on the computer. Then we changed it a little bit. We designed it, we added pictures, we, I don’t know, adjusted it, we made it more modern. So I think that helped them a lot.”

Beyond the e-skills necessary to function in the workplace, and the assistance with CVs, Tanya’s courses help connect students with concrete job possibilities: “we also checked the websites, so for employment. The most important it’s that they know where to look.”

One such student of Tanya’s is Rebeka Rodosek, a prolific oil painter in her twenties who had been unemployed for several years for medical reasons. Like Agata, her state assistance was coming to an end, and it was time to re-enter the job market. Paying the bills is difficult for any full-time artist, and Rebeka was finding it hard to penetrate the insular gallery community in Ljubljana. Through her training at MISSS, Rebeka began to learn about the expanded art market available on the Internet, and has begun posting her paintings on online gallery websites. Rebeka says the ICT instruction is also providing her with the e-skills necessary for other possible office work to supplement her artist income.

Lessons Learn from Integrated Services

During a recent visit to one of the twelve MISSS training centers, the attention to individual student

needs was evident as Rebeka worked one-on-one with her mentor, Jurij Grdadolnik. Together they navigated the online gallery where Rebeka had begun posting her paintings, and Jurij exercised patience and enthusiasm while helping Rebeka tackle the obstacles to the complicated process.

This individual care approach follows the broader MISSS philosophy of integrated – or wraparound – services. Program coordinator Matjaz Medvesek explains that the organization’s decade of counseling and information services for troubled youth has left an imprint on their new ICT training activities. For years their primary prevention programs have dealt with the social integration of school drop-outs, youth rebellion in the home, and broader issues affecting youth such as addiction, sexuality, and peer relations. MISSS counselors have applied an integrated approach to these behavioral challenges and social topics by teaming the youth – when appropriate – with immediate family, school officials, counselors, wider family like grandparents, and staff of the NGO itself. “When you have a user, we try to involve as many people as possible” to allow the youth to make supported choices, Matjaz explains. The programs follow the “theory of choice” model of William Glasser, and Matjaz says they find that behavior change is more effective when “you prepare the atmosphere and it’s up to the individual which choice” to make.

Solidarity between the Generations

In the world of e-skills development, MISSS has found their approach of preparing “the atmosphere” transfers well, and produces some unexpected benefits. Their ICT courses are called Learning for Life, or *Ucimo se za življenje*, and the courses group together students from a wide cross-section of society: school drop-outs, unemployed youth, Roma, cancer survivors, people with multiple sclerosis, and senior citizens. As part of the preparation stage for the courses, MISSS uses an initial questionnaire to match participants according to ability, while still mixing the youth with the middle-aged students.

According to a recent two year evaluation of exit surveys completed by over 800 program participants, senior citizens looking for better personal ICT development make up the main demographic, while about 250 of the 800 respondents reported taking the courses for employment purposes – either for their current job, or to find new work. The diverse backgrounds passing through the doors has led Matjaz to observe a “solidarity between the generations” that he had not seen before. The main folks meeting up are senior citizens and youth at the margins, two groups that do not always see eye-to-eye. Speaking of the seniors, Matjaz observes: “this is the first time they have set foot into the youth centers and then they realize that the youth can contribute to the country.”

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Times Are Changing

While MISSS as an organization has a relatively long history in Slovenian social work, and in the broader youth advocacy field across Europe, the group has found a new vigor through its ICT programs. The change is partly due to the physical changes: Microsoft UP was able to provide not only the training curriculum, but also software for all twelve centers and hardware for the five centers that were previously un-equipped. In part the change is due to the new horizons that have opened up through the practical approach to employability skills. Matjaz describes various efforts to strengthen the impact of the program: most of the youth centers communicate with their local labor offices to leverage employment possibilities for graduates, a Microsoft-certified training of trainers program builds the

abilities of MISSS instructors, and courses are offered as widely as possible, including a new mobile training program that goes to prisons.

For Agata, the three months of courses at her suburban center have made a significant impact in her life, and in the lives of those she cares for. While her talent and dedication helped her put together well-paying contract jobs after the unemployment benefits ended, those positions weren't enough to support a new career at middle age. A full set of job skills were required for a full time job, Agata maintains, and for the benefits that come with it: "Now I have social security benefits, work expense benefits such as meals, transportation reimbursements, sick leave."

Agata gave up time at work to come visit for our interview, and while she has a brilliant smile, she also has a very serious countenance. Slovenia has made it through communism, and into the EU at the head of the pack, but life for the unemployed – and especially for unemployed single mothers – continues to be hard. Agata says that her situation is typical for her peers: "for women between forty and fifty, it's hard to get a job. Times are changing. Technology is changing."



Rebeka Rodosek (left) is a prolific painter who was having difficulty breaking into the Ljubljana art market. With the assistance of her ICT mentor, Jurij Grdadolnik (right), Rebeka has discovered the international art market on the Internet – and has the skills to use it.

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 LawSchool. 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.