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Article for Nicaragua Dispatch By Jennifer Foerster

Computer Literacy in an Expanding World

In the hot winds of a late January morning, in the school yard of Limon 2, in the region of Tola, nearly fifty youth and adults crowded into the classroom where thirty Apple iMac computers were being powered up and tested in preparation for a Basic Computer Application Training.

It was the final day of a week of computer literacy training offered by InnerCHANGE WORKS (ICW), a U.S.-based non-profit organization focusing on health and education in Nicaragua. I was visiting from San Francisco to work with my mother, Janet Foerster, President of ICW.

The training was being conducted in communities and schools from El Crucero to Tola, and brought together the expertise of five computer science doctoral students from Colorado Technical University (CTU), with their professor, and four undergraduate students from the Engineering and Computer Science Department of the Universidad de Americas (UAM). Together with ICW, these computer specialists and students were providing research and training with the community participants of ICW's Computer Literacy Project.

The Computer Literacy Project began in 2010 when ICW coordinated a partnership to bring 320 refurbished, cleaned, certified, and software-supplied computers to ICW's Nicaraguan community projects. In partnership with the ALMORI Foundation and others, ICW has distributed these computers to need-based communities throughout Nicaragua, including libraries, schools, coffee farms, health clinics, prisons, and seminaries. ICW is now working to provide education in computer use, maintenance, and repair to local youth, teachers, and community leaders.

The ICW team was bustling about: Juan (ICW)'s project coordinator and I were setting up chairs, harvesting pens and paper, and hanging up a sheet to use as a projector screen. Janet was greeting a crowd of young women who had just arrived by bus. Inside the steamy classroom, the CTU and UAM students were connecting cables and shuffling keyboards. The resident pigs were sleeping in the shade beneath an awning.

Around mid-day, racing to Las Salinas to pick up the rice, beans, and chicken that had been freshly prepared for all fifty community members at the training, I was abruptly humbled by a three inert oxen blocking the road. They didn't seem to mind the van grinding to a halt and kicking up a cloud of dirt. Even my honking didn't distract them from their dawdle down the road.

Idling in the sun gave me time to think how grateful I was to be part of ICW. I believed in our collaborative and entrepreneurial approach to community-based development in Nicaragua, and I believed in our motto: "Working Across Cultures Works for Good." But I've also learned over the years, mostly from my mother, that all approaches to effective

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change require a willingness to adapt, the patience to change pace, and the courage to maintain an open mind. I've also learned from this week with our Computer Technology specialists that cross-cultural work now involves a new kind of interface: the ever-widening digital divide.

Back at the school after a series of ox, mule, and monkey encounters, I peered through the windows in admiration at the rows of students, diligently working despite the stifling air in the tiny, crowded room. Technology is not my forte. Don't get me wrong, I live, breathe, work, eat, and sometimes sleep at my computer. But ask me what a "motherboard" is and I will tell you it's a Star Trek Klingon vessel warping through an ethereal spider web called the Cloud.

Luckily, this week I could simply defer the question to our international team of techies, brilliant not only for what they know but also for what they are able to teach. These community members who are now the recipients of a classroom-full of iMacs won't be able to call AppleCare or take their misbehaving machines to a local Genius Bar. They will need to know how to fix these problems themselves. They will need to know the language of technology.

I never liked the idea that technology is a language of its own. But I have to admit it—the way this international team of Nicaraguan and U.S. American students worked together seamlessly despite linguistic and cultural barriers thoroughly verified this theory for me. And when I watched the Limon community members (some who had never touched a computer) showing off their vivid PowerPoint projects that afternoon in the classroom, I became hopeful that this "global language" of technology is a language everyone will have the chance to learn.

This particular week represented a key step toward the sustainable integration of these computers into community life. Participants in these trainings will comprise the basis of local Computer Councils, who will eventually assume ownership and responsibility of these computers for ongoing community use.

After lunch, while dozens of students spilled out onto the street, I wondered about the fate of these iMacs, how long they will last, how quickly the technology will change, leaving this groundbreaking computer lab literally in the dust.

In less than a year, ICW has been confronted with a range of challenges from broken hard drives to outdated operating systems. Many of our refurbished computers can't support the software most needed to benefit the classrooms, libraries, and clinics where these computers are placed. I wondered about the future of this community's youth, how quickly youth around the world are adapting to a cyberworld of instant communication, Facebook friendships, and knowledge a la Google carte, and the implications of this for community economic development, health, literacy, and education.

I sat on the ground, exhausted. A young girl of about 8 sat down beside me. I asked if she had enjoyed working on the computers. Her answer: she liked to read. Without any prompting from me, she recounted the entire story of her favorite book, weaving castles, a king, a princess, magic, and a few dozen animals into her tale. And yes, she said, after the saga was told, she liked computers, too. Then she waved at her sister who was peddling down the road on a bicycle, politely said goodbye, and skipped into the street.

I was thrilled to learn this young girl was such an avid reader, despite the limited number of books available in her community, and inspired at how engaged she seemed in the inner life of the imagination. As a writer, I've always believed in books, and in literacy as the agent to imagination. As such, I have been slightly hesitant and distrustful of the digital world. But I also take for granted what

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the digital world has afforded me, to the point where I can't imagine my life without it. While I can accept that *computer literacy* may be as much an agent of the imagination as books, the real point is this: every young person today should have access to both. Everyone deserves the freedom to live in their imagination, and tools with which to bring their inner visions to life.

When the day was done, I leaned up against a wall baked by the beating sun and watched the dust and exhaust of the crowded bus that chugged down the road. One of the peppered gray pigs had risen from its slumber and was now snorting with great enterprise through the dust. I pulled out my iPhone. Out of habit, of course—there was no one I needed to call today, and I didn't have an international data plan. The profiteering, floppy-eared pig was shuffling across the now-empty schoolyard, munching on scraps of fried chicken and rice. I began to scroll through applications, opening my iPhoto, my email, my Instant Message box for the umpteenth time. I couldn't remember what I was looking for in that imaginary space, but continued to swipe the screen, looking for something in a Wi-Fi-less field.

What snapped me out of this fruitless and all-too comfortable addiction was not myself, but the pig, who had caught whiff of the open bag of plantain chips in my backpack at my feet and was now nudging and shoveling at the backpack with his snout and hooves. I stowed my cell phone in my pocket, gave the plantain chips to the pig, and walked through the trees to the library where the Computer Council was gathering for a meeting beneath the shade of a sheltering elm.

Jennifer Foerster is a freelance writer and lives in San Francisco. InnerCHANGE WORKS, a U.S.-based 501(c)3 organization working in Nicaragua, is directed by its founder, Janet Foerster. For more information on InnerCHANGE WORKS and our community programs, please visit our website: www.innerchangeworks.org



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