Professional Networking by Disadvantaged Youth in Recife Brazil using Information and Communication Technology

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Abstract

The study describes how Information and Communication Technology are enabling disadvantaged young women from Recife, Brazil to establish and expand their professional networks. Funded by the Nike Foundation, *Programa Para o Futuro* – Young Women in Action (PPF-YWA) is a program designed by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and the Academia para o Desenvolvimento da Educação – ADE Brasil, and implemented in partnership with Learning Technologies Network (LTNet-Brasil), Equipe Técnica de Assessoria, Pesquisa e Ação Social (ETAPAS) and the Faculdade Maurício de Nassau.[2] In PPF-YWA, a population of at-risk of young women between the ages of 15 and 24, who have limited access to mechanisms to break out of their insular and impoverished communities, participate in a comprehensive economic empowerment learning program which uses productivity tools to support a myriad of project based learning experiences. One of these activities includes building eMentoring relationships between pairs of youth and volunteer professionals using email and instant messaging as the primary means of communication.[3] The role of productivity tools in this setting is discussed from both the point of view of the eMentors as well as eMentees. Through the project's structured monitoring and evaluation effort, eMentors report that mentoring using ICT solves a series of logistical problems, allows them to help the young women with writing and communication skills, and provides them with a level of intimacy that feels comfortable to the majority of eMentors. Productivity tools provide a means for the young women, who began the program with precarious language and IT literacy, to build knowledge about the subtle cultural norms of professional communication that is essential for success in the workplace. Finally, culminating results on expanding professional networks show, for example, an increase in the percent of young women who report having a contact who knows them well professionally and who could submit a personal reference from a professional.

Figure 1: Comparison of young women's professional contacts before and after the program

Keywords

ICT, Mentoring, eMentoring, professional networks, disadvantaged youth, economic empowerment

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[2] AED is an international non-profit headquartered in Washington, D.C., ADE Brasil is a Brazilian NGO located in Recife, LTNet-Brasil is an NGO located in Brasilia and ETAPAS is an NGO located in Recife.
[3] eMentoring was pioneered in Brazil by AED as part of the first *Programa Para o Futuro* pilot in 2003.

Introduction

Programa Para o Futuro – Young Women in Action, an economic empowerment project for disadvantaged youth in Recife, Brazil, uses ICT as a powerful means of enabling youth to expand their horizons and make inroads into socio-economically dominant cultures. Youth use these technologies to build new networks, to gain basic employability and marketing skills, to research and reflect upon questions of "Who am I", "Where do I want to go?" "How can I get there?" In *Programa Para o Futuro* – Young Women in Action (PPF-YWA), ICT provides a backbone for a myriad of project based learning experiences. Technology is ubiquitous in these experiences as youth, their professional mentors, and their project facilitators plan, register, interact, create, and produce content and communicate. "When technology enables, empowers, and accelerates a profession's core transactions, the distinctions between computers and professional practice evaporate." (Weston & Bain, 2010. p. 10). In PPF-YWA, the young women learn to use productivity tools – information sources, time management, organization, networking, and text, image and data processing. Instead of classes in how to use productivity tools, the young women simply use these tools as they learn the importance of organization, time commitments, follow through, personal and collective responsibility, searching for opportunities, speaking up and speaking out. The productivity tools become their means to participate in the dominant professional social structure.

Technology itself cannot shorten the distance between social classes in Brazil. Digital exclusion cannot be reduced to a question of access. Social inequality "…is not expressed merely in terms of access to material goods – radio, telephone, television, Internet -, but also in terms of the user's intellectual and professional capacity to extract the maximum potential offered by each instrument of communication and information." (Sorj, 2003, p.59). Similarly, Warschauer (2007) explains that even when comparing schools in New York City, the lack of basic traditional literacy severely compromises what youth can do with the digital communication. "Indeed, the divide allegedly attributed to unequal information literacy or multimedia literacy most frequently has its roots in differential access to basic reading and writing competency and cultural capital." (ibid, p. 44).

The young women who comprise PPF-YWA live in the Northeast region of Brazil where the literacy rate is one of the lowest in the country. According to the Indicator of Functional Illiteracy developed by the IBOPE and the Instituto Paulo Montenegro, 47% of the population 15 years and older is functionally illiterate.[4] (Instituto Paulo Montenegro, 2007) These young women come from impoverished learning environments and are isolated from much of mainstream society. "Young people from the poorest families consistently have… formal sector employment rates that are one-eighth of the national average" (World Bank, 2007). Youth from these marginalized communities also lack the social and technical skills to transition into the workplace. Young women are at an even greater disadvantage due to discriminatory social, cultural, economic and political norms, where obstacles to productive activity only contribute to the cycle of poverty. Unemployed, disadvantaged young women need professional role models who can provide new points of reference, guidance, and 'cultural capital'.

Programa Para o Futuro – Young Women in Action is a program designed by Dr. Eric Rusten and Alexandra Fallon of the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and Tania Ogasawara of the Academia para o Desenvolvimento da Educação – ADE Brasil, and implemented in partnership with Vera Suguri of Learning Technologies Network (LTNet-Brasil), Equipe Técnica de Assessoria, Pesquisa e Ação Social (ETAPAS) and the Faculdade Maurício de Nassau. PPF-YWA is funded by the Nike Foundation as part of its worldwide effort to promote the economic empowerment of adolescent girls through its campaign for the *Girl Effect* [5]

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[4] Based on a classification of four levels of literacy – 16% illiterate, 31% rudimentary, 34% basic and 19% complete.

[5] http://www.girleffect.org/

where investing in girls, "…will unleash a powerful ripple effect" for them, their families and the community (Nike Foundation, 2008). PPF-YWA is a three year project designed to promote the economic empowerment of over 800 young women between the ages of 15 and 24 residing in the urban metropolis of Recife Brazil. The Program has objectives on four major fronts: Employability knowledge and skills, Gender awareness, life skills and voice, Girls friendly environment, and Professional networks. It is a complex, ambitions program which seeks to promote the social, educational, and economic development of disadvantaged young women through learning projects ranging from personal marketing, public speaking, mentoring partnerships with active professionals, and gender and reproductive health awareness, to name a few. It also includes a rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) component for in-depth, objective documentation, analysis and reflection on all aspects of the program.

This paper focuses on the role of technology in the mentoring partnerships that the young women have with working professionals. This core component of PPF-YWA uses digital communication tools to convert conventional mentoring into "eMentoring", and to bring the young women into direct contact with professional role models [6]. This is critical because it provides the young women with a personal contact and it provides a meaningful purpose for using the productivity tools. Initial findings from the first nine month cycle of the program, including a four month eMentoring activity, involving 100 young women, and their respective eMentors, collected as part of the project's M&E component, are presented.

eMentoring and the eMentors' perspective

According to the group, MENTOR, an advocate of mentoring partnerships, "Mentoring is a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee." (Mentor, 2010). Within the context of PPF-YWA, mentors provide young women with the constructive example of a professional engaged in the job market and a window into possible careers. Given the marginalized nature of most disadvantaged communities in Brazil, these professionals represent a sphere of contacts normally unavailable to disadvantaged youth. eMentoring is a modality of mentoring where interaction takes place almost exclusively through synchronous and asynchronous communication using digital technologies, with face-to-face contacts being limited to once or twice during the mentoring experience. In PPF-YWA, professionals from fields including information technology, finance, administration, communications, education, human resources, social development, and law volunteered their time to participate as eMentors. The eMentors and their eMentees engage in regularly scheduled, one-on-one, synchronous interactions using instant messaging. The scheduled conversations are facilitated by, though not restricted to, weekly agendas of topics pertinent to the current moment in the program, for example, the job interview process, group dynamics, writing a resume, and career choices. For each of these topics the eMentor may provide specific information and guidance. However, eMentoring is also a space to personalize experiences, discuss issues of confidence, image and self perception. In addition, there is an ongoing asynchronous exchange of emails and a sharing of information and products by both eMentors and eMentees, for example, CVs, articles, video clips, and poetry according to the particular needs and interests of the mentoring pair. A byproduct of this interaction between engaged individuals from distinct social milieus, is that the young women build knowledge about and skills

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[6] Dr. Rusten of AED designed the pioneering eMentoring program for the pilot project of *Programa Para o Futuro* in 2003 and Cida Neuenschwander implemented the pilot and developed many of the detailed elements of what comprises an eMentoring activity. Expanding on this success, ADE Brasil's eMentoring team, Cida Neuenschwander and Marisa Selva have cultivated an extensive network of volunteer eMentors. This invaluable resource depends upon these two full time staff members' efforts to engage in an extensive recruitment and selections process. They also provide initial and on-going training to eMentors, while coaching and guiding both eMentor and eMentees to build their capacity to engage in active, supportive and productive interactions.

with using ICT. In addition, because of the intense use of written communication, through instant messaging and emails, they are obliged to express their ideas in writing, either by formulating and responding to questions, making comments, expressing who they are. The written word gains new significance as the young women seek to build a professional relationship.

A series of formal Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with a subgroup of randomly selected eMentors at the end of the 4 month activity as part of the project's M&E component. Focus Groups were divided solely on the parameter of experience, some FGDs were composed of eMentors who had participated in previous ADE projects and others were composed of first time eMentors. Gender and professional background were not considered in the group formation and each FGD contained a mix of men and women, and representatives from a variety of professions including IT, finance, education, social service, and law. FGD analysis protocol followed the methodology defined in the AED manual for systematic analysis of qualitative data (de Negri & Thomas, 2003). A broad range of topics were raised in the FGD protocol ranging from the initial training of the eMentors to the eMentors' expectations for the young women's futures. Responses related to the pros and cons of the use of electronic media in the eMentoring activity are presented here.

The "e" in "eMentoring" was almost unanimously considered a positive aspect of the mentoring experience. Electronic media bring a series of unique components into play. Foremost is the ability to participate in the program from the work setting. Everyone said that it would be difficult to be a mentor if they had to travel to a particular location given their tight schedules and lack of free time. *"Everyone here already wanted to do some kind of social benefit work but didn't have the time, so eMentoring is a way to make this a reality."* (new eMentor). Electronic media allows more people to be mentors.

While the IT professionals have greater facility with the technology, ICT is sufficiently disseminated among professionals in the metropolitan Recife area that none of the eMentors had trouble using instant messaging or email. Many things get solved using electronic media within the work place. It's not an artificial situation. On the other hand, for some eMentors, the computer is impersonal. *"Electronic communication is kind of cold, you don't see how the person is feeling, her expression."* (returning eMentor).

When discussing electronic communication, eMentors raised the issue of the young women's language and how the low level of language skills leaves much to be desired for the work place. Because most of the communication between the pairs used the written word, it was possible for the eMentor to evaluate the young woman's writing and to help her with her Portuguese.

Another attribute raised in each of the focus groups was that eMentors felt more comfortable, and less inhibited, in expressing themselves and raising certain issues. *"If I were face-to-face with her I would not feel comfortable saying certain things."* (returning eMentor). Likewise, eMentors felt that using electronic communication enabled the eMentees to open up and talk more readily about their day-to-day lives and about the problems they face.

Part of this spontaneity may come from a feeling that communication with the young women is safer through electronic tools. One returning male eMentor explained that electronic communication protects the person from getting too involved. *"…it protects a little; it creates a thin film that makes it so that you don't get pulled into the relationship."* (returning eMentor). A first time female eMentor also explained how electronic communication creates a necessary distance for her: *"The personal issues affect us, we don't have the training [to deal with them well]. If it were face-to-face I would have been destroyed, and she would have seen that."*

The following table summarizes these findings on the pros and cons of using electronic communication tools in the mentoring relationship. The prevalence of statements supportive of each reason is shown according to gender and profession, the greater the number of "X"s the more frequently eMentors expressed the particular idea. "XXX" means that almost all the

members of the category expressed the particular idea. Fewer "X"s means that the idea was mentioned by fewer people, which is not to say that the others disagreed, but simply that they did not comment. Zero "X"s means that no one from that category mentioned the corresponding idea.[7]

Prevalence of statements for and against the use of ICT in mentoring communication according to gender and profession				
Statement: Pro	**Gender**		**Profession**	
	Male	**Female**	**IT, Finance**	**Education Social Dev. Law**
Facilitates in terms of time and space: people who are busy or who can't spend time moving around the city can still be eMentors.	**XXX**	**XX**	**XX**	**XXX**
Many things get solved using electronic communication within the work place.	-	**X**	-	**X**
The eMentors' familiarity with instant messaging facilitates the activity (it requires abilities that are already known and commonly used.)	**X**	-	**X**	-
Through electronic communication it is possible to evaluate the young woman's writing and to help her with her Portuguese.	**X**	**XX**	**X**	**XXX**
Using electronic communication mentors and mentees are more comfortable expressing themselves on various issues.	**XXX**	**XXX**	**XXX**	**XXX**
Communication through electronic communication tools is safer; it creates a necessary distance so that the person doesn't get too involved in the relationship.	**XX**	**XXX**	**XX**	**XXX**
Statement: Con				
Electronic media is "cold". You can't see people's feelings.	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**

It is clear from this table that the eMentors were overwhelmingly positive about the use of electronic communication tools in the mentoring activity and that all eMentors felt that these tools allowed them to express themselves more freely. Not surprisingly, educators more readily mentioned the opportunity to correct Portuguese language than technical professionals. Statements on the "necessary distance" created by electronic media were voiced by all categories, but even more frequently by women and by professionals from the areas of education, social development and the law. While the majority of eMentors preferred this distance, for others it was a barrier that interfered with establishing the level of intimacy they desired. It is important to note that this group of volunteers is a purposeful sample in the sense that these individuals actively chose to participate in PPF-YWA as Mentors knowing that they would be using ICT.

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[7] Because of unequal numbers of men and women, frequencies were calculated based on the percentage of responses in each category.

Changes in Young Women's Professional Networking Capacity using ICT

When the young women entered PPF-YWA they demonstrated the level of IT skills that young people acquire "spontaneously" with friends and in cyber cafes when they have limited access and nothing very productive to do. They view each others' social networking pages and look up pop stars on the Internet. Some didn't know how to use the mouse or scroll the screen. Their extensive use of unconventional acronyms and abbreviations such as the Portuguese equivalent of using the letter "u" in place of the word "you", masked a plethora of Portuguese language errors. Although 71% reported having email accounts when they entered the program, it became apparent that they lacked many basic ICT skills, for instance, how to attach a file, unattach a file, copy people on emails, make IM accounts, save chats, save their work so as to facilitate retrieval, etc. The list was quite extensive.

Nevertheless, the skills to use productivity tools were readily acquired as the young women tried to learn the more challenging and subtle cultural norms of professional communication through the use of these electronic tools. For example, they had to learn to distinguish when it is appropriate or inappropriate to use cutesy emoticons. They had to learn to use inoffensive language. They had to learn that during an important synchronous communication with a busy professional contact, not to have multiple IM windows popping up with little jingles. They had to learn to respond to an email from their eMentor within a reasonable time frame, and if they didn't understand what was being requested, they had to learn to ask their eMentor to explain instead of remaining silent.[8] They had to learn to be forthcoming, active participant in the conversation and not "monosyllabic" passive participants. Developing good communication skills was very difficult for many of the young women because of their relatively low level of Portuguese literacy. It was a challenge to organize their ideas and formulate them in writing. Miscommunications with their eMentor serve to raise awareness as to the relevance of conventional spelling and sentence construction. Even though the young women were exercising their writing skills in purposeful communication, many eMentors exclaimed that their eMentees' language skills will need greater attention. Nevertheless, the young women were making important inroads into professional communication through the acquisition of ICT literacy.

Results from a formal assessment of the young women's reflections on what they learned through eMentoring are not yet available. However, initial data shows some important changes. This data was collected using an extensive questionnaire designed to gather information on Knowledge, Attitudes and Perceptions (KAP). The questionnaire was applied online prior to Program start up and again nine months later at the end of the first round. Here are responses to some of the questions related to eMentoring and Professional Networking.

Essential to career development is having contacts in important places who know you well and in a professional context. Self responses show a slight increase in the percent of young women who responded affirmatively to the question "Is there a person with knowledge of the existing job market who knows you well professionally?" Since most of the young women had just finished the Program and had not yet found quality employment, few had made contacts who know them well professionally, though there was a slight increase from 43% to 57%. Greater increase in this indicator is expected at one year follow-up.

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[8] This is an especially important set of skills since being able to ask adults and "important people" questions is new to youth and can be seen as exposing ignorance. However, having this ability is critical to success in the workplace.

Is there a person with knowledge of the existing job market who knows you well professionally?		
Response	% at Baseline	% at Endline
Yes	43.0	57.4
No	54.8	41.2
N/A	2.2	1.5

Another essential component of employability is the personal reference. Through eMentoring and PPF-YWA there was a significant increase in the percent of girls who responded that they could submit a reference from a professional contact who could attest for their capabilities – an increase from 29% to 58%.

Would you be able to submit a personal reference from a professional who can attest for your capabilities?		
Response	% at Baseline	% at Endline
Yes	29.0	58.8
No	60.2	35.3
N/A	10.8	5.9

The baseline / endline comparison of the percent of girls who have these two kinds of professional contacts is represented below:

Figure 1. Comparison of young women's professional contacts at baseline and endline

Young women were also asked the following question. "Think about a situation in which you made an important decision for your life and the people you turned to for advice. How do you know these people? In each category write the number of people who have helped you make an important life decision." Presented below is the percent of girls who report having one or more people who have helped them to make an important life decision, distributed by type of contact. The results show that at baseline young women reported that family (1st), friends (2nd) then religious organizations (3rd) are the most common sources of advice. Professional contacts are one of the least common sources of advice. At endline, while the previous contacts remain stable, professional contacts increased dramatically, as well as teachers, and both of these surpassed religious organizations. The increase in teachers may in part be due to a stronger personal involvement in their school setting but also may include the relationships the young

women established with the PPF-YWA's learning facilitators who the young women may refer to as "teachers".

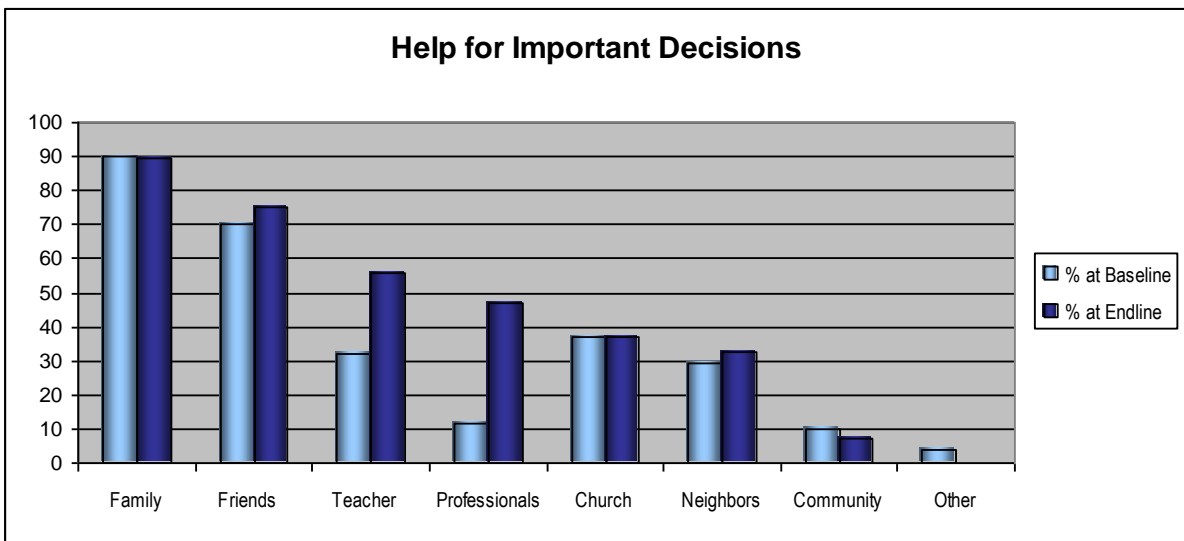| Percent of girls who report having 1 or more people who have helped them to make important life decisions		
Category	% at Baseline	% at Endline
Family members	90.2	89.7
Friends	69.9	75.0
Teacher	32.0	55.9
Professional contacts	11.7	47.1
Church member or religious organization	36.9	36.8
Neighbors	29.1	32.4
Members of community centers	9.7	7.4
Other	3.9	0

Figure 2: People who have helped to make important life decisions

Taken together we see clear evidence of expanding professional networks. It is through these precious new relationships that young woman can begin to break the downward spiral of isolation and lack of opportunities so common to youth in disadvantages communities.

Concluding Reflections

Results from the first of four rounds of the PPF-YWA program, show that as the young women learned to express themselves using ICT within the eMentoring relations they were able to expand their professional networks, an essential element of economic empowerment. The process of learning to use productivity tools makes explicit innumerable subtle conventions in professional communication, allowing the young women to construct inroads into the culture of the workplace, increasing their 'cultural capital'. Through interactions with their eMentors the young women were able to start to build new kinds of relationships previously unavailable to them. The professionals who are eMentors in PPF-YWA use ICT in their normal routine of communication and solving problems, so mentoring using electronic tools came as second

nature. For some it even provided a safe filter through which the mentoring relationship could be built. However, like the young women, ICT allowed the eMentors to come in contact with a reality that was previously unavailable to them. Hopefully this exchange between new contacts will continue to bring significant learnings on both sides.

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