

Schools in Burkina to conquer the New Technologies

by: Ramata Soré

Initiatives aim at integrating the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the educational system in Burkina, a country extremely poor and therefore at the bottom of the UNDP classification scale. The teachers and pupils are delighted with this initiative. They are discovering new ways to communicate and to look for information. Despite shortfalls due to the novelty of the approach, the new ICTs are essential in the educational system, as can be seen from the reactions described below.

"I am very happy to discover how to surf and chat on the net with friends in other schools apart from mine," pointed out Mathieu Kabré, a pupil at the Marien N'Gouabi de Ouagadougou High School. This student learnt about the net at his high school thanks to the Global Teenager Project (GTP). The GTP is a programme set up in 1999 by the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD). This institute works in 9 countries, including Burkina, but the GTP is active in 23 countries.

"The project brings the new information and communication technologies in the high and middle schools. This initiative sets up networks between several high and middle schools (which are located in Switzerland, Benin, Holland, Senegal, Burkina, Madagascar, etc.). The pupils therefore have the opportunity to join in online discussions (Learning Circles) on a wide range of subjects such as health environment, human rights, globalisation, AIDS, culture, racism or music," explained Adama Traoré, the GTP/Burkina coordinator. Trained teachers are in charge of supervising the pupils. Together with the project partners, they also choose the different themes to be discussed. The pupils taking part in the different forums are chosen in relation to their academic level. They are generally from the 3rd level, from the same or different classes in the same school. "They are students capable of thinking about and discussing a given subject," pointed out Adama Traoré.

More than a hundred pupils from a dozen Burkina schools meet up online in 2004 using email, chat, etc. Discovering the new ICTs, developing an intercultural understanding opens up new horizons. "Now, I am a computer ace and when I tell everyone that I know how to surf the Internet, all my friends want to be like me," Sara Touré, a pupil, proudly told us. Certain beneficiaries, according to Adama Touré, "have become managers of cyber centres or own them. Others go on to study to become computer technicians". The GTP Learning Circles take place twice a year and last ten weeks.

Internet, spin-offs for teaching

Apart from this project, World Links, a World Bank programme, set up in Burkina in 1997, "aims for better integration of the new ICTs in schools by means of projects bringing together technical supervisors and pupils. The World Links initiatives consist of allowing a group of pupils to search the net to find websites relating to the courses being given in class and which could help to understand the lessons," explains Abdoulaye Yatabaré, World Links project coordinator and a teacher by profession.

According to him, the use of Internet changes the academic situation of certain pupils considered to be useless. In class, they are not interested in the subject and get bored. With ICTs, these low flyers can turn out to be real virtuosos. This new tool becomes a way for them to show their intelligence.

"I believe that Internet is essential in school. If you want a good job nowadays, the recruiters are looking for Internet and computing skills and knowledge about several other areas. I therefore think that it is good that we learn about new ICTs in high and junior school," said Linda Kpota, a pupil in the last year of high school.

With the World Links programme, the networking search module lasts for eight hours divided into four two-hour sessions. The module takes place in a computer room that has at least ten computers connected to the Internet. During the module, the participants work with educational websites. During the sessions, the pupils receive technical support from teachers, who have received training beforehand. "I was trained in the pedagogical use of new ICTs in history and geography. Thanks to this training, in June 2002, I was able to show 25 of my colleagues how to create websites and prepare classes. Today, I can say that project showed me how to use the Internet to find information. Thanks to this project, I am part of the elite that knows how to use the new ICTs," explained Abdouramane Atji, a teacher. Abdouramane Atji is now in charge of an association promoting the use of ICTs in school in the financial capital of Burkina, Bobo-Dioulasso, located over 350 km from Ouagadougou. This association describes itself as an intermediary of the World Links programme. Its headquarters are located in Ouagadougou.

Prioritising needs

Computer equipment and the Internet are not available in nearly all the schools in Burkina. The situation is even more blatant in the schools in the provincial areas (There are around twenty or so high schools with equipment out of nearly 450 high and junior schools). The computer equipment all too often only consists of a computer and a printer that is only used when there is someone who is computer literate. Furthermore, the equipment is damaged by the heat and dust. In the case of certain schools, if there is a connection, more than one has been discouraged by its exorbitant costs (150,000 FCFA per month) or the very slow connection. The schools often have less than ten computers for over 80 pupils.

“I think Internet offers some advantages, but you have to be careful. Looking up information and setting up school websites are perhaps the most important aspects. Unfortunately, I have seen how using Internet has become a sort of easy solution for the education problems. Nevertheless, we have priorities. In my class, there are more than 90 pupils. We don’t have teachers for some subjects, etc. What is the fundamental priority between these requirements and the desire to install the Net in all the schools?” wondered Patrick Somda aloud.

The World Links coordinator wants the junior and high school pupils in these regions to use the CDs produced on the different school subjects and using the research carried out by the pupils involved in the project. The twelve schools benefiting from the World Links programme are in the political, Ouagadougou, and financial, Bobo-Dioulasso, capitals. The World Links programme is working with the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Education and Scientific Research (MESSRS) and the General Directorate of Vocational Education (DGESTP). Since January 2003, World Links Burkina has a multimedia centre, located in the school area of Ouagadougou. The twelve thousand pupils from the local primary, junior and high school can use it. Neither GTP nor World Links have an annual operating budget. They are funded by charities.

The fundamental evaluation

With the introduction of the new communication technologies, aren’t teachers frightened of being replaced by ICTs? “The courses that you see online are the work of teachers! Pupils also need supervisors to guide them though this huge network. I do not see how these technologies would replace us,” retorted Pascal Bascouré, a high and junior school teacher who is convinced of the usefulness of the teachers.

According to Abdoulaye Yatabaré, “The Burkina schools’ commitment to introducing ICTs is not easy to achieve. I have seen how some pupils sometimes only like the Internet because they can send email, others are spurred on by the sites that they visit (pornographic sites, for example) and another category never finds the information they need”.

It is therefore not enough just to equip the school with computers or just train the learners. Despite the passion of a minority of the education world for these technologies, it is not surprising to see that the other part is not interested. “For the moment, the ICTs do not play a major role in my teaching. I do not use them to complement my teaching or practical classes. In reality, I do not even know how to hold the mouse of the computer,” explained Laurent Adrien Soubeiga, a teacher.

ICTs have to be integrated into the very heart of teaching. They cannot be seen as a new subject that is isolated from the others and considered to be something out of the ordinary that is for a very few pupils, but as a tool that is part of school life. “It is therefore essential to prepare learning activities that allow skills and know-how to be developed: a critical (try, select, check) and analytical approach is there needed in order to reflect and learn in order to reach an evaluation. Without this evaluation, the different training that we are given loses its impact and importance,” stressed Adama Traoré.

ICTs can lead to a diversification of the information sources, practising languages using real communication situations, increasing the motivation of the pupils, teaching using maths, life and earth science software. The research by the pupils into a subject area should not only be by just discussing a subject. In order to study a case, the pupils have to resort to various information sources, select those that are likely to provide the suitable answers and then reorganise them so that they can be disseminated.

Creating contents using software such as Dreamweavers, PageMill, Photoshop, PowerPoint, etc. is not sufficient. In the same way that surfing online and exchanging messages without any educational purpose does not result in learning. The teacher has to include the activities using ICTs in projects with a plan, programme and encourage the pupils to question their knowledge. A research and synthesis approach has

to be developed in the schools. The teacher cannot achieve this alone. The initiative therefore has to be a national one, in other words from the Education Ministry.

The necessary collaboration

The deluge of field initiatives kills skills and distracts the people interested in new technologies applied to teaching, according to Abdoulaye Yatabaré. The lack of coordination and collaboration in the actions can be seen in the opportunities that arise and because everyone wants to be responsible and run a structure. Abdoulaye Yatabaré therefore predicts: "We are facing a situation where we are driven to make an easy living and we forget about the fundamental. While the structures working at integrating ICTs in teaching do not combine their efforts, our forces will still be scattered and we will have nothing to contribute and will be the losers".

The participation of high, junior and primary schools in the GTP or World Links programmes is based on the school directors simply stating that they wish to join in. In order to encourage other schools to participate in the different training opportunities, these two organisations have launched best website competitions. These competitions are aimed at the pupils who have to create websites on their high or junior school and to the teachers who publish their classes online. The prizes are usually small computer equipment, such as a mouse, diskettes, a mouse mat, etc.

ICTs first appeared in the Burkina schools some years ago. The happy beneficiaries usually use it to exchange information (email, chat, documentary research). These technologies are never used as "teaching machines", testing knowledge and providing and developing on the basis of a rationalised use of knowledge. In order for the new ICTs to be used as a teaching aid in the Burkina educational establishments, the teachers and policy makers need to thoroughly study the pedagogical conditions to be set up. ICTs are becoming wide spread. They will undoubtedly be essential communications and information tools in the future. And the Burkina schools will be able to brag that they know HOW TO USE THEM.

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www.iConnect-online.org is a knowledge sharing platform for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in sustainable development. iConnect draws content from its partners, links resources and expertise and encourages collaboration. For the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), the host of iConnect, this is a way to share experiences, lessons learned and ideas, and interact with communities and people with an interest in development and the applications of ICTs. These experiences can lead to a better understanding of the actual benefits of ICTs for Development (ICT4D). The core of iConnect will be a series of locally written articles on the impact and the use of ICTs for development. The articles have a strong focus on fact finding; objective information on ICT4D practices from a southern perspective: Southern content written by Southern people. i4d is the iConnect partner for Asia, and ECA is the iConnect partner for Africa, disseminating the articles to their public.
