Creating Opportunity at the Margins of Bogotá

ICT training at Centro de Juan Bosco Obrero

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Evidence Narratives at the University of Washington's Center for Information & Society

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 for PR purposes, 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 the PR desire to feature certain cases of success 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 training NGO managers and grant makers in these techniques, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the PR 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 and public relations.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape.

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For many residents of Bogota's Ciudad Bolivar, violence, negativity and the lure of self-destructive choices tower like the city's Andean elevation. The civil war that has engulfed Colombia for over a decade continues to displace rural residents, usually landless and scarred, feeding a migrant wave of "urban invaders" at a rate some estimate to be greater than 100 new arrivals per day. Bogota's population has swollen to more than 7.5 million with much of the growth concentrated in the poorer Southern neighborhoods such as Ciudad Bolivar. These districts are poorly equipped to supply jobs and government services or reduce the tension that accompanies an infusion of mostly uneducated newcomers, fresh from the violent front lines of the conflict, into already dense environs. For people at the bottom social strata of war torn Colombia, nurturing hope and opportunity is a daily struggle.

Sandra is one of the hopeful.

Sandra, a 28 year old single mother, is studying computer systems at Juan Bosco.

Eighteen months ago Sandra heard about Centro de Juan Bosco Obrero. A close friend told her about a free computer-training program offered in a technical training facility (Sala Popular de Formación Tecnológica) underwritten by Microsoft Colombia. Sandra heard that the curriculum was rigorous, but that students love the school. In particular, the school's respectful approach toward "teaching the whole person" was praised. Sandra's friend was going to attempt to enroll the next day and invited Sandra to join her. Sandra had only completed grade seven and keeping up with the curriculum would be daunting. However, as a 28-year-old single mother with a 6-year-old daughter, she wanted to consolidate her many formal and informal jobs and improve her wages. And the value of the opportunity to learn about computers was clear to her. "Knowledge of technology and the Internet is very important for any job. If I know how computers work, many better, higher paying jobs will be available to me and I will be able to take better care of my daughter and teach her as well."

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>
> *Sandra*

Enrolling at Juan Bosco

When Sandra embarked on the fifteen-minute early-morning walk up the hill to the Juan Bosco campus, she was not sure what to expect. She had not visited the campus but was told to go early because the limited available spaces were highly desired. Past

students had reported that over 1,500 people had stood in line to apply for the available spots in previous quarters. Every quarter Juan Bosco offers approximately 300 students positions in a variety of technical programs such as computer systems, auto mechanics, carpentry, sewing, and others. As

Centro de Juan Bosco Obrero is deeply connected to its neighborhood in Ciudad Bolivar, though its ethic of respect and valuing community creates visible differences between the school and the street beyond. On the campus, sidewalks are neatly swept and buildings are carefully maintained. Students would not think of littering at Juan Bosco.

Sandra passed through the barbed-wire-topped fence that surrounded the campus, she noticed a dramatic change. Dirt, litter, graffiti and broken windows disappeared, replaced by neatly swept brick pathways and impeccably maintained buildings. The way the students carried themselves between classes was subtly different from others in the neighborhood. Sandra was a little worried because she had only completed grade seven and even with certification from Juan Bosco finding a good job would still require a secondary education degree.
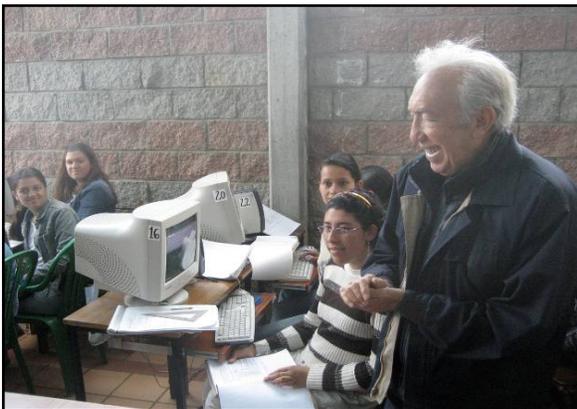
According to Father Jaime Garcia, spiritual and executive leader of Juan Bosco, students pay for their education through "punctuality, respect and hard work."

The poorer the better…

Juan Bosco admission policy prefers local students from the lowest social strata. "The poorer they are the better," said Carlos, director of the computer program. "The less they know the better. We are trying to serve the people that need it the most. Although, they may need to do extra work, because they are tested on their knowledge." The school has developed such an outstanding reputation that Sandra knows of students that lie about their addresses and social strata in order to gain admission. Sandra was accepted into the morning session.

Students at Juan Bosco aren't charged monetary fees, though no one describes Juan Bosco as "free." Students pay by agreeing to live by a certain code of conduct while studying there. For many, it's a lasting commitment. According to Father Jaime Garcia, the spiritual and executive leader since 1993,

they pay through "punctuality, respect and hard work." Sandra knows that some people have found these rules to be too restrictive and have dropped out. Sandra sees this differently. "To me, rules are laws that someone else put there and I have to fulfill them no matter what I think or feel. The code at Juan Bosco is a commitment that I believe in. I want to fulfill them. I'm committed to them."

Sandra says Juan Bosco's values of listening, learning, and respect for others are very important. Many students served on "opposing" sides of the civil war and while the ideological basis of the conflict has faded, when rural Colombians migrate to the city, they bring their histories with them. Students who carried automatic weapons and fought as soldiers, either with the guerillas or the opposing paramilitaries, study side by side at Juan Bosco. Mediation, counseling and an explicit orientation toward tolerance and respect allow these students to function. Each quarter students take courses in Human Values, Sports and Arts, and Business Administration (funded in part by the Government of Japan and USAID among others) in addition to technical training. Social workers and Father Garcia's charisma also play important roles in every student's life. Teaching the whole person is indispensable.

Enhanced employability

While employment is only a slice of Juan Bosco's mission, the chance to get a better job is one of the main reasons that Sandra and others enroll. The school has a formal relationship with SENA, Colombia's National Training Service program, which places students with employers. Juan Bosco is also developing a powerful reputation among employers as a producer of excellent employees. While many programs "certify" trainees based simply on the fact that they attended training, for example, Juan Bosco computer certification requires 320 hours per quarter of training distributed across four modules: hardware, software, networking and accounting. Students are tested and retake the entire course if they fail. The students take this training seriously. Juan Bosco's reputation derives from its holistic approach as well. A stonemason who restores historic buildings, described two workers that he hired from Juan Bosco as "the two best employees he has ever hired because they listen and think for themselves. They are skilled but they also have an attitude that makes them creative, responsible workers. Their value is greater than their technical skill as masons."

Sandra's course of study at Juan Bosco has been challenging. The lack of computer access in Ciudad Bolivar makes it very difficult for Sandra to complete her homework. Sandra only knows three people in her neighborhood with computers at home. Public access computers exist at the Tunal Public library, however it is an especially long walk and much of her accounting and networking homework requires technical software that is not available outside Juan Bosco. All of the students at Juan Bosco use email every day, so free lab time is tightly rationed. Sandra's

Computer students at Juan Bosco spend hundreds of hours in class and are tested around four technology modules: hardware, software, networking and accounting applications. When asked about the most difficult part of the training, this student offered a visual aid.

work is excellent and it's clear that she is learning, according to her teacher Carlos. However, because computer access is scarce, Sandra's portfolio is written out in long hand on paper. This is time consuming and not ideal for a computer systems student.

Outside of class and in addition to her other jobs, Sandra offers childcare for children from her neighborhood at little cost to their families two days a week. Her daughter helps her with the small children and parents often accompany their children on "cinema night" when Sandra borrows a neighbor's VCR and shows movies on the roof of her building. She is passionate when she speaks of

The computerlab at Juan Bosco, donated by Microsoft Colombia, is one of the few access points in Ciudad Bolivar.

her daycare and educating children. She dreams that computer training at Juan Bosco will allow her to earn more income and more stable hours so that she can expand her childcare efforts. Ideally she would love to own a computer. "There are many ways I could put the computer to use, from spread sheets and administrative uses to teaching the children. Many kids here have no experience with computers. Some of the people in my program touched a computer for the first time at Juan Bosco." Even used computers however are prohibitively expensive, but Sandra still dreams.

In a few months Sandra will graduate. She is optimistic about her future. Juan Bosco has offered her many of the opportunities that the people in Ciudad Bolivar need, such as access to free education, opportunities to work towards a better job, and an improved chance to be included in Colombian society. "The people of Ciudad Bolivar are looked down on because we are poor. Outsiders judge us thinking that our locality is full of violence, drugs, and poverty. But many of the people I know in my

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community are ready to move forward. The problem is the lack of opportunities." The problems of violence and drugs are real. Domestic violence is rampant. Nearly everyone has lost loved ones and been directly affected by the conflict. But positive community forces operate as well, such as Juan Bosco and Sandra's childcare center. Sandra does not consider her challenges unique or debilitating. "Everyone here has a story of personal tragedy. What is unique is the opportunity to improve our circumstances." Juan Bosco is nourishing the positive forces in this neighborhood and elevating the people that are creating community and sparking social change. "I feel privileged to study here."