

LOCATION

Worldwide

PARTNERTEACHING-AIDS AT LOW COST,
UK

Teaching-aids At Low Cost (TALC) is a UK-based charity that specialises in providing low-cost health information to developing countries.

SUMMARY

The project aims to increase the efficiency, reach and impact of health information dissemination. It will produce and distribute free CD-ROMs containing training materials and information to health workers in developing countries.

PERIOD OF FUNDING

June 2001 to March 2004

GRANT

£111,437

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Production and distribution of electronic training materials

BACKGROUND

Since its foundation in 1965, **Teaching-aids At Low Cost (TALC)** has distributed more than ten million health information books and accessories to the developing world. Yet, although TALC's books are cheaper than those available from the commercial sector, they are often still beyond the means of many who could benefit – the cost of postage alone often means that organisations can only order a limited number.

In addition to this, advances in information technology mean that health information can now be distributed more cheaply and quickly than through printed media. Access to computers in developing countries is improving and so the potential of the Internet as a source of health information is enormous. However, Internet access is still limited in countries where telephone services are unreliable and line-rental charges remain high.

As a result of these factors, CD-ROM technology has become an important way of increasing the availability of health information. In response, TALC launched a KaR-supported project in June 2001 to distribute health information CD-ROMs to organisations in the South.

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TALC

THE PROJECT

TALC's project aims to improve healthcare in poor communities by increasing the efficiency, reach and impact of health information dissemination. TALC is doing this through the production and distribution of regularly produced, free CD-ROMs containing training materials and up-to-date healthcare information for health workers. The CD-ROMs contain copyright-free materials, have a search engine and include interactive features which enable users' feedback to be gathered.

Because CD-ROMs can only be used by people with access to computers, they cannot wholly replace hard-copy information such as books and

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newsletters. But the advantages of CD-ROMs are that they are cheap to produce compared to books and cost little to distribute because they are lightweight. Unlike the Internet, CD-ROMs can be used without the need for a computer which is connected to a telephone line. They can also hold a great deal of information which can be selected and tailored by users, both to meet their local needs and to develop their own libraries of materials at low cost. The

information can be made interactive for training purposes, and for those with access to laptop computers it can also be used in the field.

CD-ROMs also avoid many of the problems experienced when using websites, for instance the risk of viruses, slow loading, expired pages and the need for other programmes to be able to access material.

One unique feature of the project is that TALC is encouraging southern non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and health workers to supply information for the CD-ROM for distribution to others. This will provide a vehicle for South-South exchanges of information, therefore reducing the South's dependence on the North for health information.

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TALC set up an office in Oxford with technical staff to produce the CD-ROMs. It has received a great deal of interest from other organisations that are considering using the service to distribute their own health information, including the **World Health Organization**, the **HIV/AIDS Alliance** and the **International Centre for Eye Health**. The number of contributors from developing countries is increasing, and the project has created the opportunity for partnerships to be developed between a variety of northern and southern organisations.

To date, almost 3,000 of the first two CD-ROMs have been sent to health workers on TALC's database who are known to have computer access, and initial feedback is very positive. Issues covered by the CD-ROMs include leprosy, cancer, palliative care, pharmacy, HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health and skin diseases. A questionnaire has been issued to gather feedback from users so that TALC can develop further CD-ROMs to suit users' needs.

LESSONS LEARNED

- A study of the ways in which CD-ROMs are being used and the impact they are having is needed to provide an estimation of the size of the available market. It would also be useful to know how easy people find the CD-ROM to use, and the levels of computer expertise available and necessary.

- People use computers in a variety of ways, so it is difficult to design a single disc that fits all patterns of use. Users have a very wide range of computing skills and knowledge of subject areas.

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- Remote feedback from users may be of limited value because there are limits to how honest people will be using such methods. Visits to users would be useful in this regard. In general, face-to-face networking has been particularly useful,

for example, in brainstorming and developing ideas.

- It was difficult to convince organisations of the value of the CD-ROM approach for distributing their materials without a tangible product to show them. Interaction and interest considerably increased when contributors actually saw the product, and extra copies of the CD-ROMs needed to be produced.

- Many users are using old hardware and software. This needs to be considered when designing discs. For example, the material may need to be tailored for basic computers, thus limiting the scope for graphics and high-resolution images.

- Many copyright problems have been raised by this project. For example, authors may wish to share what they have written but find that the copyright is controlled by someone else. Book publishers appear very wary of this technology for fear that they might be bypassed by authors communicating directly with audiences.

FUTURE PLANS

Further CD-ROMs are planned, and potential new contributors for the content of these CD-ROMs are being identified. Some funds will be raised by selling the CD-ROM at cost price to northern NGOs who require bulk quantities. Publicity for the project is being sought, particularly within the medical community, and demonstrations of the CD-ROMs are to be held in Oxford, UK.