

Embracing the Digital Era

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(Editor's note: This interactive presentation was delivered at the Cyprus Conference, September 2011. We invite you to join us on this special journey to five train stations posted on www.cifinternational.com using the links embedded in this document. You can ask questions and interact further with the author, Patricia Gándara de Marshall by e-mail: gandara.patricia@gmail.com).

I would like to introduce the possibility of questioning in our global societies: What is the role of technology in social work and related fields?

In February 2010 when I read the *CIF World News* and the message from the president at that time, Mimmo Merola, talking about the bridge to the future, he referred to the next generation, to the CIF younger participants and one of his questions was: "What will the new generation need to keep CIF alive?" And I would like to extend this question to our practical fields: "What are we going to need in our near future practice?"

Then I started to think of my field, of my expertise dealing with the educational practice and my daily work at university level, teaching students in open and distance educational programs, and also training professors who are trying to include new technologies in their classrooms.

I am going to try to be provocative to stimulate the dialogue and to give the opportunity to open your mind to new ways to connect now days, also the possibility for you to continue debating your feelings and the impact that the new technologies has on you. This is one of my purposes and also I would like to invite all of you to have an adventure with the reading of this paper as I did last year at the Cyprus Conference 2011 where the participants followed this lecture.

There are a lot of questions about technologies, we can start thinking that they are an opportunity but also a risk, and we can compare this with: "Why do we have two eyes?" and think that good and bad come together as in life.

As we already know the New Technologies (we are going to refer to them as the new technologies or ICT) have an impact on our lives, in the way we interact, generating special needs for: all the citizens and for social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapy, speech pathology, educators, sociologists and related fields, as you can see in all the social areas.

The ICT also generates special needs for the participants of social programs, for our students at the university or clients of the different agencies and also in the institutions where we work. It is an impact at different levels or dimensions.

As I mentioned before, I am going to invite you to go on an adventure, as we are all world travelers: I am going to propose a “virtual journey” where you only have to bring your imagination with you. We are going to travel by train and we are going to have five stops, in each stop you have to follow the sites with your computer. This paper will be interactive: you have to search for the different web sites selected to follow the reading.

Let’s enjoy this music and the dance as we start our journey going through this first station. And then imagine yourself going back in time and living in Tchaikovsky’s days, just for a while in this first station, this video will help us: Tchaikovsky: The Nutcracker, by the Royal Ballet with the orchestra of the Royal Opera House:

http://youtu.be/9M6iSgILM_U

There is a story that tells about the first phone call Tchaikovsky made to a music friend. At that time this phone call was planned ahead by post. Rumor has it that on the phone Tchaikovsky felt so bad that he begged his friend to hang up as he couldn’t go on with the conversation. “I heard his voice,” he said, “and I couldn’t stand it! My heart started pounding and I had to stop.”

So we may look and feel like Tchaikovsky sometimes with the ICT!!! Unfortunately in many other aspects we and Tchaikovsky are far from alike!!!

This could be a way to feel about the ICT, we can’t stand them, and we may feel threatened by them, so let’s explore this together:

We may call this train station: *Always Tchaikovsky*

Because now we are here in this high tech world and we have to consider that to make matters worse or more complex, the ICT’ s proposition has two common aspects: being in constant change and evolution for us.

Now, it’s time to move on to our next train station.



On this occasion I invite you all to see the wall paper of this train station as you can see in this photo from the Cyprus Conference 2011.

After digesting this picture of the riots in Vancouver, a freelance photographer, Rich Lam, spotted several shots of a man and a woman, surrounded by police officers as you can see, in the middle of a “like-nobody’s-watching” kiss.

When the photos were published, internet users set out to identify the “kissing couple.”

Within a day, the couple’s relatives and friends had tipped off news websites to their identities. And there they were, on the next day, on the TV “Today” show: Scott Jones and Alex Thomas, the latest proof that thanks to the Internet, every day could be a day that will be remembered around the world.

“It’s kind of amazing that someone was there to take a photo,” Ms. Thomas said on the TV show. These days the web unmask everyone!! We can call this train station: *Upending Anonymity*.

And we may think about the unforgiveness of the web.

When we were children we used to write our personal diaries and hide the key, nowadays our children are writing on Facebook about their personal conflicts, and making them public, not only open to be on the web, but also forever.

Teenagers upload their photos of their parties labeling other friends: and this is going to be there forever, or until the designers of the platform consider making a change: they hold the key of all these diaries. We can imagine in the near future the Human Resources companies searching this information on the web about candidates for their jobs: can the web forgive us?

Now we leave this station and we are going to our next stop, where I invite you to listen to the background music of the next train station:

Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir - 'Lux Aurumque' virtual concert May 2, 2010 with 185 voices and 12 countries, next will be 1000 voices.

<http://youtu.be/D7o7BrlbaDs>

This can illustrate how the ICT can create bridges through distance, breaking all the barriers between continents, flight schedules and kilometers of distance. Also they can create bridges between different generations, allow any organization to work for the future, attract young groups, and develop communities. ICT can give a voice to all the people that can create their online spaces and not only be consumers on the internet, they all have the potential to include the past – like when they recover history and store whatever we like, all the people coming together, creating together.

New technologies can include more and more people, time is handled in an asynchronous way in which you don't need to be in the same space to consider that you are communicated, and it is as if barriers of time and space are disappearing: they are Virtual.

Now we need to think what virtual means and I consider that it helps if we compare our feelings in a face-to-face reunion with a virtual world wide web.

In Argentina, there was a famous author, Jorge Luis Borges, who proposed an imaginary exercise in which we only have one sense instead of five, so we have to imagine that we can't see: so the sky, and the stars disappear, nor do we have the sense of touch, so, again in his own words: "the rough, the smooth disappear." Lastly, we lose our sense of smell or taste, and so we can't tell if something is sweet or bitter or sense the scent of a flower. In his view, all we need to be communicated is the word. In Borges case, being blind, he chose the sense of hearing as his channel of communication. In our case, we may have chosen "reading," as our priority channel for communication.

As you see, there we can have a possible life that could put aside space: it would be a world of individuals that communicate through words.

One of the keys is that we have to make sure that we are dealing with the new technologies as inclusive tools for everybody and not as a means to build up new barriers or put up walls that exclude people in our fields. And the name I propose for this train station is, if you agree: *New Communities*.

The doors are closing and our train is ready to travel to our next station: I invite you all to pay attention to the graffiti on the *walls* of the station!!! And tell me what you can read: Is Google making us stupid?

One question about Google: Do you know that if all of us decide to start a search in Google at the same time for the exact same words: Google is going to give different *results* for each of us!!!

As we are located in different countries and because our search history is personal, so will the results of our searches will be – something to think about. Nicholas Carr is the author of an article with this title: Is Google making us stupid? He is an ICT expert and his latest book is: *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*.

He mentions that over the past few years he has had an uncomfortable sense that someone or something has been tinkering his brain, reprogramming his memory, he found that his mind is changing and this is clear when he is reading a book or a long article because nowadays his concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages.

Is the web chipping away our capacity of concentration and contemplation? Think for a minute, how do we connect with the internet? Surfing in the web page superficially until we find what we want and then we dig into what we are interested in. You may have heard: I am smarter when I am connected, when I know who is the right person or the right site to visit, that's the real power.

Think also about the impact, experts express that we are not only what we read but also, "We are how we read." The Media are not passive channels of information – Marshall MacLuhan taught us that (the 1960 Canadian specialist). He mentioned that media not only supplies the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought.

The playwright Richard Foreman recently expressed his concern about digital dependency in his suggestion that we are on our way to become "pancake people," in contrast to those who are cursed with a more "complex, dense, and cathedral-like" mental structure.

The pancake people are "wide and thin," connected to the network of information, while the cathedral people have internalized a personal vision on the world.

Foreman concluded that we are at risk of turning into pancake people: spread wide and thin as we connect with the vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button.

The name of this station is going to be: *Cathedrals and Pancakes*.

We are arriving at our last train station and its name is the *Collaboration/ Learning Station*.

I want to invite you to see this short video. It is a *TED* production, TED is a small nonprofit organization devoted to *Ideas Worth Spreading* and through www.TED.com they promote annual conferences, and events.

Salman Khan talked at TED 2011 (from ted.com) Khan Academy
<http://youtu.be/qM95HHI4gLk>

We can consider that open learning and virtual opportunities are the future way to learn in collaborative environments, where we don't need to reproduce, we can think differently, and create our own productions: we can be *prosumers* in the web not only consumers.

We can spend some of our time in classrooms in face to face groups to give the opportunity to the student to achieve a personal learning in an "adventure way." Besides, we have to think of portable devices and the increase of internet connectivity, which allows the learning process to occur/ take place anytime, and anywhere: it happens at a bar, at a library, at work; we say that learning is ubiquitous.

The school doesn't have the monopoly of teaching, this could be through a tutorial, like Khan's tutorials that we share, we can access information with no interaction of a tutor or a teacher, then the teacher's role is different, we may have to start to call them: moderators, mediators, teachers 2.0. We don't need to teach all about a subject, we don't need to know everything, we may only be curators of their learning, suggesting, giving options, being an inspiration, showing our passion.

We may change the name of this train station if you agree? As you can see instead of Collaborative/Learning and rename it: *Creativity*

Some Key findings and Key recommendations to share:

- The ICT are always a creation, not just for giving assistance; it is not a new way of delivering social assistance or information or delivering education. As Social Workers or experts in global societies we are not delivering.
- Our clients and students or patients can now have new ways of receiving information. We as professionals have to promote supporting learning, motivating – Technology can't do this by itself. Don't be afraid to be replaced.
- Our clients or students may know more than we about ICT development, and they can explain and teach us. This could be an opportunity not something to be threatened by.
- Empower the people; we could be a blogger, a twitter, you choose, be connected: have your voice, be interactive, share your best practices.
- In the education field we have started talking about: University 2.0. Why not Social Workers 2.0 or CIF 2.0?
- We need to remember that what is important is the content: the technology could be different, the music is always the same on a cd player, on a nano ipad or the gadget you may have. Remember always Tchaikovsky.
- We have the choice to be unplugged, always bear that in mind.
- Build communities, touch with a simple switch.
- Create tutorials.
- Consider the virtual education programs and the e-learning options; be open to this new model of education, think of models like the Open University in Scotland that spends 3 million dollars to design a course, also presently in Israel and in India with 1.5 million virtual students.
- Don't be scared of large groups of students or participants, consider the case of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) in Argentina, where I am currently working, we have 60,000 virtual distance students in courses for beginners through virtual programs.
- We need to be protected in the Internet, like in our societies; we do not allow crime – the same with the ICT: we have to protect our privacy, our security and our property. Don't protect like dinosaurs, protect with creative commons: copyright to motivate creation. I prepared this speech using all white papers on the web.

- You could be heavy users, moderate users, and light users: be yourself!!!
But, always stop and reflect on your personal practice.

The railway company is always designing new stations for our future!!! But, today our journey is finishing here. I decided to share with you these words from Harry Potter's writer, J. Rowling, who said in a graduation speech in Harvard in 2008: "We don't need magic to create the change, we have the power to imagine better."