Bridging the Digital Divide Reading Passage

Bridging the Digital Divide

A. In what concrete ways can information and communication technologies (ICTs) benefit the two -thirds of humanity who are more concerned about their next meal than about email or eBay?

B. First, there are the economic advantages of these technologies. Besides providing businesses with the opportunity to access real-time market information and complete business transactions electronically, ICTs can reduce costs and provide a channel to market goods and services. One small company from Tanzania replaced $20 faxes with 10 cent emails and saw its telecommunications bill go from over $500 per month to $45 per month. In the business-to-consumer segment you will find examples like EthioGift.com which sells gifts, including sheep and goats, over the Internet.

And in India, which is fast becoming a global center for telemarketing, customer support and other call center services, ICTs are transforming the economy. With the legalization of Internet telephony, India has captured an even bigger chunk of the global outsourcing market, with calls from the US accounting for 80 percent of call center business. Schools are even training young men and women to speak in an American accent in order to handle the calls.

C. Health services also benefit from ICTs. Using the Internet, doctors in poor countries can keep up to speed with the latest developments in their field as well as seek help from their peers. This technology can also facilitate the control of diseases. Throughout Africa, for instance, individual cases of meningitis are tracked over the Internet so that epidemics can be stopped early. In addition, ICTs can assist in allowing healthcare professionals to extend their reach through telemedicine into the remotest and most underserved areas.

D. ICTs can make it easier to reach a broad segment of the population in education too. The African Virtual University is a distance learning project which is partly financed by the World Bank, and which serves the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The Virtual University uses satellites to broadcast televised courses to students who communicate with teachers by e-mail and telephone.

E. Finally, we come to what has been dubbed ‘e-government’. E-government initiatives focus on making government transparent and accountable by providing citizens with direct access to information. Critics might argue that when you’re being stalked by war, hunger and disease, this may be a priority. But the e-government is about more than just the ability to pay your taxes online or apply for a driving license over the Internet. It is about giving citizens access to information which allows them to make informed decisions on subjects that affect their lives.

F. But how can those people who need ICT capabilities most be best helped to bridge the Digital Divide? Throwing computers and modems at people (as someone colorfully puts it) will not in itself help much. Other important issues that need to be addressed include improving computer and keyboarding skills and increasing people’s confidence in their ability to use the new technology.

G. A good example of how this can be done is the Information Village Project, a computer intra net linking ten villages near Pondicherry, India. The project, started with a $120,000 grant from the International Development Research Centre, Canada, provides locally relevant information on product prices, healthcare, weather and fishing conditions. A team of volunteers from each village gathers up the information and feeds it into the computer in the local language (Tamil). It is then available to all users of the intranet. There is also a multimedia component to make the information accessible to illiterate users.
Most of the operators and volunteers providing the primary information are women, and their role in the project raises their status in the community. Since most of the villages experience erratic power supply, the project can run on solar power as well as mains electricity.

H. Another Indian creation, the Simputer (short for Simple, Inexpensive, Multilingual computer) was conceived by a team of computer scientists at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. It is a small, hand-held, battery-powered computer about 12 cm by 7 cm that has a touch-sensitive screen. You use a stylus to tap on icons and to input information. Because each display page shows only a few possible commands, illiterate users should be able to learn by trial and error the purpose of the icons and buttons on each page. The Simputer also has software that can turn text into speech.

This works for various Indian languages and allows the Simputer to read the text aloud on its tiny built-in speakers. It also has a slot for 'smart' cards, a feature that its makers see as crucial. Because the device lacks a hard drive, smart cards act as the device's portable storage units. In this way, many people can use one Simputer without having to share their private information with one another. The Simputer costs $200 – a sizable chunk of the yearly per capita income for many of its users. But one Simputer can enable an entire village to access the Internet, perform transactions, keep track of agricultural prices and educate its children.

I. So bridging the Digital Divide is not something that happens after addressing the 'core' development challenges; it is a key component of addressing those challenges in the 21st century. Failure to address the Digital Divide will only exacerbate the existing social and economic inequalities between countries and communities.

Questions

Questions 1- 5

Complete the sentences below with words taken from the Reading Passage.
Use NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS for each answer.

1. The example of the Tanzanian company's telecommunications bill demonstrates how information and communication technology can cut ……..

2. In Africa, use of the Internet enables ……..of diseases such as meningitis to be controlled.

3. An international organization has subsidized a …….scheme in Africa which depends on ICTs.

4. E-government provides people with a source of ……so they can make their own choices in life.

5. In order to allow global use of ICTs, people need to have the skill and …….. to use this technology.

Questions 6- 11

Classify the following features according to whether they apply to

A. the Information Village Project only

B. the Simputer only

C. both the Information Village Project and the Simputer

D. neither the Information Village Project nor the Simputer

6. use of the technology is not limited to individuals

7. information can be kept secure and private by individual users

8. must have a mains electricity supply

9. initially supported by an overseas agency

10. can only be used by people who can read and write

11. knowledge of English not required

Questions 12- 14

Choose the best answer, A, B, C or D.

12. What reason is given for the increasing importance of call centers to the Indian economy?

A the availability of workers with the right accent

B a change in the legal system

C local familiarity with outsourcing techniques

D the country's geographical position

13. The writer says that in both health and education

A more training is needed in the use of ICTs.

B international organizations need to provide more support with ICTs.

C Ordinary people are gaining more skill in the use of ICTs.

D ICTs can help to provide services to more people than before.

14. Overall the writer's main argument in this passage is that

A ICT access is a basic need for a fairer world.

B the digital divide is the cause of our present inequalities.

C the developed world should do more to provide ICT training.

D the digital divide may never be successfully bridged.