

Creating Learning Communities to meet the Challenge of Globalization- can Open and Distance Learning help?

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Abstract: *These are turbulent times as forces of globalization have engulfed most countries in the world. The impact of these forces is so overwhelming that it seems to have altered the economic map of the world. In India, while on the one hand, there is growing affluence of certain sections, on the other, there are signs of marginalisation of vast sections of the population in terms of growing disparities in education, income, health care facilities and other measures of well being. Women in particular, have been adversely affected due to forces of globalization. Globalization has also sparked a revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs). While the ICTs are ushering in an Information Age that promises to bring about new levels of global connectedness, the gap between the 'information rich' and the 'information deprived' is also widening.*

The paper examines the role of education in such a context. In recent years, a paradigm shift is beginning to take place whereby the focus is now on 'learning' and building learning communities/societies within the context of lifelong learning. The experience of technology based community learning centers is showing how technology can be harnessed to empower individuals/communities whereby they engage in learning to create, appropriate and share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies. The distance and open learning system would have to gear itself to meet the challenges posed by these developments.

Context

We live in turbulent times. The forces of globalization are not only affecting but are also transforming finance, currency, trade, employment and communication. The impact of these forces is so overwhelming that it seems to have altered the economic map of the world. Proponents of opening up of economies to international trade and financial flows, aver that globalization will boost economic growth rates. A recent study (Weisbrot, Baker and Chen, 2000) looks at the major economic and social indicators for all countries for which data was available and compares the last 20 years of globalization (1980-2000) with the previous 20 years (1960-1980). These indicators include: the growth of income per person, life expectancy, mortality among infants, children, and adults, literacy, and education. The findings of the study are disquieting for they show that for economic growth and almost all of the other indicators, the last 20 years have shown a clear decline in progress as compared with the previous two decades.

In India, the impact of globalization is now beginning to be visibly felt. With economic restructuring, fast developing changes are bringing about important transformations at various levels. While on the one hand, there is growing affluence of certain sections, on the other, there are signs of marginalization of vast sections of the Indian population in terms of growing disparities in education, income, health care facilities, and other measures of well

being. Women, in particular, have been adversely affected due to forces of globalization. Beside women's labour and employment, women's livelihood issues have been affected, so also their access to basic services such as fuel, water, childcare and maternal support (Sen, 1998). There are other manifestations of the impact of globalization that have started affecting everyday lives in urban areas. There is a phenomenal increase in the levels of violence, corruption, pollution, disease, consumerism, individualism, aggressiveness, suicides, etc. Today, most scholars and eminent economists are trying to find answers to critical questions regarding intellectual property rights, currency convertibility and technology transfer in the context of globalization. Increasingly, concern is being expressed on the long-term impact of globalization on urbanization, education and culture in India.

There is yet another phenomenal change that has taken place in recent years. Globalization has also sparked a revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs). The new ICTs are based on the use of computers and multimedia, digital compression and satellites, fiber-optics and wireless networks, artificial intelligence and virtual reality. When compared to the traditional media such as television, radio and the press, the new technologies are showing that they have an enormous potential for engaging in learning and teaching at the individual, community, and societal levels. In other words, as the world's population is getting more and more connected, the ICTs are ushering in an Information Age that promises to bring about new levels of global connectedness. Thus the last few years have seen the proliferation of virtual worlds, cyberspace and networks of communication between businesses, banks and other commercial outlets. E-mail, internet and tele-conferencing, etc. are now in common usage in many parts of the world. On the other hand, around 80% of the world's population has no access to reliable telecommunications. It is said that more than half of humanity has never made a telephone call and that there are more computers in New York than in the whole of the African continent (DFID, 2000). Beyond the electronic world, however, there is the real world that is made of hunger and disease and this is the real world where the majority of humanity continues to live. Within such a context, the gap between those who have access to information and those who do not is widening and this gap between the 'information rich' and the 'information deprived' is now assuming alarming proportions.

In India, masses of adult men and women are still inadequately prepared to participate in the emerging global society as parents, workers, and citizens. Vast sections of the population continue to be illiterate. By and large, the illiterate are poor, hungry, sick, powerless, exploited. With the economic restructuring that is taking place at the behest of the World Bank and the IMF, the disinvestment of the PSUs (Public Sector Undertakings) and downsizing of government jobs, the specter of jobless growth now looms large. In such a scenario, special efforts would have to be made to enable people to understand and critically reflect on the rapid changes that are taking place around them so that they can explore and develop new approaches that require their knowledge and skills be continuously accessed and updated.

A question that needs to be asked is what is the role of education in such a context? With growing pauperization of vast sections of the population, what kind of education would be relevant to deal with the forces of globalization and the rapid advances that are being made by information technology? What would be the role of distance and open learning system in such a rapidly changing scenario? An attempt is made in this paper to take a critical look at some of these questions.

Education- the way out

The 1990's could be said to have been a decade that helped develop universal awareness and collective mobilization vis-à-vis education. While promoting the importance of basic education, there was also the recognition of the need to move beyond a narrow concept of basic education. Thus, the World Conference on Education for All document stated,

What is needed in an 'expanded vision' that surpasses present resource levels, institutional structures, curricula, and conventional delivery systems while building on the best in current practices. New possibilities exist today which result from the convergence of the increase in information and the unprecedented capacity to communicate. We must seize them with creativity and determination for increased effectiveness.

The educational programmes that have been offered to adults and children so far, however, have stemmed from the 'one size fits all' mentality. As a result, uniform programmes, with little flexibility and diversity, have been offered to children and adults, most often with all too well known consequences of low initial enrolment and subsequent high drop out rates. Recognizing the need to make a shift and to orient the educational system to meet the challenges of the new millennium, the Delors Commission Report talked about the four pillars of education, viz. learning to be, learning to do, learning to know and learning to live together. Even the Dakar Declaration (April 2000) states, 'we re-affirm the vision of the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990) supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that every child, youth, and the adult has the human rights to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of the term... an education geared to tapping each person's talents and potential, and developing learners' personalities, so that they can improve their lives and transform their societies.' In other words, there is recognition of the need for flexibility and adaptability to suit local contexts and specific circumstances.

Educational programmes that emanate from such an understanding of education would look for increasingly diverse solutions instead of propagating universal solutions for all. Rather than accepting that there is one single pattern for everybody, what would happen is that diversified educational models would be designed to meet the specific needs of each group. Also, rather than outside 'experts' planning and designing programmes to meet the needs of different groups, such an understanding of education would allow for greater decision making on the part of the participant groups. So far, the poor and illiterate adults have only been blamed for their illiteracy and poverty. As a result, experts who have offered mainly middle class solutions to their problems have developed literacy programmes for them. If people are looked at mainly as 'solutions' rather than as 'problems' that they have tended to be so far, they would be seen as being already engaged in daily processes of self and community development. But for this to happen, according to Jain (2000), we would have to recognize the infinite and diverse potentials of every human being and their different learning styles/paces, intelligence, creativities, meaning-making systems, etc, and allow space for these to bloom. At the same time, we would need to better understand and foster the dynamics of collective learning, interdependence, collaboration and dialogue which are critical to living in healthy communities. If we recognize that individuals and communities are constantly learning and are constructing /sharing knowledge even when there are no formal educational programmes, we would understand the importance of building a

learning society grounded on a discourse of diversity.

The possibilities for using different combinations of technology to create and facilitate such learning processes and environments are infinite. Technologies make it possible to visualize other worlds and to link up diverse learning communities. According to the Unesco document titled 'Technology and Learning,' these technologies and their breaking down of barriers, present us with a chance to address questions of distance and time. 'They allow us to question fundamental assumptions, generate new ideas and even, sometimes, albeit more rarely, catalyze social and institutional change. To unlock this potential requires recontextualizing the ways in which we 'see' new technologies.'

Experience is now beginning to show that as a response to forces of globalization, more and more people are in fact beginning to work out their own strategies for survival and development. Local citizens' groups and alternative institutions are emerging to meet basic economic needs, to preserve local traditions, to establish ecological chains, and to struggle for human rights and dignity. In other words, the educational interventions are aiming less at optimizing one's survival within the existing framework of global competition, and more at transforming the existing framework itself. ICTs are facilitating networking among groups and individuals who are exploring democratic alternatives to top-down economic globalization. The International Forum on Globalization (IFG) is an alliance of leading activists, scholars, economists, researchers and writers formed to stimulate new thinking, joint activity, and public education in response to economic globalization. IFG came together out of a shared concern that the world's corporate and political leadership is undertaking a restructuring of global politics and economics that may prove as historically significant as any event since the Industrial Revolution. According to this Forum, this restructuring is happening at a tremendous speed, with little public disclosure of the profound consequences affecting democracy, human welfare, local economies, and the natural world. Whether it is Seattle, Davos, Prague, the forces that oppose globalization and the economic policies of the World Bank and of the IMF, are picking up momentum. On the other hand, new social movements which include a wide number of grassroots organizations working locally in many parts of the Third World are engaged in constructing educational alternatives that symbolize a different vision of the world and of the social relations therein (Kamat, 2000). Education, like many other sectors of society, is thus going through a paradigm shift in favour of putting the focus on 'learning' and how it can unlock the enormous potential of each individual human being. Momentum is building up for lifelong learning approaches and for creating learning communities/societies, in view of the challenges to nations, organizations, and individuals in the new millennium. According to Longworth (2000), while it may seem like a learning utopia, already some 'cities in the world- Southampton in England, Edmonton in Canada, Udaipur in India, Kakegawa in Japan- are taking the first steps towards the dream and declaring themselves to be 'Cities of Learning.' There are others in the world that are setting up similar initiatives, and he foresees that soon in this millennium, there would be a new world of linked Communities of Learning in which knowledge and expertise and talent are shared with one another through electronic links between 3rd age citizens, school children in their studies, universities in their research activities, companies for trade, and hospitals for medical assistance.

Setting up Technology-based Community Learning Centers- some experiences

The need for building a learning society becomes even more urgent due to discrepancies in ICT access between the industrialized and wealthy nations of the 'North' and those of the 'South' (almost all developing countries). As a result, serious concern is now being expressed about the 'digital divide' that separates the information-rich and the information-poor. A question that repeatedly gets asked and which poses a moral dilemma is, when hundreds of millions of people in the South lack basic education, health care, adequate nutrition, and basic amenities for decent living, how can investment in ICTs be justified? Since resources are limited, should they not be allocated to meeting basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health care and education?

Today, it has to be recognized that information and communication technologies have a place in the South in as much as in the North. Also, technology is already a reality in the South and increasingly so for greater numbers. Rather than posing this as an either-or proposition, it is important to realize that while the basic needs of people have to be met, at the same time there is need to use technology but in a manner whereby people begin to exercise control over its use. Since developing countries lag significantly behind in information infrastructure and individual access to technology use seems an impossibility, the concept of a community center that is equipped with technology and which serves the information, communication and educational needs of the community, is drawing considerable attention. Current research indicates that such centers can begin to respond to varied community needs. Keniston (2000), however, cautions that instead of assuming that extending ICTs to larger populations is good in itself, what has to be understood is that if ICTs are useful at all, they must become a potential instrument in meeting other human, social, economic, cultural needs. In other words, ICTs should be deployed only when they constitute the most effective available way of meeting basic human needs. Drawing lessons from the Indian experience, he enumerates some principles that need to be kept in mind if ICTs have to be used to increase equity and promote diversity. One of the principles relates to that of the ICT projects building on an assessment of local needs, as locally defined by local people. The experience of the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation in Chennai has shown how community tele-centres were set up in villages near Pondicherry. Before introducing new technologies of information and communication, however, extensive discussions were held with different sections of the village community to ascertain their information needs.

They found, for example, that women wanted information about childcare, health, child rearing, education and reproductive health; men were interested in information on market prices of fertilizers and grain. Assessment of information needs was useful in helping the project team to craft Internet uses that were responsive to the needs of the villagers and became the starting point for procuring/adapting/developing learner-centred materials. Thus, in a coastal village, a U.S. Naval website is now accessed every day in order to provide information about heights of waves that is of use to the fishermen who are venturing into the sea. In the case of other villagers, information regarding government schemes, health related information, market prices of agricultural commodities, pest control measures, home remedies, etc., are procured from government and well as other sources. The community tele-centres ensure that the information required by the villagers is procured from different sources and is made available to the villagers in a form and language that is understood by them. It is not assumed, however, that sophisticated Web

sites or even ICTs are the only means to provide the needed information. In one village, the village women articulated the need for information on reproductive health. As a result, a health camp was organized to address this need and information about reproductive health was thus better provided to women in small group discussions with doctors than by clicking for information on a Web site.

Elsewhere, there are interesting experiences, both within India and abroad, which are showing that the ICTs can be used by the poor for accessing information on issues that affect their lives. Thus, computerization of SEWA Bank helped to expand the self-help groups involved in financial services at the village level. Use of computers in district level organizations helped expand business by maintaining up-to-date records and increasing productivity. . Computers opened up new markets for craftswomen of Banaskantha and Kutch. The wares of these skilled artisans were displayed on the NET, generating a lot of interest and bringing in more business. This has helped the women command a better price for their products and has benefited more than 40,000 women in these areas (Bindra, 2000). For the 800 Bangladeshi women who were given cell phones on loan by the Grameen Bank, the instrument became more than a means of communication: it became a weapon, which they have successfully used to fight poverty. As a result, they are now any number of cases where the mobile phone has brought changes in their lives and in their social status as women (Thakuria, 2000).

Project Headstart of the Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission of Madhya Pradesh, is a project for computer-enabled education and development of basic computer skills for all students in primary schools and middle schools through the 7500 Jan Shiksha Kendras of Madhya Pradesh. It seeks to correct the growing trend that computer education is only about learning basic operations of computers and replaces it with a perspective of computer-enabled education to stimulate learning in exciting new ways through multi-media applications to enliven the process of learning (Headstart, mimeo).

The Centre for Extension Education of IGNOU has recently initiated a project funded by the Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver. The objective of the project is to set up technology-based community learning centres for promoting literacy among adults, youth and children. It is envisaged that beyond simply learning how to use software and hardware, individuals and communities will use varied technologies to generate their own literacy materials and thus facilitate mutual learning, begin to access information that they need, exercise control over such information, and use the new ICTs for the articulation of their own culture and identity. The experience so far has shown that some interesting developments have begun to take place. Very early on in the project planning, accessibility, interactivity, community mobilization and sustainability were articulated as project goals. As a result, project activities have been shaped on the basis of these project goals. Various strategies have been used to mobilize the community and ensure access of technologies to different socio-economic groups with varying learning needs. Thus, the younger school going children as well as adolescent youth have shown interest in acquiring computer skills; while there are neo-literate adults who have begun to use technologies such as digital camera and handycams to take pictures and compose their own stories and materials, while still others use the computers to practice reading skills. Short duration training programmes on reproductive health issues have been organized for those women who articulated this need, inasmuch as a soil testing programme in one village and animal husbandry programme in another village were organized on the basis of the development needs that were articulated by the villagers. Gradually, an environment of learning is being created in these communities. Technology is being harnessed to respond to the community

needs. Experience is showing how information and communication technologies can be used to provide flexibility for catering to different learning styles and different learning needs. In other words, there is a shift from trying to promote a mix of appropriate technologies to supporting a process in which technologies themselves are appropriated by the people themselves.

According to Johnson and Jain (1999), in using ICTs, individuals/communities should hold a larger vision of learning. This vision should involve processes of critical self-reflection, thinking, questioning, exploring, interacting, meaning-making, creating, connecting, and discovering. Quoting from a UNESCO document, Johnson and Jain aver that these processes are directly linked to a notion of empowerment, in which individual/communities engage in learning to create, appropriate and share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies. Through empowerment, individuals not only manage and adapt to change but also contribute to/generate changes in their lives/environments.' It is such a vision of learning that must guide the technology-based community learning centers if ICTs have to play a meaningful role.

Creating Learning Communities- how Distance and Open Learning System can help

The distance and open learning system is presently not geared to meeting the challenges posed by the learning communities/society. This is because the existing distance and open learning system has based itself on the formal system of education and has catered largely to learners from the tertiary sector. The influence of the formal system has influenced the manner in which the distance education courses have been developed and offered. Thus, so-called 'experts' develop the content of such courses and the courses are 'delivered' to the learners. Tests are designed to examine how much rote memorization has taken place. The banking concept of education has ensured that the iniquitous and hierarchical relation between the teacher and the student remains intact. Furthermore, it is the 'one size fits all' mentality that has guided the open and distance learning system so far.

If this has to change and the open and distance learning system has to build/support learning communities, then the system would first have to undergo a process of unlearning and then re-learning in order to understand how learning communities can be built. This would entail a complete change of mind set and de-conditioning on all of our parts. The challenge would be to develop a variety of courses for adults wherever they may be- in the homes, outside in the fields, in the workplace, in the community- using whatever media is at their disposal- television, local radio, satellite, cable, ISDN networks, and the Internet- to make learning the number one activity in each community. But in order for this to happen, the open and distance learning system would have to start focusing on the needs of people as learners- finding out why, when, what and how people prefer to learn, discovering new learning methods, identifying the basic skills which people need in order to learn better individually, in groups and in families- using the modern education delivery technologies and tools to provide new learning for people wherever they want to receive it.

This is the challenge the open and distance learning faces if it wants to build learning communities as part of the Learning Society in the new millennium. Whether the system would accept this challenge remains to be seen.

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