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Flexible Education: The Key to Learning- An Integrated and Sustainable Model

Ananya S Guha, IGNOU Institute for Vocational Education and Training,
Shillong, India

Comments welcome. Please contact author: asguharsd@gmail.com

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Chairs of the Network:

Professor Dr. David Crowther, De Montfort University, Leicester Business School, The Gateway, Leicester LE1 9BH, UK

davideacrowther@aol.com

Professor Dr. Güler Aras, Yildiz Technical University, Institute of Social Science, Yildiz, Besiktas 34349, Istanbul, TURKEY

guleraras@aol.com

Education is a social responsibility cause and effect. This is so especially when and where education is also taken up by Corporate Houses and NGOs as an act of social responsibility. The Indian Parliament has passed the right to education bill which makes education a fundamental right especially for children of the age group of 6-14 years. This is good augury especially in the sense that basic and primary education and their pillars must be strong if the edifice is to be built. Then only, secondary and higher education can gain a firm foothold. Para education that is education for street children, children of affected by calamities such as floods (Countries such as India and Bangladesh are particularly prone in this regard) is arousing a strong world consciousness. The common school system, neighbourhood schools and community colleges are other awakening factors in the world of education, which again is connected to the world of work, and the industry education interface and alliance.

Flexible learning is the key to learning today, when contextualized in a world of changing learning needs and teaching paradigms. The fact that education has become an 'industry' also necessitates that learning is more flexible, where working people need time to take off from their work situation, to take add on courses and be updated in their specific work situation. Moreover the world of work, and the world of education have, today, direct linkages. This is the import and meaning of Adult and Continuing Education. Working men and women studying and learning should not be an opprobrium. Also, the training factor is a significant component of education today. Flexible learning would then mean studying leisurely in one's place and pace. Even when one shifts his/her place, learning continues in space, made available by cyberspace and the world of the internet. The world is a global community today and cyber space creates the right ambience, even if one is uprooted from the physical place. Internet learning, which is a form of learning enables one to be in touch with tutors synchronously or asynchronously. Even the traditional classroom is extended beyond the four walls because the teacher can keep in touch with students or communicate with them sitting at home. Moreover, classes/teaching sessions can be conducted for off campus students.

The Radicalization of Education

The radicalization of education began with Distance Education which graduated from print technology to media technology. Subsequently, technology has been integrated with printed material and audio-video conferencing which came to play a vital role in education, where students sitting at a distance can interact with peer groups and teachers. Radio broadcasts for students also have become very popular in different parts of the world. Distance and Open Education judiciously uses technology with face to face teaching in a blended mode. The idea is that classroom learning is not stymied where there is use of different formats in pedagogy such as lectures, role plays, quiz, group discussions, etc. The lecture method is not the only ontology in teaching-learning heuristics.

"Distance Education struck gold with the advent of computer networking..." but it is to be seen how this actualization takes place in remotely rural areas in inaccessible regions of the poorer counties.

Adult and "Continuing" Education

This is not a myth today, but a vibrant reality. The world of work and the world of education have a very close and intimate connection. Adults who are working have

the felt need to be updated and trained in their own workplace or would like to study 'sandwich' courses, that is take time off to be trained and study, take admission to courses which can satisfy their training needs. A teacher may need to do a short term course on School Leadership Management, a business executive may desire to update his/her professional skills by studying courses on Human Resource Management. But, what is to be known and scrutinized is how far this learning will have practical applications. Adult and Continuing education is also distance and flexible learning as these two matrixes are very convenient and apt mechanisms for the adult learner or the learner who wants to work and study at same time. In fact, the adult learner forms a very tangible part of the target group for flexible learning.

Flexible Learning is geared towards lifelong learning, adult and "continuing education", in fact it provides and fulfils a base for them so that learning is autonomous, autodidactic and is also a contiguous force. Learner autonomy is the rationale for education today – freedom to learn at any place, time or pace. In fact because of the internet, the mobile and the integration of technologies, learning and teaching have broken the barriers of distance – echoing Negroponte's seminal words that distance is dead. Technology has made incursions into the traditional classroom and Negroponte's movement of cheap computers for school children in the poor countries; the OLPC (One Laptop Per Child) has made daring interventions into school education, in countries like India where relatively cost effective XO computers have further radicalized the concept of education. The child can have fun and learn and there are mechanisms for uploading course content into the laptops.

Distance Education, Open Education and Flexible Learning

The terms 'distance', 'open' and 'flexible' in the context of education can be used and are used synonymously and interchangeably. They denote the 'space' both inner and the outer, which the learner needs. Even the young learner who is taking to studies after a period of time, or after a gestation needs that space— studying at one's place or space, studying which makes the process pleasurable rather than an onerous responsibility fraught with dire consequences — the opprobrium of failing.

Thus, the learner can spread out his learning with mobility: exams say may be held twice a year, the learner may not even complete a programme, and be awarded certification for the courses he/she has completed. All these are very flexible models for the 'disadvantaged' learner, the working learner, the adult learner, missionary workers, mothers, working women, school teachers etc.

However Distance Education is gradually merging with traditional education due to the interface with technology and also due to the advent of FOSS (Free and Open Source Software). The number of open access journals that have become available on the web is a testimony to the accessibility of knowledge and information dissemination. The Internet is a plausible movement to consciously break barriers of distance, and create a tour de force for educational ontology.

Methods of Flexible Learning

While Distance Education started off with print pedagogy which in many ways is still the mainstay of such open learning many other forms have come to stay and have made an indelible stamp in the world of learning . One such form device or methodology is technology which covers a wide range : the television, the radio the Computer/Internet and even the mobile phone. In many instances these supplement

the print technology. In many cases they are used as stand alones, but have to be viewed in an integrated, holistic manner as acting and interacting upon one another. Podcasting or computer broadcasting uses the forms of the computer, radio and even the television in the sense that one may 'see' the presentations. One of course hears them and listens to them. Then of course the discussion mode can be both voice chat and text chat. In addition there is audio video conferencing, two way, which is interactive. Radio lessons can also use the interactive mode.

Mobile Learning is the latest addition to the wide matrix of technology in education and, universities like the Indira Gandhi National Open University have been using sms alerts for students to update them with information on course registration, payment of fees and examinations.

Internet Learning

Often used synonymously but mistakenly with e-learning, internet learning is computer aided instruction which is both synchronous and asynchronous by which the student can constantly keep in touch with his/her teacher. However, for formalization the internet is structured into a class room where multi tasking devices such as the moodle can be effectively used for teaching and learning. This is not a shift in paradigm-different formats of teaching- learning heuristics have been used in the conventional classroom such as; group discussion, quiz, role plays, lectures, brainstorming sessions etc. Technology such as using the device of the moodle can permanently structure these formats and, computer aided instruction can be an extension or appendage of the classroom. After all, who does not need the classroom? It is something that any learner has been used to since his/her childhood. It is there that he met his friends and his best teachers. The classroom cannot be demythicized, at best it can be modified and extended or even shortened—thanks to technology. The implications of technology in learning processes today are many. Power point presentation can be used in the classroom— more visual and more interesting perhaps than the 'chalk and talk' method. So paradigm, conceptual and practical shifts are continuously taking place in the world of education in a classroom which is not so much permanent but transient. There is a broad and cultural shift in the role of the teacher, but the learner remains static.

This is because education today is primarily not teacher centric. It is this learner focused system of education which is making huge demands on educational systems as learning is growingly becoming more and more associated with training.

"Openness of Education"

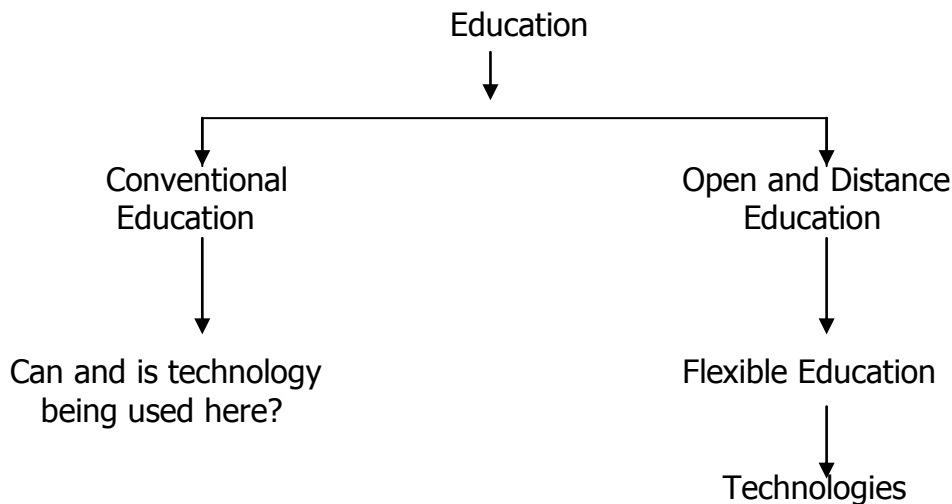
Education today is often described as an open book. The Wikipedia, a world wide web, classless encyclopedia was designed, fashioned and engineered to provide information and knowledge to poor children in different parts of the world. As mentioned above, FOSS (Free and Open Source Software) is another typification of such 'free' and 'open' knowledge. This is not only giving momentum to education but also access and flexibility. Access and equity in education are often talked about, but these developments in access such as free knowledge sharing are giving egalitarian opportunities for knowledge sharing to people and students the world over. The MIT and other Institutes of Technology are hosting on the web classroom lectures of their teachers for anyone to read. This is unprecedented in the history of education, and is made possible today only because of technological access.

'Openness' then is not a myth but a larger step towards making education a commodity which is flexible and more importantly accessible. 'Openness' is an epistemological tool abetted by technological forces which mankind is using creatively for educational purposes. Technology, flexibility, user friendliness, the internet, the radio and the television are proven matrixes and concomitants for educational practices and ideologies. These are good practices.

The Radio

Contrary to popular belief at least, in countries like India that the radio would die a natural death, in the face of the massive appeal of the television, there has on the contrary been a resurgence and boom of the radio in the form of FM stations. This is being used by universities like the Indira Gandhi National Open University to broadcast lessons in different areas of expertise and specialization such as agriculture, commerce, health, teacher education, rural development, creative writing, mass communication, etc.

Community Radio also is one such expression of community needs, and educational needs can well be met through the aegis of the community Radio. The features of flexible education, and its paradigms can be shown diagrammatically as below:



If the answer is in the affirmative to the question posed below the subtitle "**Conventional Education**", then there is a convergence or rapprochement between conventional and traditional education and open, flexible education. This is good augury in the sense that the ends of education which are pervasive must needs be viewed holistically.

The Marketisation of Education- Education as an Industry

The demand and supply of Education is to be seen in the context of the discussion, analysed and enumerated above. Education is a growing industry due to the demand of learners who do not mind paying course fees of a substantial nature for professional needs. More and more Distance Education Institutes are gaining ascendancy all over the world and they are capitalizing on the needs of such market forces. The purists of education are not happy with the growth of such capitalism and understandably they are worried about quality assurance. The complexity of education is evidenced by market forces, costs, both one time and recurring fee

structure etc. Distance Education can also be seen from such 'business' perspectives and there is prevalent here the concept of buying and selling course ware. This notion of Education as an industry has seeped into the psyche of both educators and industrialists, and the education industry alliance is a much worked out concept today. This has gone a step further with the PPP-Private Public Partnership. This model is being used for vocational education and training (VET). I have in mind especially developing countries such as India.

The traditional radio has gone one step ahead in its popularity, with the emergence of the community radio for communitization of education and social development. In fact technology has compelled the global and the local not only to co-exist but to interact; what with the popularity of concepts such as "earth treasury" and global village networks advocated by Free and Open Source protagonists such as Edward Cherlin Mukurai.

The Telecentre Movement

Community based education is also one of the focal points of education today. In a globalized world the dialectics of the local and the global co-exist. At the same time community needs in terms of education and overall socio-economic development are some of the felt needs. The telecentre movement in East Africa and Asia is a pointer towards this and in village community centres the local 'community' can gather to address their socio economic needs by using the internet as a delivery mechanism. This is Education in a broad sense. Telecentres, thus, can be Distance Education and Vocational Centres, where there is a mix of technology- the radio, the television, the computer and the mobile phone. Telecentres will vie with each other for sustainability and where there is no mission drift the sustainability factor will invariably be strengthened. In fact the telecentre movement is an autonomous movement for learning and earning by the community, by which they can gather at a telecentre to collect information, transact business or buy tickets. The telecentre becomes the hub of community activity.

There are various models of telecentres such as the education model and the business model. The telecentre movement is giving education and social development the required shot in the arm and fillip. It is a radical form of social and communication daredevilry with a goal towards the communitization of education-vocational and skill development. The IGNOU Institute For Vocational Education And Training in Shillong, India has experimented successfully with vocational training in the Common Services Centers in the West Khasi Hills District of the State of Meghalaya in India. The village chosen was Mairang and skilled vocational training in the form of electrical wiring was imparted to the youth in a Common Services Center, in collaboration with BASIX India; a micro financing and micro credit organization. This was further integrated with basic computer knowledge which is literacy per se today.

There were fifteen participants in all and this experiment will now be taken to two other districts in the State of Meghalaya in India. The goal is to cover in the first phase **60** Common Services Centers in the North East Region of India; which the IGNOU Institute for Vocational Education and Training caters to.

Changing Circumstances of Distance and Open Learning:

Technology has aided and abetted a changing situation in the scenario of education,

because technology which progresses rapidly is a change agent. We have journeyed a long way from the printed word to a combination of technological heuristics. Educators and education providers must constantly adapt to such changes. Education must also be seen as a catalytic agent generating knowledge processes. The information society must needs be a knowledge society. A knowledge based economy is the fine tuning of education industry alliance, by which education and knowledge drives people into the market or industry. Education is increasingly being altered to the job market and is not now only — degree biased. Also, it is being inextricably connected to training- to create a more sustained and sustainable workforce.

Education and Sustainability

This brings us to the question of education and sustainability. Education is a cyclical process leading to cybernetically related strategies such as training the master or future trainer. When we speak of Education for sustainable development, what do we mean? Do we mean education for employability, for economic development? Or is it education for economic advantages? Clearly, the issue of education has remained a myth, but what about learning? The term learning implies a much wider connotation, it is also pleasure induced and there can also be learning for its own sake. The qualitative aspect of learning cannot simply be undermined or underestimated, so also its subjective and universal appeal.

Conclusion

Flexible learning is thus, 'open' in the widest sense of the term, technology driven and encompassing the values of both distance education and traditional teaching and learning. It is the latest learning ontology in a world where access to education and equity of education are the prime needs. It is also, in its finest sense adult and continuing education, vocational and professional training as well as education for dropouts and delinquents. It is education on the job for the workforce, women and working professionals including teachers, administrators and managers. The connotations of education today have large ramifications due to its industrialization, marketization and commodification. But quality will be propelled both by internal (i.e. demand) and external (i.e. supply) forces.

The marketisation of education or its commodification has lead to a radical paradigm shift in the education system. Gradually there is an industry-education alliance, what with corporate houses consciously propagating such an alliance. For example, we are talking of investor education, education for employment opportunities in call centers. In India the CII (Confederation of Indian Industry) has been involved in the formation of a national Skill Development Council which apparently is concentrating on vocational education with reference to the Public Private Partnership model. Thus, vocational education and training is emphasized today as an outlet for job opportunities. Thus also there is a shift in thinking that mere acquisition of degrees will not lead to employment. In fact, the focus is on skill development and short term courses. The educators think that the under graduate and post graduate syllabi do not prepare the youth for the world of work. Vocational education then will be skill development not only for the youth, but also the general public in both the organized and the unorganized sectors with an accent on the latter. However, with the industry education alliance forging ahead then, this

complicity cannot be compromised with quality. From research and development to vocational education and training the role of the industry is fraught with onerous responsibilities.

Education and social responsibility have an inextricable linkage as education impacts directly upon society for social development. Today, if we are talking about a knowledge based economy, then it is one of the mandates of education to augment economic self reliance. Vocational education and partnerships and consortia between the Govt. and community based organizations is the right pointer towards such an objective.

And, flexible education has long standing ramifications as it gives wider opportunities to people to learn including drop outs, house wives and working professionals. In fact, learning and earning is a popular maxim today. It connotes the vocationalisation of education, its professionalism and marketing strategy.

However, the commodification or commercialization of education has its inherent and lurking dangers. There is a strong apprehension among educators regarding the emergence of educational shops. In India many foreign institutes whose credentials have not been established are marketing their courses aggressively. Cross border collaboration is alright but when such collaboration takes place between one developed nation and another developing one then the fees are very steep in terms of Indian currency. This divides the haves and have nots sharply and creates a greater hiatus of opportunities between them. Similarly, private institutions in the country without any credentials operate courses ranging from communication to IT skills. There are a plethora of them today, and even the smallest towns have them. It is business started by people who are not remotely connected to education. The education-industry alliance is a welcome sign when there are tie-ups between educational and industrial houses of repute with proven research credentials.

Education is continuity, contiguity and learner autonomy. This is its social responsibility aspect. It is holistic right from school education onwards and such holism makes it value based and continuity based. Thus, school education is the base upon which the edifices of higher education are built. In countries where literacy rates are low then education is the antidote for social ills. Once, literacy rates are high and there is free and compulsory education for all then automatically higher education becomes qualitatively better and accessible. Quality in education perforce cannot be compromised notwithstanding the industrial and marketing features of it. If education becomes solely utilitarian and profit oriented, then it is crassly sacrificed at the altar of expediency and mercenary motives. This, as educators, we must be aware of.

However, the blueprint is that education has gone beyond acquisition of degree to the world of vocational education, SMEs, skill development, literacy and what is termed as basic education. The National Skills Commission Report (2008) of the Govt. of India addresses these issues cogently and earmarks segments of the population in India which are in crying need of skill development and vocational education and training. They are educated unemployed, drop outs, street children, domestic workers, addicts etc; so that the concept of education is not jaundiced but holistic. In fact many NGOs and Corporate Houses in India, the govt. owned State Bank of India are taking up vocational training initiatives as an integral feature of its CSR activities – good practices in large measure.

This is the sustainability and 'continuing' attribute of education-its altruism and egalitarianism especially in the poorer countries of the world. This must needs be perpetuated and sustained, it is not larger than life, it is a replication of life, action research and critically addresses needs of the community (see: www.telecentre.org)

A sustainable model of education needs to be worked out, adapted to local conditions where education is not understood merely in terms of the cognitive and intellect, but is psychomotor in orientation-hands on experience and skill rearing and nurturing. Further any form of social and economic development, is in its finest sense; education in motion.

Education and its sustainability is an exemplification of how education can touch the masses and not only the classes. The very fact that Corporate Houses are looking at education in more ways than one in the form of establishing schools, and in terms of vocational education; is a pointer to the CSR dimensions of education. In India, industrial houses such as that of the Tatas and the Birlas have already done pioneering work in the field of both school and higher education since its independence. Coming to flexible education or say vocational education organizations such as "Katha" in India are doing pioneering work for the education of children in slum areas and integrating Information and Technology literacy with it. Education can have a sustainable model only when the entire gamut of society realizes its social responsibility aspect towards it. Even micro financing and micro credit organizations such as BASIX in India are tying up with the Indira Gandhi National Open University for the cause and advocacy of vocational education.

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