LEARNING WITHOUT FRONTIERS

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS OF SPACE, TIME, AGE AND CIRCUMSTANCE

AN OPEN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Millions of people of different ages, all over the world, in developing and industrialized countries alike, remain deprived of the opportunity to learn. Some of them have never had the chance to go to school. Others, who have once gone to school, find it impossible to continue to learn. UNESCO’s programme Learning Without Frontiers (LWF) aims at lowering the barriers to education and learning. The problem addressed relates to the insufficiency and inadequacy of the formal schooling system. It affects learners of all ages, applies to education at all levels and transcends the separation between academic and vocational learning. Efforts to improve formal education need to continue. At the same time, there is an urgent need to explore new and complementary routes to learning. Innovative strategies are required to meet the learning needs of the unreached and to respond to the challenge of lifelong learning. The opportunity to learn must be available to any person, at any time, anywhere, at any age and in any circumstance. This calls for an open, flexible learning environment, responsive to diverse learning needs and easily accessible for people in different circumstances. Learning Without Frontiers is UNESCO’s response to the challenge to create that environment.

THE BARRIERS

Barriers of different nature need to be overcome. They relate to space, time, age and circumstance.

Space

Physical distance limits access to learning by remote populations. Approaches are required that bridge the separation between the learner and the sources of learning. This often involves the use of communication media.

Time

Many people cannot learn because of time constraints. When education is offered they are not available. When they are available there is no education.

Young people in agricultural communities are kept out of school for long periods of time on a seasonal basis. Adults who are employed during the day can only study at night. Mothers who take care of their children cannot leave their homes at any time. Solutions need to be found both in deforming the existing structures and in providing education outside the formal system.

Age

Education has traditionally favoured the young. However, learning is increasingly becoming a lifelong requirement. Many adolescents and young adults have, for a variety of reasons, either never gone to school or failed to attain sustainable learning achievements. Adults at any age are in constant need to adapt, through learning, to changing circumstances. Mechanisms must be established to offer attractive learning opportunities to such people, catering for their specific needs.

Circumstance

A wide variety of circumstantial factors constitute barriers to learning. Geopolitical boundaries, for instance, which often cut across ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, hinder learners from across borders to be served in cost-effective ways by the same programme. They also hamper learners from different countries to learn from and with each other and to have access to the sources of wisdom, knowledge and information anywhere in the world. They frustrate opportunities to learn about such global issues as the

HAVE LEARNT, WILL TEACH

A man in Kyrgyzstan has taught himself to speak and write English, simply by listening to shortwave radio broadcasts.

Boris Meshevtsev, a retired music teacher in Bishkek, has never had a formal lesson in the English language, nor has he travelled abroad. Instead, he has relied upon the transmissions of foreign radio stations to develop his language skills. As an amateur radio operator, his prime motivation was to be able to speak with other "hams" overseas.

Even more remarkable is that Meshevtsev is totally blind, having lost his sight at the age of three. Despite this handicap, he types in English and also has taught himself to read braille.

Meshevtsev now wants to compile and present English language lessons for broadcast on local radio stations. He wants to prepare radio scripts along the lines of the Voice of America’s Special English programmes for the education of young people learning the language. He credits such programmes for his own mastery of the language.

environment democracy and tolerance in a truly international context, which could lead to increased international and intercultural understanding. The problem calls for improved international co-operation and exploration of the emerging global information infrastructure. Others, particularly mature learners, face barriers that have to do with rigid school systems which deny them access as they do not satisfy formal admission criteria. Accreditation systems need to be adapted to accommodate the recognition of competencies acquired outside the formal system. Financial constraints often constitute overriding barriers to learning. They call for cost-effective approaches and the application of innovative financing schemes, with emphasis on benefiting the poor.

Social and cultural barriers hinder access to learning by women and marginalized groups. Solutions need to be found both inside and outside the formal system. Other barriers, relating to the compartmentalization of knowledge into well defined disciplinary areas, restrict learning as they discourage the mind from travelling between and beyond them. In addition, the mind sometimes creates its own restraints and stereotypes that limit our vision. Both barriers call for learning which focuses on problems rather than traditional content. Making knowledge understandable to different users, who require it for different purposes and for application in different contexts, means breaking through yet another barrier - it responds to an increasing demand for the indigenization of knowledge and for knowledge to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. Learning Without Frontiers is concerned with lowering all these different barriers.

**LEARNING TO CHANGE**

Not only individuals, but also social units, such as local communities, organizations, and even entire societies, learn. Such learning is based on interaction among people. Learning to live together in post-conflict situations, such as in Mozambique and El Salvador, is an important objective of UNESCO’s Peace Education Programme. In El Salvador, for instance, daily radio programmes and campaigns using multi-media materials were jointly designed and are being implemented together by former enemies. They learn from each other in a process that benefits all, breaking down barriers that have divided them for decades.

**LIFELONG LEARNING**

Balancing change and stability

The world is increasingly challenged by the need to accommodate inevitable change - political, technological and demographic, as well as relating to spheres of knowledge - while maintaining stability. This requires both individuals and organized groups of individuals to learn. Learning to change is a condition of survival for individuals and social units of different degrees of complexity and size. Countries such as Egypt, which has redefined education as a national security issue, recognize the importance of learning as a condition for stability and peace. LWF is an expression of that same concern at the global level.

**CHALLENGES AHEAD**

The world faces an impressive range of challenges as it approaches the twenty-first century. Meeting these challenges calls for a shared vision and partnership.

**Lifelong learning**

The changes taking place in the world today indicate that change itself will be an increasingly essential ingredient of life in the foreseeable future. Education, however, is not following suit. Learning Without Frontiers aims at lowering the barriers that prevent education from being responsive to the needs of modern society, particularly to the need of individuals to adapt to change at any stage of their life. The most important capability required of any person will be the ability to learn and to access sources of learning autonomously. The most important responsibility of any society will be the provision of a flexible and open learning environment.

**HOW DID THE IDEA EMERGE?**

The idea to create a programme that would, in a coherent way, address the various problems outlined above originates from the 'Ad Hoc Forum of Reflection on UNESCO's role in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century', convened by UNESCO’s Executive Board. In its report to the Board on 30 October 1993, the Forum recommended the establishment of a “world system of open learning” - Learning Without Frontiers - enabling “people throughout the world to obtain access to all forms and levels of education within the context of lifelong education”. The current programme is based on that idea and designed in accordance with further consultations, involving all sectors of UNESCO as well as outside expertise. Learning Without Frontiers constitutes an important component of both UNESCO’s proposed strategy for 1996 to 2001 and its programme for 1996-1997.
Diversifying the learning environment

Conventional education systems are increasingly unable to respond to the rising demand for learning. LWF, in synergy with other UNESCO efforts, is a much needed response to calls to use multiple channels to open up learning opportunities to all, such as expressed in the World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs adopted in March 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand. A multi-channel multipurpose learning environment for multiple users is required, which should concentrate on:
- the use of a wider range of delivery options and approaches than typically found in existing programmed
- the recognition that people learn in different ways and through various means and that those ways and means are neither the same for all people nor constant over time or across circumstances and types of learning effort for the individual learner
- the establishment of different pathways connecting the learner with the sources of learning, recognizing that different channels reinforce each other mutually
- the use of different means (including human ones, such as teachers and facilitators)
- the complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Emerging technologies

Technology can help lower the barriers surrounding traditional, institution-based education and create a culture of lifelong open learning. There is enormous potential in the technological environment that can be brought to bear upon education. LWF is a response to this often untapped potential. However, it is not primarily about instruments; it is about substance. And the substance is learning, in its full richness of connotations. Emphasis will be on the integration of emerging technologies, such as the information superhighway, with existing ones. Specific attention will be given to approaches that benefit the unreached and undeserved.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

A concerted effort is required to meet the above challenges. UNESCO will collaborate with other United Nations agencies, governmental and non-governmental organizations and professional and industrial interest groups. Special emphasis will be given to working within the context of partnerships or collaborative networking arrangements among countries that are expressly committed to LWF-related concerns as well as countries with needs that require innovative responses of the kind envisioned by the programme. Some examples are:
- the Joint Distance Education Initiative of the Nine High-Population Countries (DE9)
- the emerging collaboration among the countries of East and Southern Africa in the framework of the Multi-Channel Learning Base (MCLB)
- the collaborative framework of the African countries with Portuguese as an official language, involved in the shared development of Interactive Radio Instruction.

INCORRECTING THE BALANCE

Non-formal mechanisms to provide education have proven particularly effective in addressing the learning needs of women and girls, as well as minorities and disadvantaged groups. The Andhra Pradesh education have proven particularly effective mainstream. Its enrolment includes 70 per cent girls against a national average female enrolment of 41 per cent. In Pakistan, where girls make up only 34 per cent of the total enrolment in primary schools, community run home schools in the Karachi area alone enrol an estimated 11,000 girls who would otherwise have remained deprived of education. Indonesia’s extended non-formal education programme has resulted in a reduction of adult illiteracy by nearly half between 1980 and 1990. The greatest progress was made among women.

INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED

Inner city homeless individuals and families are getting connected through a programme called SHELCOM. The programme is a joint venture of the National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL) and community organizations in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Using computers set up in shelters, innovative adult literacy instruction is provided, connecting the homeless through an Internet-based communication network. ‘Being connected’ is a critical issue for the homeless in the United States and the programme therefore aims at enhanced self-esteem and positive beliefs and attitudes towards literacy.

Improved reading and writing as well as computer skills and increased employability are also results of the programme.

NCAL’s experience benefits the work of the UNESCO co-sponsored International Literacy Institute (ILI), which is located, like NCAL, at the University of Pennsylvania. ILI already offers free services to link up literacy practitioners and professionals worldwide through LITNET, a facility which provides up to date information and documents via the Internet.

Access at ILILITERACY@PENN.EDU

LEARNING TOGETHER

Various groupings of countries collaboratively learn how to develop educational alternatives.

Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan have joined hands to learn from each other’s experience in developing distance education and open learning. In December 1993, at the Education for All Summit in New Delhi, they launched the Joint Initiative on Distance Education (DE9). Covering half the world’s population and almost three quarters of its illiterates, the nine giants together hold a wealth of different experiences in areas such as in-service teacher training at a distance, open schooling, the use of satellite technology to reach remote population and the teaching of life skills to illiterates. Learning from and with each other, solving problems collaboratively, can help these countries make an enormous leap forward.

In a similar vein, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe jointly develop Interactive Radio Instruction to improve the quality of learning in mathematics and Portuguese in their schools and among out-of-school youth. Great cost savings result from their collaboration.

Likewise, the countries of East and Southern Africa are establishing a collaborative framework the so-called Multi-Channel Learning Base (MCLB), to work together on the establishment of alternative routes to learning.
LEARNING THROUGH DIALOGUE

Effective learning, resulting in confidence and capacity to apply acquired values, knowledge and skills in real life situations, depends on dialogue. Conventional distance education systems have often lacked in their capacity to cater for this need. Modern communication media allow dialogue, interactivity, once again to become an important part of such systems as well as to strengthen interactivity in systems primarily based on face-to-face interaction. Brazil’s in-service teacher education programme ‘Um Salto para o Future’ (A Leap to the Future) uses satellite TV broadcast in combination with live interaction by telephone and small group discussion at ‘teleposts’ nationwide.

UNESCO collaborates with the International Telecommunications Union and professionals from a number of significant developing countries on an intersectoral project to develop the technology of interactive television for educational purposes. The project takes into account, on the one hand, the needs and conditions of developing countries and, on the other hand technological capabilities becoming available through the digitization and compression of information.

THE LEARNING WITHOUT FRONTIERS PROGRAMME

Its mission: To serve and provide learning opportunities to the unreached and the excluded.

To serve, in a lifelong education perspective, those whose learning needs have not been met

Its development goal: To create the dynamics required for the establishment of a culture of lifelong learning, which is universal and available to all. The culture of learning aimed at will be increasingly freed of the barriers of when, where, at what age and in what circumstances learning is to take place. Its establishment will require the rethinking and redevelopment of existing institutional frameworks.

Its strategies:

■ To stimulate and diffuse innovative experience
■ To build capacity for the development of innovation
■ To develop supporting policy and infrastructure.

Its action:

Training; professional exchange; policy development; programme and project development; development and promotion of affordable technology use; organization of partnerships (such as the Alliance of Educational Broadcasters) and networks; fund-raising; collection of data and documentation on experience to be disseminated through leaflets, publications and soon, via the Internet, available on a World Wide Web site near you.

Starting date:

Preparatory’ activities – for instance, in collaboration with the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), a training programme on the planning and management of distance education and a project to reach the unreached in at least one country, e.g. Mozambique – have already started. Formal launching of the programme after approval of UNESCO’s programme and budget by the General Conference (November 1995).

To join the partnership:

Write to the Director-General of UNESCO, attn. Learning Without Frontiers, at UNESCO, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07SP, France; fax (33-1) 473-48557.

To stay in touch:

If you wish to receive further information and regular updates, or if you have ideas, experience and resources to contribute, or wish to suggest other network partners, contact Jan Visser by e-mail to J. VISSER@UNESCO. ORG, phone (33- 1 ) 456-80887, fax (33- 1 ) 406-59505/6, or by mail to the above address.

Other examples are the proposed collaboration among Arab States to establish a regional distance education centre; the Asia/Pacific regional networks for open and distance education; small island states; Central America; the Latin American countries involved in exploring the shared use of HISPASAT; Eastern Europe

The LWF programme will build on UNESCO’s past and ongoing experience in such areas as improving access to and quality of education, the promotion of lifelong education for all, the development of open and distance learning, the social use of communication (e.g. educational broadcasting and rural press), the use of alternative energy sources, the development of flexible autonomous learning systems in science and environmental engineering and the Global Scientific Communications system. It will address educational needs at different levels and pertaining to different interests and settings (basic to higher; academic and vocational; institution-based and outside the institutional frameworks).

UNESCO will collaborate with its various United Nations partners. Outside the United Nations system, interest in collaborating has been expressed by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL), the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), the International Literacy Institute (ILI), the International Multi-channel Action Group for Education (IMAGE) and the Advancing Basic Education and Literacy project of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).