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Title:

Towards Meaningful Learning in a Developing World: Assessing Learning Needs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Short Description:

This paper presents the results of a learning needs assessment undertaken in the Democratic Republic Congo. It argues, based on analysis of the needs assessment data, that, to make learning meaningful, approaches are required that are contextual, comprehensive and integrative. A proposed intervention, based on such approaches, pays specific attention to using local science and technology as a basis to build on for improving teaching and learning. Concrete examples will be analyzed.

Abstract: ([format option](#))

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The schooling tradition has in general given insufficient attention to making learning relevant to real life and context. This point was eloquently made several decades ago by such authors as Bruner (1971), Goodman (1964), Holt (1972), Illich (1970), and Kozol (1967), often, but not solely, inspired by the mismatch of assumed good intentions of the school on the one hand and, on the other hand, the service schools provided to those living in underprivileged social and economic circumstances in the developed world. Freire's (e.g. 1967, 1970) work focuses on this problem area more specifically in the context of developing countries. From a design perspective, the importance of taking context into account has been emphasized, among other authors, by Arias and Clark (2002), McAnany (1978), Tessmer and Richey (1997), and Visser and Buendia Gomez (1989). Despite decades of critique, frustratingly little has been achieved, around the world, in addressing the problem of relevance of school-based learning to real life and context. The authors don't see this as a reason to give up. Rather, they interpret it as a sign of the vastness and complexity of the problem at hand and as an indication that comprehensive approaches are required to address such vastness and complexity. The paper focuses on such an approach toward making learning meaningful in the context of one country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Meaningful learning in the context of this paper means: Learning that gives direction to life in context in ways that are

transferable throughout life and across contexts. Having such direction and the abilities that result from meaningful learning will allow people to interact constructively with the problems they encounter in their environment across contexts as they progress through their lives.

PROBLEM SPECIFICS

With a surface area of 2,345,000 square kilometers, the DRC is roughly a quarter of the size of the entire United States of America. It has more than 50 million inhabitants, as compared to 285 million in the USA. In other words, the DRC is a country that matters. On the other hand, the DRC's ranking on the scale of the 2002 Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) puts it at the 155th place from the top among a total of 173 countries listed, a statistic that one can actually feel while traveling through the country. The HDI being a composite index, it is important to realize that the state of education contributes to it both in its own right as well as in terms of how education correlates with such indicators as for health, nutrition, and child mortality. Even a superficial look at the DRC points towards education as an important area of intervention for anyone interested in human development in an international context. However, about half of the children in the school age, particularly girls, do not attend school (UNDP, 2002). Solutions that are meant to impact the state of education in general must thus be relevant for audiences both inside and outside the school.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The proposed paper presents the results of a learning needs assessment carried out in the DRC in the beginning of 2003 in the context of financial assistance provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), provided in the framework of the Digital Opportunity through Technology and Communication Partnerships (DOT-COM Alliance), specifically the dot-EDU Associate Award, the latter being dedicated to the improvement of learning systems. While the financing scheme suggests a focus on the use of digital technology, the researchers deliberately defined their task more broadly, clearly distinguishing means from ends, searching for evidence-based solutions that could or could not be based on the use of digital or other technologies. The findings of this learning needs assessment, as well as the method used to obtain the data, will be presented and discussed.

ANALYSIS AND PROPOSED INTERVENTION

Analysis of the data of the learning needs assessment points towards solutions that are contextual, comprehensive and integrative. This has implications both for the nature of the intervention devised following the needs assessments and for how that intervention should be conceived to function within the larger context. No single development agency is able to implement solutions as comprehensive as the needs assessment data suggest. Collaboration and building on the work of others as well as allowing others to build on one's own work are thus essential dimensions of the proposed intervention, which focuses on the creation of local capacity among those who teach (not only formal teachers) to:

- * Reduce rote learning and increase active learning at formal, non- formal and informal level.
- * Increase relevance of content to the immediate environment, thereby providing a solid basis for conceptual and theoretical development that has its roots in practice and concrete experience.
- * Increase relevance of content by including project-based learning activities that use problem areas such as HIV/AIDS, nutrition, and agriculture as basis for learning that is not artificially limited by concerns with separation between the various school disciplines.
- * Build on local science and technology to support teaching and learning.

The proposed intervention emphasizes situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), multichannel approaches (Anzalone, 1995), and the exploration of a mix of information and communication technologies (ICTs) able to support the above developments in a sustainable manner. It furthermore recognizes the linguistic diversity of the country and takes into account the pedagogical needs arising from such diversity.

NATURE OF THE SESSION

The proposed session will accommodate the interests of those, in general, who feel that the relevance of education is still an important issue. As in the presentation of their analysis, the authors will pay specific attention to opportunities arising from the use of local science and technology, the session will be of particular interest to those active in the development of human learning in developing countries. In addition to presenting their findings, the researchers have a keen interest in a critical discussion of their propositions.

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Session Type: Concurrent

Area of Interest: General

Format of Session: Research/Data-based

Session Length: 60 minutes

Primary Keyword: Research

Secondary Keyword: Instructional Development

Submit to Primary Division: International Council

Submit To Secondary Division: Instructional Design & Development

URL: <http://www.learndev.org/AECT2003-DRC.html>