

MULTI-PURPOSE LEARNING CENTRES IN AN OPEN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Multi-Purpose Learning Centres in an Open Learning Environment

- 1. The concept, nature and functions of Multi-Purpose Learning Centres**
 - 1.1 Distinguishing between Multi-purpose *Community Centres* and Multi-purpose *Community Learning Centres***

Multi-Purpose *Community Centres* are generally envisaged as structures that can enable communities to manage their own development through having access to appropriate facilities, resources, training and services. The "Multi-Purpose" dimension is a reference to the various service and information sectors that can be represented and needed within a community. These services and information relate not only to education and training programmes, but also to health, cultural, economic, welfare, social, safety and any

other area that can be of benefit to the community¹. The multi-purpose aspect is also an element that adds to the viability and sustainability of these centres.

Multi-purpose *Community Learning Centres* (MPCLC's), on the other hand, can be regarded as centres not only encompassing all the functions of Multi-Purpose Community Centres and in being linked to other service and information providers, but also in having a strong education, learning and training emphasis and function. For the sake of brevity, the term Community Learning Centres (CLC's) will be used in this discussion.

1.2 The potential role of CLC's within the educational infrastructure

Community Learning Centres can offer a pragmatic response to immediate, pressing educational needs and inadequate facilities. Various observers believe that these centres have the potential to extend and develop the current educational infrastructure by being an additional means of education delivery. Their functions can include those of traditional learning sites, but can potentially be far broader, more extensive and cater for diverse and varied community education needs over a wider age continuum. In addition, these centres have the potential of offering programmes directed at preparing learners for the world of life and work beyond school, and more specifically, to become competent citizens in the "information age" and in the "knowledge society". These centres are characterised by flexibility, the ability to rapidly respond to changing demands and needs and to offer a diverse range of learning opportunities far more readily than traditional learning sites.

The broad significance and value of CLC's should be seen in relation to and contextualised within some of the issues and challenges currently confronting education providers in South Africa. Particularly relevant are:

- Constituting an educational system to fulfil the vision of providing access to learning for all.
- Building a just and equitable lifelong learning system to provide good quality education and training to young and old learners alike.
- Ensuring that education is relevant and applicable to the current needs of individuals and communities,
- Ensuring that education and training is responsive to the perceived requirements of the social, economic, political and global environments of the new millennium.

In summary, CLC's are not only suitable for providing instructional venues and facilities, but are also suitable for implementing the following educational approaches:

- Giving impetus to Lifelong Learning programmes and initiatives, such as Community Based Education projects, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), Learners with Special Education Needs (LSEN), Early Childhood Development (ECD), Further Education and Training (FET) and cultural education activities.
- Promoting a new culture of learning and teaching resulting from an open learning approach to education and training.
- Integrating distance learning and contact teaching methodologies.
- Providing access to education resources, especially in the rural areas.
- Redressing past imbalances through the implementation of new teaching and learning strategies, transforming previously entrenched and outdated pedagogies and providing effective and flexible delivery of a wide range of community, economic and social services.
- Developing and extending the educational infrastructure by providing access to public telecommunication services, information technologies (including Internet) and resource facilities.
- Providing locations for education and training programmes (from informal to support for formal distance education programmes).
- Providing greater equity, redress and access to educational opportunities.
- Allowing for the integration of education and training.
- Allowing individuals to take responsibility for their own learning and training by providing them with a wide range of possibilities and opportunities to do so

2. CLC's within an Open Learning environment

An important perspective to bear in mind when looking at CLC's within an open learning environment is the current move toward learner-centred education and training. This learner-centredness implies a move away from traditional courses and teaching modes towards flexible programmes that allow open access to learning and training. This flexible and open learning enables education and training to be expanded

¹ National Information Technology Forum, 1998, *Multi-Purpose Community Centre Research Report*, P4.

beyond the confines of the traditional classroom and taken to a situation that is most convenient to the learner and to be used when and where it is needed. It also implies that learners are able to exercise some measure of control on aspects of the education and training process.

Open Learning describes an approach to education that seeks to increase access to educational opportunities by removing all unnecessary barriers to learning. At the same time, it aims to provide learners with a reasonable chance of success in an education and training system centred in their specific needs and located in multiple arenas of learning².

The concept of open learning is built around certain key principles, many of which underpin the White Paper on Education and Training³. They are as follows:

- Learner-centredness,
- Lifelong learning,
- Flexibility in learning,
- The removal of all unnecessary barriers to access,
- Recognition of prior learning and experience,
- Accumulation of credits within and across different learning contexts,
- Learner support,
- Expectations of success,
- Quality education,
- Quality learning, and
- Cost-effectiveness.

CLC's are in many respects, well suited to provide those supportive processes identified as core components of lifelong learning and which form the basis from which the relevant knowledge, skills and understanding required by members of the community, can be developed.

3. The use of educational technologies in CLC's

3.1 Background

The development and application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is contributing toward developing open and flexible learning environments. The feasibility of interactive learning using ICT's (between teachers and learners, between computer-based software applications and learners, and among teachers and learners themselves) is becoming a reality for some people in developing countries. It is also a technical possibility that these learning approaches can become cost effective alternatives to some of the traditional forms of education in the future. The possibility of continuous informal education and lifelong learning is growing with the increased availability of ICT applications to address development problems and generally strengthen the capabilities of both urban and rural areas. However, these possibilities can only be exploited if the formal and informal education processes can assist people to acquire the skills that are necessary to use the new technologies creatively and productively⁴.

Any discussion around the use of technologies in CLC's needs to be prefaced with some views about the educational use of technologies and in identifying possible pedagogies that can be more feasible and effective within alternative learning modes. A basic principle in selecting technologies to enhance education and training processes is that learner needs and outcomes strongly influence the selection of appropriate and relevant technologies. However, mediated instruction within the formal education environment has, to date, been characterised by an overriding need to convey content and information and using whatever available technologies to do this. A revision of this thinking is required to accommodate outcomes based and learner-centred approaches in traditional and alternative learning sites.

3.2 The use of new technologies in education and in CLC's

The introduction of lifelong learning strategies brings with it certain requirements, namely that;

- the foundations of learning be strengthened and changed,
- there is flexibility of movement between education, training and work,
- new roles for public and private sector institutions that contribute to the learning process, and, significantly, an

² Department of Education, 1996: Distance Education in South Africa. A Concept Paper. Department of Education: Pretoria, p2

³ Ministry of Education, 1995: White Paper on Education and Training, Government Gazette No 16312. Parliament of the Republic of South Africa: Cape Town, p 28

⁴ Mansell, R. and Wehn, U. 1998, Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development. New York. Oxford University Press, p66.

- investment in skills related to the use of ICTs and in developing the generic competencies necessary for participating in the future "knowledge societies."

Developing skills and competencies for social and economic development within the information and knowledge society requires that technology play a role within the education and training environment. The introduction of ICT can lead to economic and social advantages, but can also be a potent force in reinforcing inequalities. In this regard, MPLC's can contribute toward overcoming or minimising the divisive and disempowering aspects of ICTs, especially when there is a general inequitable access to networks and an inconsistency in developing the necessary competencies⁵.

3.3 Pedagogic approaches

The necessity for considering pedagogic approaches lies in the fact that there has been and still is a dependence on using content-based, lecture-style pedagogies in the education and training fields. This is not to disparage such approaches or to advocate their discontinuance, but in an outcomes-based, learner-centred, lifelong and open learning environment, and one which can be technologically enhanced, there certainly is a need to consider a wider variety of learning approaches to achieve a greater range of learning outcomes.

The traditional, objectivist pedagogy characterised by a teacher- and content centred, examination-driven process is inadequate to effectively cater for learner-centred, technology-based learning approaches. This tutorial process is characterised by a tutor leading and guiding the student step-by-step and in complete control of the student's behaviour. A restricted repertoire of teaching and presentation styles and strategies in which evaluation is strongly focused on getting the student to understand his or her errors and misconceptions also typify it. Learning in the traditional classroom is an individual process. The traditional pedagogy does not assign any significant role to student-student interactions in the process and progress of learning. Teachers do their work mostly in isolation from colleagues and their interactions with the students are severely constrained by time pressure and the need to maintain order in crowded classrooms.

The penetration of technology into the learning process can have profound consequences for how learning takes place socially. On the one hand, learning that is even more individual with a learner sitting in front of a computer is a possibility. But, on the other hand, the technology allows for much more diversified and socially rich learning contexts through the shared use of computers, peer tutoring via computer, Internet and computer networks, e-mail and through more extensive use of telecommunications. These approaches are relevant to the requirements of emerging "knowledge societies." They include developing skills to create new knowledge through conferencing techniques, small discussion groups around computers, surfing the Internet and addressing problems through teamwork. Students also prepare papers collectively and log onto networks to confer with other students located in foreign countries. In essence, learners must be taught and equipped with the ability to analyse the information flow from cyberspace in order to distinguish irrelevant information and data from relevant knowledge. They must also be assisted to develop decision-making and problem-solving abilities in order to utilise, diffuse, maintain and benefit from all the information and data they have access to⁶.

Within a technologically rich learning process, the role of the teacher can also be radically changed. There may be less time pressure to teach specific topics, more varied interactions with students, diversification of competencies, interactions with a number of new professional figures that may enter the learning process, such as software developers, experts of subject matter structuring and instructional designers, with whom teachers can work in closer collaboration⁷.

Other pedagogies that can be usefully utilised within MPLC's, apart from the collaborative, peer-assisted resource- and problem-based learning approaches, include self-directed learning, experiential and real-world learning. Assessment practices can move away from summative approaches toward those that

⁵ Mansell, R. and Wehn, U. 1998, Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development. New York. Oxford University Press, p67.

⁶ Mansell, R. and Wehn, U. 1998, Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development. New York. Oxford University Press, p67.

⁷ Seidel, R.J. and Chatelier, P.R. 1994. Learning without Boundaries: Technology to Support Distance/Distributed Learning. Defense Learning Series, Plenum Press, pp49-52.

involve self and peer assessment, and approaches that can be used as an opportunity for learning, focussing on 'what' is learnt rather than on 'how much' is learnt.⁸

3.4 Technological applications in CLC's

Within the broader South African education environment, the use of technologies remains largely marginal, in spite of their progress and effectiveness in other areas of activity. Teaching and learning models and the emphasis within these models are changing and shifting, and the role of technologies within these models and pedagogies are in a process of being redefined. However, the new technologies of ICTs and computer-aided instruction are certainly going to have an influence on instructional approaches. They are able to:

- Assist in self-learning in the classroom and at a distance.
- Help overcome the lack of sufficiently skilled teachers and serve as a teaching tool for students and teachers
- Be used to upgrade teacher skills.
- Exchange experiences and teaching material.
- ICTs and networks can also be used to create repositories of study material that can be transmitted and reproduced at low cost.

Looking at the broader range of available ICT's, the following applications of ICT's are possible within CLC's. Some of the comments and observations made are as a result of first-hand discussions with CLC managers.

3.4.1 Narrow -Telecasting

This approach is increasingly being targeted at CLC's. It is essentially a communication network of satellite transmissions of televised learning materials to multiple, closed audiences. The general approach consists of feeding a number of centres with a telecast of specific material. The success of this method relies on telecasting to scale, implying a more generic type of learning material. From models seen, interaction is limited to telephonic and keypad responses. This implies levels of passivity and a strong focus on content-based approaches. To make this approach work, a tutor or facilitator is required to engage students in the material and to facilitate co-operative and collaborative teaching afterwards. A communications organisation in South Africa, Multi-Choice is field-testing this approach and is telecasting material for in-service educator development. The potential success of their project lies in the follow-up strategies of letting educators perform web-based searches, engage in peer-to-peer discussions, and then implement the techniques and their insights into their classroom practice. Numerous other organisations are also promoting this technological approach for CLC's. It is an expensive option with possible drawbacks. One of these is that live satellite transmissions are expensive, and quite often the same results could be achieved by providing video programmes covering the same, if not more, content. These technology providers are often only suppliers of technology and are not instructional designers or programme developers. This results in excessive "talking head" programmes or simply the transmission of video material. To make this approach effective, tutors or facilitators need to follow-up on the content-provision with meaningful pedagogic activities and engagement.

3.4.2 Broad -Telecasting

Much of what applies to the narrowcasting of programme material applies to the broadcasting of material. The material in broadcasting does tend to be more generic, however. One of the attributes of televised learning material is that it arouses interest in a subject. To capitalise on its impact, follow-up strategies and materials are required to get learners to engage with the learning programme. Should relevant televised material be available, CLC's can assist in the learning process by offering the following:

- Facilities in the form of TV sets for viewing programmes.
- Programme information and schedules.
- Video facilities for recording and possible storing of resource material. Some programmes should, as a matter of course, be captured on video.
- Radio and audio-tape facilities.

3.4.3 Internet access

Internet facilities can, on the one hand, allow for access to a wide range of resource materials and learning programmes. A real strength of Internet connectivity is however, in the communication possibilities of e-mail and the type of co-operative and collaborative learning that this feature can support. This allows participants to collaborate on learning projects with other learners, subscribe to relevant news-groups and

⁸ Taken from *Lifelong Learning*, located at <http://www.acs.uwa.edu.au/csd/newsletter/issue0497/lifelong.html>

list serves that can promote discussion and dissemination of information. In this way, real skills are developed to function in an information and knowledge environment and adds to the knowledge and information base around certain learning areas. Added advantages are that learners develop computer literacy skills, information retrieval skills and use the potential of computers to generate information and business. They also acquire a host of critical crossfield learning outcomes – being able to collaborate in learning groups, develop teamwork abilities, organising information, etc.

3.4.4 Computer Aided Instruction

Computer Aided Instruction (CAI) in many respects engenders the same learning outcomes as those attained by access to the Internet. CAI has the advantage though, of presenting highly structured information in sophisticated multi-media and hypertext formats. It also provides what can be very effective programmed instruction if the instructional design has been well structured. Observations at CLC's have shown that the CAI offered has been very effective, especially in teaching younger learners mathematical concepts and language acquisition.

4. Additional educational services that can be provided by CLC's within an open learning environment

4.1 Services to learners studying courses at a distance

An important service that may be provided is making facilities available for those learners studying university, college or Technikons courses by distance education methods. This can include providing "second chance" learning opportunities to failed matriculants. The types of facilities that should be provided are primarily study facilities and rooms where students can either work individually or in groups to work at tutorials or where they can meet with lecturers when necessary. Important also is a service to provide access to Tele-communication facilities.

4.2 Services to educators in the surrounding community

This form of support to educators in the nearby community can be by way of:

- Offering Teacher-centre type services and facilities to enable teachers to produce and access a variety of resource materials. Facilities should also be available for educators to have access and use a range of electronic media and technologies. Essentially this would mean that a Media or Resource Centre should be established, not only for educators, but also for all members of the community.
- Consistently implementing in-service and development courses for educators, ranging from the Multi-Choice type projects, NGO initiatives, to the formal courses offered by colleges, Technikons and universities.

4.3 Library and resource facilities

Providing these facilities promotes the concept of a CLC being a central hub in a particular area to feed under-resourced schools with learning resources. Such a resource centre can perform the following functions:

- Provide resource materials to learners involved in education at a distance.
- Provide resources to teachers to implement OBE.
- Provide leisure reading and recreational resources and materials to the community as a whole
- Instigate the development of resource materials for schools providing ABET, ECD and other programmes.
- Be a repository for textbook material.

4.4 Summary of essential facilities and services that could be offered by CLC's within an open learning environment

- Media and resource centre.
- Tele-communications and duplications- fax, telephones and Photostats.
- Computer centre with at least 10 computers and a connection to the Internet.
- Audio-visual equipment such as TV-video, audiocassette recorders and an overhead projector.
- Individual and group study facilities.
- Assist educators to develop their own teaching materials to address local education needs and be related to labour market demand. They should emphasise self-organised group learning and respect for cultural patterns of learning which foster co-operation and specialisation among local distance learning.

5. Models of current CLC's

One function of this discussion document is, ideally, to influence the future practice and functioning of CLC's. The basis for this would be not only to enhance the education and training occurring in such

centres, but also to provide some guidelines for sustainability that is more consistent. One aspect in this regard would be to provide an outline of possible models of viable CLC's. The following is a cursory outline of existing practice to provide a framework from which proposed models can be developed.

5.1 The Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Centre

These centres are NGO's that started as centres providing basic literacy and numeracy programmes to adults from the previously disadvantaged communities. Many of these centres are reliant on donor funding and/or education departments for their financial sustainability. Many previously had staff who worked on a part-time basis and were paid part-time rates by the ex-departments of education. It is from these beginnings that some have branched out to offer a wider range of educational services.

5.2 Community Service Centres

These centres focus mainly on providing services and information relating to:

- Housing and bond issues.
- Political issues such as rights for children, farm workers and women, democracy and voter education.
- Health services, alcohol and drug rehabilitation.
- Life skills issues – conflict and dispute resolution, AIDS awareness, handling trauma and family counselling.
- Recreation activities and shelters for the homeless and street children.
- Legal and consumer advice.

5.3 Collaborative Business and Industry Training Services

As typified by the centres envisaged for Midrand and Rosslyn in Gauteng, and Boitjorisong, which is currently functioning in the Free State. These centres work in close collaboration with local industry, business, the community and organised labour. The focus is strongly on providing skills training and development to assist members of the community to be more economically active. Because of the buy-in by unions and business, the sustainability levels of these centres are quite high.

5.4 Basic skills training and subsistence centres.

These centres provide invaluable services to their communities by providing assistance in Small, Medium & Micro Enterprises (SMME) development, developing marketable skills in sewing, garment making, subsistence farming, hairdressing, bread-making, upholstery, building, plant and animal farming. They also provide forms of legal representation and educare training and facilities.

5.5 Education, Community Colleges, training and resource centres

These centres provide higher levels of skills development and cater for learners with at least a general level of education. They provide computer and ICT skills training, provide study centres and resource facilities for Technikons, technical colleges, correspondence schools and universities. They are also quite active with the in-service development of educators.

6. Conclusion

It is quite evident that MPCLC's have an important role to play in education and training, thus nurturing citizens to play an effective role within the information age and knowledge society. Currently, many of the education, service and information centres that are collectively known as Community Centres exist independently of each other, offering a focused range of services. The centres in existence are initiated, supported and utilised by provincial education departments, non-governmental organisations, industry, unions, parastatals and church groups and the task is now to harness the potential of these centres by broadening their focus and extending their range of activities.

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