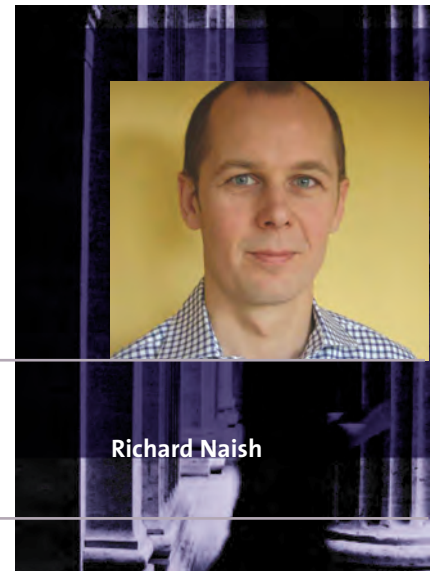


Hole new ball game

Collaborative learning for kids is a growing business, but what about us adults?



Richard Naish

The Hole in the Wall project in the slums of India, which inspired the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, showed how children form collaborative learning groups when there is only one computer to share.

But how are we adults doing on collaborative learning, especially in the new world of distributed organisations and home-based working?

Plant the seed this morning

When film director Sir David Puttnam spoke at Online Educa last year he said he was most interested in working with “the building blocks of the future” – children. He thought they needed to be smarter, and more adaptable, collaborative and resilient than the existing generation. Using the horticultural analogy of a seed needing 20 years to mature into a sapling, he said: “Well, we’d better plant it this morning.”

The skills of collaboration are learnt, with some adult encouragement, by interacting with other children, from around two years old. At primary school, the curriculum emphasises collaborative working. Unfortunately, that was not the case when baby boomers and Generation X were at school. For many of those folk, it remains a tricky skill. The next generation, however, won’t use buzzwords like “partnership working” and “multi-agency approach”; collaboration will be a no-brainer for them.

The Hole in the Wall project started back in 1999 with one computer fixed into the wall that separated a company premises from a severely deprived area of New Delhi called Kalkaji. But rather than facing inwards, the computer faced outwards, for anyone to use. And people, especially children, used it and did

some great things without any training. The originator, Sugata Mitra, then coined the phrase “minimally invasive learning” to explain how all the learning seemed to take place without any teachers or instruction. Now there are more than 300 such stations in India and other countries.

Different strokes

It is a slightly different philosophical approach to the One Laptop Per Child project, where the aim is to give every child in the developing world their own \$100 laptop. Both projects aim to give children access to computers. However, with Hole in the Wall, the children must collaborate in order to learn, while in One Laptop Per Child collaboration is merely an option. Hole in the Wall is also a practical approach, since consistent internet access can be maintained, and there is no risk of loss of the computer.


Research by the Delhi government at Madangir in 2004 looked at the social dynamics of the collaboration. The self-organising groups of children organised themselves into leader (expert), connector and novice groups. The leaders tended to teach a group and then connectors, often girls, initiated younger children with no experience of computers and connected them with the leaders in the group. As any successful organisation knows, good connector people are vital. They create links between the silos of knowledge and experience that build up in organisations and encourage them to work together towards a joint purpose.

In 2009, Ritu Dangwal and Preeti Kapur called the emergence of these group-based social practices crucial for achieving basic computer skills. Individual learning happened too, but the social learning was the key enabling layer of the learning experience.

But what about us?

Since the internet, organisations have become more distributed and virtual, with every individual having access to their own resource. So adults are not forced to learn collaboratively by having to share a single resource. Effectively this is the One Laptop Per Child philosophy of individual learning: collaboration is just an option. Although online collaboration tools make up for the lack of physical office-based collaboration, they are not natural tools for everyone. Take the example of discussion forums. Here, there is 90:9:1 rule, which is that you usually have 90% of people lurking (reading but not contributing), 9% contributing a bit, and 1% contributing a lot. So 90% of people use this social learning tool as an information resource, not as a way to learn with others.

Another example is communication applications such as Skype, which is no longer just free internet telephony but also includes videoconferencing, instant messaging, file-sharing and screen-sharing. Distributed employees could effectively ask for a helping hand with a difficult task, at any time, from anyone in the world. With emoticons and fast typing, it can feel like you are really talking to the others online, but for many adults it will never be a memorable interactive social learning experience like, say, face-to-face chats or advice from colleagues.

The irony is that the educated people who created the environment of collaborative learning in the Hole in the Wall project have much better internet and computer resources but make much less use of social learning with these powerful tools than do the resource-hungry children of Delhi. 

Richard Naish is an independent e-learning consultant