# INTERNET AND WORLD WIDE WEB: PROVIDING NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TO ADULT LEARNERS IN CO-OPERATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to review some of the current perspectives about technology particularly the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) that can provide new opportunities on learning by co-operative community. The co-operative education, which represent an important trend of the co-operative movement, should get out of the boundaries of a purely philosophical system and move towards empowering knowledge to the people involved in the co-operative movement. In general, the biggest asset of the economy and organisations is the knowledge held by its people especially at times like this where the world has undergone a transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the present Knowledge Age. The fact that most co-operative members are adult has led to the discussion on adult learning issues. The paper begins by the literature of adult learners characteristics and then understanding learning through Internet and WWW. Finally we elaborate on the great potential that Internet and WWW can be used to support and expand adult learning.
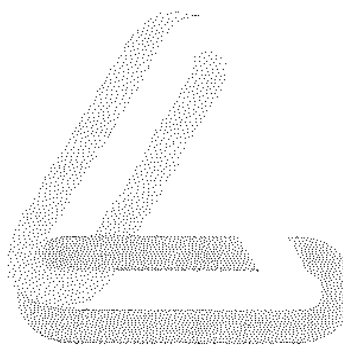
INTRODUCTION

A co-operative is a social and economic movement with its own distinct history, identity, structure and purpose. All over the world, millions of people have chosen the co-operative model of business enterprise to enable them to realise their personal and community development goals. Through their various activities, co-operatives in many countries plays significant social and economic role in national economies thus making not only personal development a reality, but contributing to the well-being of entire population at the national level. According to a statement made by the International Co-operative Alliance on its 81st International Co-operative Day, (5th July 2003), 760 million people around the world are members of co-operatives. In Kenya 20% of population are members of co-operative, while in Argentina it is over 29%, 33% in Norway, and 40% in Canada and United States. In the case of Malaysia which has a population of 25 million, 5.35 million or 25% are members of co-operatives.

It is opportune for co-operatives to undertake some serious introspection, develop a profile which appropriately positions them in the new emerging environment, and strive to rebuild themselves on the basis of values and ideals, which make them socially unique, economically attractive and politically desirable (Taimni, 2000). Being successful in today's marketplace, whether the organisation is in the public or private sector as well as the co-operative sector, means being able to attract and retain the best and the brightest minds that will help ensure the cost-effective delivery of the services.

Therefore, members are central to the very purpose of co-operatives to attain this mission. Continuing and purposeful education of members holds the key to the ultimate success of the co-operatives. It is obvious that the traditional learning from formal training cannot handle such requirement. It is this aspect of the new economy that has brought the most pervasive of the technologies with educational applications, the Internet and WWW, as a way for learning to the forefront. In the new environment, content is mobile. It is available everywhere and is dynamically updated. Learning is only a mouse click away (Chada and Kumail, 2002).

The world has undergone a transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the present Knowledge Age. In the knowledge age, wherein the economy is knowledge based, continuous learning will decide the success or failure of organisation and individual. Every organisation today is striving to become a 'learning organisation". With knowledge becoming the key business asset, learning is considered to be a tool that provides both a strategic and a competitive edge (Chada and Kumail, 2002).

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Internet And World Wide Web

Many people use the terms 'World Wide Web' and 'Internet' to mean the same thing. In reality they are different. Jones (2001) defines Internet as a vast network of computers spanning the planet, that are connected to each other through telephone lines, satellite relays, microwave transmission, optical fiber cables, and so on. The Web is just another service available on the Internet. It uses the Internet to access and link websites as well as providing the infrastructure over which the World Wide Web is able to operate. The Internet offers a variety of other forms of communications and resources, including email, newsgroups, and discussion groups. If the Internet is like a system of roads linking places together, then requests for Web pages, and the data from Web pages, are just two of the many kinds of traffic that travel on this road system (Brown and Lawton, 2001).

Adult Learners

Learning is the process by which people acquire new skills or knowledge for the purpose of enhancing their performance (Rosenberg, 2001). Reasons why adults seek learning outside of traditional higher education have remained fairly consistent over recent decades. The top two reasons have been developing work-related knowledge and skills and gaining personal development and fulfillment (Lyman, 1999).

In the context of co-operatives, adult learners have some common characteristics, although individual differences exist among them. For instance, Rogers (1989) lists the following characteristics of adult learners, although cultural settings may modify these to some extent:

- They are in a continuous process of growth, not at the start of a process.
- They bring with them a package of experience and values.
- They come with specific intentions.
- They bring expectations about the learning process
- They have competing interests.
- They have their own set of learning patterns of learning

Nebraska Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy ("Assumptions about the Adult Learners," 2002),a summary of characteristics of adult learners based on the research of Dirkx and Lavin (1995) and Pelavin (The Adult Learner) proposed the following characteristic of adult learners:

i) Adult learners are diverse, bringing a wealth of life experiences to the learning situation. Active forms of learning help connect the content to the learners' own meaning structures. They:

- vary widely among ages, abilities, job experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal goals;

- range in educational backgrounds from no formal schooling through many years of schooling;
- carry well-developed personal identities;
- carry reservoirs of personal experiences, which are learning resources.

ii)   Adult learners want to be able to relate content to specific contexts in their lives. These contexts are often in the form of a problem issue or concern in their worksite. They:

- tend to be pragmatic learners;
- study to improve their performance in other social roles;
- let their schoolwork take a back seat to other responsibilities, such as jobs and families;
- expect their class time to be well spent;
- hope their courses will help them solve problems in their daily lives.

iii) Adult learners prefer to have some degree of control over their learning. They may show a greater or lesser degree of self-directedness depending on their maturity level and familiarity with the content. They:

- tend to be voluntary learners;
- believe the decision to return to school is an important one;
- believe that education will be helpful;

iv)   The adults' sense of self has a significant influence on the meaning of the learning situation for that person. Learners have differing degrees of self-efficacy and awareness of their own learning styles. They may:

- feel embarrassed about returning to school;
- feel embarrassed to join classes with younger students;
- hold negative impressions of their own abilities;
- hold negative impressions of schools and teachers.

Understanding the personal factors that influence adults' acquisition in learning help us to identify the medium or technology appropriate to accommodate with their capabilities.

Opportunities From Internet and World Wide Web

We believe that the nature of Internet and WWW enables it to fit well with many of the adult characteristics. The Internet and WWW offers many benefits to adult learners such as the following:

- **Access to learning** - opportunities to learn can be offered at times and in places where traditional institutional delivery is impossible or uneconomic. Learners spread around the world can be brought together to learn in fields where group tuition face to face would be uneconomic, or tutors not accessible. Study need not happen in an educational institution, but can take place entirely in the home or

workplace. Email, for example, enables a learner send work to a tutor (and the tutor to reply) from anywhere in the world, at any time of day or night.

- **Access to information** - people can have access to bodies of information and knowledge on a scale not previously available even to most professional researchers. The Internet provides access to tens of millions of pages of information, and access to libraries and databases around the world.

- **Access to learning advice and guidance** - information about learning opportunities is becoming widely available, and interactive discussion tools can be used to respond to individual or group enquiries. A variety of databases are now available allowing individuals to search for opportunities not only locally but also around the world.

- **Interactivity** - there is more opportunity for individuals to discuss their learning and share ideas with tutors and other learners. Learning materials can incorporate much more active participation, from simple multiple choice checklists to virtual reality tours and simulations. Video conferencing can enable learners to talk to tutors as they demonstrate skills in remote locations where learners could not have access for safety or accessibility reasons.

- **The impact of disability** – Internet and WWW can enable people with sensory or mobility difficulties to overcome barriers which confront them in traditional learning provision. They can also enable them to participate on equal terms, since visible disabilities cease to affect interaction with able bodied learners.

- **Size of the education and training market** - educational institutions are no longer limited to local market, are beginning to offer opportunities to learn in overseas markets, and learners can become members of global learning groups. A growing number of universities offer some courses entirely through combinations of satellite communication and the Internet

- **Who creates knowledge and where** - adult education has traditionally sought to build on the knowledge that learners bring with them, and make learners active participants in the creation of new knowledge. Technologies offer wider access to research material and the opportunity to bring together people with common interests (including both experts and amateurs) across time and distance

- **New kinds of learning** - learning in an information rich environment, without the constraints of physical buildings and timetables, can be a different kind of process, involving new kinds of relationship between teacher and learner, and between learners. Resource based learning becomes easier as more resources become available, and there is more learning from and with other learners, and from commercial and voluntary agencies, rather than from teachers. Freed of physical constraints, learners can join specialised learning communities across the world.

- **New kinds of institutions and systems** - without a requirement for teacher and

learner to meet in time or space, the role of the educational institution will change. Traditional institutions manage learning, provide materials and assess achievements but these functions may become separated from each other. Commercial software houses, for example, produce free standing educational software without offering tuition or assessment; other agencies provide assessment and accreditation without offering teaching.

With all these benefits. Internet and WWW as an instruction delivery medium can indeed enhance learning and meet the needs of adult learners. In addition. media are not mere vehicles that deliver instruction but they are important components of the learning process.

Supporting and Extending Adult Learning Through Internet and World Wide Web

The introduction of the Internet has been relatively recent. For the majority of adults it represents a leap from the traditional methods of instruction to the technology-based learning systems we have available to us today. One has only to look at the spread, in half a decade. of such services as telephone banking to see that sophisticated technologies can have a major impact on how people live. Home ownership of personal computers (PCs) and subscriptions to Internet Service Providers has risen dramatically. We will see the same kind and speed of change in learning needs and learning technologies. Increasingly, opportunities to learn will require the use of the technologies, and those who do not have some confidence in it will be left behind.

While adult learners are constantly seeking specific information and knowledge that is relevant to their immediate problems, and are aware that they would benefit from further education, many are not interested in a standard long-term course of study. They do not have the time or energy to become involved in a traditional education system, and their concerns are context-dependent, focused on specific information relevant to their immediate concerns (Tennant, 1997). Given this information, it is natural that educators look to this relatively new phenomenon technology, namely, the Internet for Web-based learning opportunities.

The WWW provides new opportunities to deliver instruction over the Internet. The Web, when combined with other network tools, can be used to create a virtual classroom to bring together a community of learners for interactive education. It is a popular and useful instructional medium for a number of reasons. It is easily accessible, it supports flexible storage and display options, it provides a simple yet powerful publishing format and a means to incorporate multiple media elements (Henke, 1997). Adult learners will be attracted by its flexibility, which offers the opportunity to learn at their own pace, at a time to suit them, from their own home, workplace or a non-traditional venue. The possibilities of Web-based

learning are boundless and seem to have the potential to meet the needs of adult learners.

The WWW can provide stimulating material to enhance and enrich the learning experience by using graphics, sound, video and virtual environments. It supports learning in 'own space, own pace, and own time' (Henke, 1997). It has limitless possibilities of interactive computer multimedia instruction. The potential benefits include personalized instruction, active learning, instant feedback, real world simulation, as well as faster and more effective teaching and empowerment of learners (McManus, 1995).

Like any other instructional tool, WWW and Internet technology can serve to bring about poor educational practice or it can become a means for transforming learning. These technology can enhance adult learning because it has the potential to increase flexibility, provide access to expertise, facilitate discussion among learners who cannot meet face to face, reduce feelings of isolation often experienced by nontraditional learners, increase learner autonomy, and support and promote constructivist and collaborative learning (Burge 1994; Cahoon 1998; Eastmond 1998; Field 1997).

The literature contains a number of examples of how technology is being used to promote and extend good practice in adult learning. Cowles (1997) uses the Internet to support her beliefs that skills are learned best when embedded in context of interest to the learner and when learning is active. She has found the Internet to be a tool that can be used to individualize instruction but at the same time keep it in the context of the group and program goals. Pobega (1996) describes how he was able to use the Internet to involve learners more directly in producing a newspaper that he had edited for 5 years with the goal of developing their literacy skills. Work on the newspaper resulted in learners developing writing skills, engaging with technology, and working collaboratively as an editorial team.

Part of using technology effectively understands what adults want in the learning environment when technology is employed. Suggestions for structuring environments include the following (adapted from Burge and Carter 1997):

- Create a place where learners can collect important ideas, express themselves, and feel some security that they are going in the right direction.
- Provide fast and productive access to help when it is needed.
- Because adults generally have two basic intrinsic motivating drives of autonomy and affiliation, provide a learning environment that promotes both independent and interdependent activities with cognitive as well as psychosocial support.
- Because adults value economy of effort (i.e., they don't want to waste time), ensure that the learning tools are intuitive and essential for the immediate task.

Conclusion

In an environment of rapid economic changes co-operatives are expected to compete effectively and efficiently and serve their members. The value of human resources has also become increasingly important to the success of co-operatives. Thus, encouraging continuous and purposeful lifelong learning opportunities for member particularly through the internet and World Wide Web could ensure co-operatives to maintain their competitiveness. Co-operatives have to ascertain that continuous evolvement and each technological innovation of the Internet and WWW will create new demands and opportunities for adults in co-operative community to learn.

As quoted by several adults' experiences, the Internet are consistent with the conventional wisdom about the characteristics of adult learners. Adult learners are often so highly motivated that they may be characterised as self-directed learners, clear in the educational goals and objectives they wish to pursue. Internet-based learning has tremendous potential for saving time and money as well as alleviating related problems of transportation, childcare and lack of family support, which impeded them from pursuing adult education in the past. Adult learners have increased motivation when they are given some freedom to select media and learning activities. In general, adult learners want learning that is flexible, relevant to their work situation, current, personalised, portable, focused, timely, affordable and valued which are appropriate with learning through the Internet and WWW.

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