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**LEVERAGING ICTS FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE LEARNING IN NON-FORMAL
EDUCATION FOR CARIBBEAN WOMEN: THE
CASE OF ST.VINCENT & THE GRENADINES**

***APALANCANDO LA TECNOLOGÍA DE LA
INFORMACIÓN PARA LA ENSEÑANZA
ABIERTA Y A DISTANCIA EN LA EDUCACIÓN
NO FORMAL PARA LA MUJER EN EL CARIBE:
EL CASO DE ST. VINCENT Y LAS
GRANADINAS***

JUDITH SOARES AND MICHAEL THOMAS

ABSTRACT

This paper is a continuation of the debate on issues of relevance to the development of education in small island states with specific reference to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. In this respect, it seeks to unveil the experience and the lessons of non-formal education in the Anglophone Caribbean. In so doing, it examines the experience of rural women in St. Vincent and the Grenadines who have embraced the possibility of leveraging ICT as a means of accessing relevant information to enable them to improve their quality of life and that of their families and community.

RESUMEN

Este documento es una continuación de lo ya tratado sobre temas de importancia para el desarrollo de la educación en pequeños estados insulares con referencia específica a St. Vincent y Las Granadinas. A este respecto, intenta develar la experiencia adquirida y las lecciones aprendidas sobre educación no formal en el Caribe anglófono. Al hacerlo, examina la experiencia de mujeres del medio rural, en St. Vincent y Las Granadinas, que han abrazado la posibilidad de apalancar la tecnología de la información como medio para el acceso a la información relevante que les permita mejorar su calidad de vida y la de sus familias y comunidad.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 1980s, there has been a trend towards research and the publication of articles on education in small island states. This paper is a continuation of that trend as it documents developments in this field that are both dynamic and relatively recent. It, therefore, provides an agenda for both reflection and debate in the discipline of education.

It is clear that one of the most important developments in the non-formal education sector debate in recent years has been the *Dodds Report* (1996) which has formed the basis for much deliberation at a number of international fora. This is so because his research has had the distinction of documenting the worldwide uses to which distance learning approaches have been applied to non-formal education. His effort resulted in the compilation of a directory of programmes, for which information was available at the time, classified geographically and cross referenced by content and media used. In highlighting a number of issues arising from the survey, Dodds' conclusion that there is an urgent need for continued research to document this experience and test the lessons which can be drawn from it forms the basis on which this work seeks to unveil the experience and the lessons of non-formal education in the Anglophone Caribbean. In so doing, we examine the experience of rural women in St. Vincent and the Grenadines who have opened themselves to the possibility of leveraging ICT as a means of accessing relevant information to enable them to improve their quality of life and that of their families and community.

CONCEPTUALISING NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

In the context of open and distance education, non-formal education is perhaps the most illusive and ill-defined sector of distance educators' work worldwide (Spronk, 1999). In our attempts to incorporate methods of open and distance education into non-formal education, issues of definition arise.

Non-formal education has been recognized, since the early 1970s, as the wide range of educational activities, mainly for adults, taking place outside of the academy. These activities were considered to be vitally important in contributing to social and economic development in the less industrialized countries of the South and the more industrialized countries of the North. It must be noted that, according to the literature, the term 'non-formal education' was coined by Phillip Coombs, Ahmed Mansoor, Jim Sheffield and Victor Diejomaoh to describe these activities (Dodds, 1996). From as early as 1968, Coombs observed that non-formal education was characterized by a diversity of activities known by different names: adult education; continuing education; on the job training; accelerated training; farmer or worker training; and extension services. Later in the 1970s, Coombs, along

with Posser and Manzoor, offered an expanded definition of non-formal education by including educational opportunities for rural young people. In this respect they categorized these programmes of activities in the following way: agricultural, artisan and craft, vocational and pre-vocational preparation, leadership training and civic service, general, multi-purpose and miscellaneous which includes literacy training and school equivalency programmes.

At the same time, Sheffield and Diejomaoh (1972: xi) in their contribution to the literature argued that non-formal education is supposed to serve three basic needs: as an alternative for those who lack opportunities for formal schooling, extension of formal schooling for purposes of employment, and as a means of upgrading skills for those already involved in productive employment, and as a means of upgrading the skills of those already employed. Later in the 1980s, Bates offered that the basis of non-formal education is the improvement of an individual's personal, social and work life. It is intended to help them make practical changes in their daily lives and to advance personal development in the context of their own goals and wishes. Hallack's input (1990) recognizes four broad areas of non-formal education enumerated as follows:

1. paraformal education (evening classes, distance education, and so on), which refers to programmes that provide a substitute for formal schooling, that is, offer a 'second chance' to those who cannot attend regular schooling;
2. popular education, which is explicitly targeted to serve marginal groups. It is the least institutionalised component, including adult literacy, co-operative training, political mobilization, and /or community development;
3. education for personal improvement (music, languages, sports and so on) which is provided by clubs, cultural institutions and associations, and in most cases paid for by the client; and
4. professional or vocational non-formal education and training, which can be provided by firms, trade unions, private agencies and, of course, schools.

For his part, Fordham (1993) suggests that in the 1970s, four characteristics came to be associated with non-formal education:

1. relevance to the need of socially disadvantaged groups;
2. concern with specific categories of person;

3. a focus on clearly defined purposes; and
4. flexibility in organization and methods.

The definitions of non-formal education in the existing literature by conventional theorists do not necessarily fit the mould in the Caribbean where we define non-formal education within the context of our experiences in the region. While there are attempts to present clear-cut definitions of non-formal and informal education in the literature, it is our view that there can be no such cut and dry definitions. Our experience in the Caribbean indicates that forms of schooling that do not take place within the walls of the classroom, yet which teach the formal curriculum and which ultimately feed into the formal examination and credential system are often lumped with the informal system, and so do incorporate elements of both non-formal and informal practices. In addition, other Caribbean experiences also do not fully validate the experiences discussed in the literature with respect to the prevailing definitions of non-formal education. These definitions do not consider national literacy programmes such as the Jamaica Adult Literacy programme (JAMAL) in Jamaica, Cuba's literacy programme, the Adult Literacy Programme in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme (YTEPP) in Trinidad and Tobago where non-formal education was introduced and legitimized by governments. In other instances, we find, for example, The UWI's Radio Education Unit, airing for years, "Listening Post", an information programme for Jamaican farmers; government extension services in agriculture through the ministries of agriculture in some countries of the region; the introduction and use of radio broadcasts to support curriculum in primary schools by various governments; and in Trinidad and Tobago of the 1940s, Rawle Farley, Resident Tutor, The UWI's School of Continuing Studies, used radio as a medium to discuss literary works as a means of encouraging critical thinking. It is because of these experiences that Soares & Thomas (2006: 2) contend that:

Regardless of the nature of its organization, non-formal education programmes are often those most closely linked with direct application and functional outcomes. Frequently centred around adult literacy, learning addresses issues of local relevance, thus providing an orientation into which the concerns of sustainable development [and sustainable livelihoods] easily fit.

They conclude that, "non-formal learning offers ways of bringing organized educational opportunities to a diverse range of learners from rural women to out-of-school adolescents to redundant workers and the retired".

We, therefore, conceptualise non-formal education in an ideological context which forces critical thinking through modes of delivery and

'curriculum' development which would allow participants to raise their levels of social consciousness and knowledge through adult upgrading and encouraging them to take action to address change in their social and economic condition, and by extension, that of their community. While this may be a start in the right direction, it is by no means a way of effecting social change or addressing issues of national development, defined as social progress and social justice. Such issues are ones of mass mobilization and political commitment at the national level.

FANCY: ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Fancy is a small remote, rural community in the Caribbean island of St. Vincent and the Grenadines which lies south of St. Lucia and north of Grenada, its closest neighbours. This community comprises some 240 women, 270 men and 140 households. In this community which has one primary school, a health clinic with regular opening hours and several churches, the main means of subsistence are fishing and cash crop farming. While there is a post office, there are no government offices, commercial banks or other business enterprises to facilitate employment so there is a high level of unemployment, particularly among women who are either farmers or homemakers or both. Although the community is a remote one, community members are linked to the 'outside world' through telephone connection, and a transport bus which makes daily runs to Kingstown, the country's capital. In terms of access, there is only one entrance and exit to the community which lies in a hilly terrain in an area which is prone to land and rock slides. The poor state of the access road removes Fancy even further from communities in the north-eastern district where the community is located. Telephone access is not universal in terms of fixed lines, a situation which is the reverse in the case of mobile phone availability. Most households have a radio and a television set. At the best of times, however, community members have great difficulty in receiving radio transmissions from broadcast centres in St. Vincent and this situation becomes more acute in times of natural disasters. Internet access is virtually non-existent.

Fancy is one of those communities where people are more socially disadvantaged than poor as defined in conventional economic terms. However, because of their socially disadvantaged position, they can be thrown into poverty at any time. That is to say, the people of Fancy all own the land on which they live and subsist, as common property. They own their houses which are of concrete structure and are furnished with all modern conveniences. But because there is no constant flow of money, they become vulnerable to economic difficulties and its remoteness also puts the community at a disadvantage in terms of the ability of its members to gather information on issues which affect their daily lives such as farming methods and techniques, information to assist their children with their academic work,

health issues etc. This means that for adults, there is really no way of expanding their knowledge base except by leveraging information and communication technology to facilitate the process of learning to improve their quality of life. Community members also have little access to government training programmes. Unless these training programmes are held in the village, it is extremely difficult for adults to participate in any learning activity since training sessions are usually held after regular working hours.

Recognising their situation and the possibility for creating change, the women of Fancy got involved in a process of 'community development' in which they combined organisational capacity building with economic necessity and social ideas to achieve their goals of developing their technical skills, expanding their economic activity and broadening their views on social issues towards improving their livelihood and providing a socio-economic cushion for themselves, their families and the community. Theirs was to develop a model of 'development' which was equitable, inclusive and self-reliant. Including research and documentation, income generating projects, social training and non-formal education, this model of development embraced both women and men based on the unifying principle of 'equality in ownership and benefits'. Notably, this community project was conceived and run by the women who had constituted themselves in the *Fancy Community Help Group* (FCHG) with the expressed purpose of improving the quality of their lives and that of their fellow citizens in a socially cohesive community built on notions and practice of the African tradition of the extended family. In fact, the focus of the FCHG has been to address issues of social well-being and strengthening social cohesion, creating initiatives which would stimulate and improve their livelihood opportunities and paying attention to historical and cultural issues which would encourage a positive sense of self, family and community. Over the past decade, the FCHG has undertaken several initiatives to further social and economic development: income earning activities to supplement the financial resources of their families, creating an indigenous banking system to provide loans to families, particularly for health and education purposes, conducting research and documentation of the community's history, and participation in training aimed at personal and organisational development.

Given their circumstances, of social and economic disadvantage, the remoteness of their community and their thirst for information, the 22 women who comprise the FCHG were not only interested in creating an economic and financial base to strengthen their livelihoods. They were also intent on creating a knowledge-based community through the use of modern communication information technology (ICT) which they felt would allow them to access information relevant to their daily lives and to link them with the outside world. For them, ICT is not just a teaching tool, but a research instrument and a source of information. This is critical because Fancy community members appreciate the value of education, learning and social progress.

It was against his background that the women of the FCHG decided to get involved in an ICT project which had the strong backing of their husbands and partners who felt that such a project would also benefit them and their children. In developing this project, the women were guided by the Women and Development Unit (WAND) of The University of the West Indies (UWI) in collaboration with a sister department, The University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) both of which were located within The UWI's former Outreach sector, now the UWI Open Campus.

AN ICT PROJECT

It is our view that distance learning offers an essential opportunity for the beginnings or continuation of education for women, particularly rural women precisely because the program can be adapted to the rhythm and the life style of each woman individually. With this in mind and couched in the non-formal mode of learning, the idea of an ICT project was introduced to the community in 2004.

At this time, WAND discussed with the Fancy Community Help Group the possibility of establishing a small training centre and a community radio. The Group had identified a building as a possible location for both activities but were unsuccessful in securing its use as a community training centre. The quest for a second building also proved unsuccessful and so a decision was taken to house the project in the community's only preschool building where it would provide services for the health clinic which is also on the school complex.

In this community driven, multi-stakeholder project the goal is to establish community access centres to achieve "anywhere, anytime, anyplace" education. The original idea involved the placement of 10 computer terminals in a small building with the possibility of extending it to provide space for a community radio station, so as to create a multi-media centre. The project will include training to use the internet, word processing, spreadsheets, accounting packages, etc and eventually getting the community to establish a community portal with e-mail accounts, etc. An important consideration is the use of wifi for the whole community using a shared network. Another consideration is the use of renewable energy e.g. solar panels and a Bio Diesel plant as cost reduction measures and as a means of sensitizing the community to the use of alternative sources of energy.

WHY A RADIO STATION?

A community radio station is one that is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community. The community can be territorial or geographical - a township, village, district

or island. It can also be a group of people with common interests, who are not necessarily living in one defined territory. Consequently, community radio can be managed or controlled by one group, by combined groups, or of people such as women, children, farmers, fisher-folk, ethnic groups, or senior citizens. What distinguishes community radio from other media is the high level of people's participation, both in management and program production aspects. Furthermore, individual community members and local institutions are the principal sources of support for its operation.

Community radio gives community members access to information because it gives them access to the means of communication. The most relevant information - educational and developmental - is disseminated and exchanged. Important local issues are aired. A free market place of ideas and opinions is opened up and people are given the opportunity to express themselves socially, politically and culturally. Community radio helps to put the community members in charge of their own affairs.

OBSERVATION(S)

Access to ICT can provide the tools of empowerment for women and build their self-confidence and self-esteem and give them a sense of independence, but such a community project, as experience has shown, can create conflicts between women and men. As a matter of fact, feminists and women activists have indicated that when women pursue an interest or activity which have very little or no bearing on their domestic role, and effectively expose and challenge unequal power relations within the family, they often meet with strong resistance from their male partners because of suspicion/jealousy as well as ridicule (Evans 1995). In Fancy, this is not the case.

First, the men do not feel threatened by their women's efforts to achieve and to educate themselves. They feel that such an exercise will also benefit them and their children. According to one husband who has been married for 15 years, "I support my wife, I believe in myself and I believe in her and if she is interested (or involved) in a project, I will support her: I feel this project is a good one, my children can learn it and then they will teach me". Another "I am not jealous and I am not suspicious of her; I want good things for her, she is a good wife to me and I trust her". This sentiment was corroborated by women of the FCHG who clearly stated that "Jealousy and suspicion do not exist in this community" and that "(the men) encourage their women to get ahead and show an interest in our work and even if the women get more money than them, it does not matter".

Second, both women and men have worked together to implement and sustain projects women have been involved in over the years. While

we are aware of the unequal power relations which characterise social relations between women and men, we note that in Fancy gender inequalities have been reduced, mainly because both women and men have equal access to land made possible by the nature of land ownership, mentioned above, and the practice of women and men working together in both the home and the field. Land ownership and notions of equality, therefore, have passed down through generations. This relationship to the land has also influenced ideas of democracy which figure centrally in the organisation and implementation of community projects.

It has been claimed that for developing countries, without investment in women's education and health, "human capital will continue to remain undeveloped and the [economies] ... will suffer unnecessarily the consequences in terms of foregone production, diminished family welfare and rapid population growth" (Women's International Network News, 1990). Evidence has been presented (for example, Chaudry, 1995) that women who attended adult education classes became more confident, which in turn equipped them with better mobility, expression, understanding and ability to make decisions and accept responsibility. There were benefits not only for the women themselves, but for their husbands, children, families and communities.

BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

- Enhancement of knowledge of agricultural techniques, skills, technology and technological developments, farming practices, availability of resources, environmental and developmental issues etc.
- Generate employment opportunities for the community.
- Research, news, information, community programmes.
- Health information, e.g. healthy eating habits, for healthier living and assisting the creation of a database recording system for the community health centre.
- Opportunities for increased technological training.
- Knowledge of accounting procedures.
- Knowledge of issues relating to women and other women's groups.
- Cheaper and faster communication with friends and families through email.

- Reduction in expenditure for community events e.g. printing of wedding invitations and programmes.
- Greater cohesiveness centred around the project which would be owned by FCHG and the community.

BENEFITS TO THE UWI

- Provide the platform for future delivery of UWI programmes for personal development and career enhancement through the School of Continuing Studies - integrated into The UWI Open Campus
- To deliver higher education programmes to potential students in the remote, rural areas of the Caribbean
- To provide a model for replication throughout the Caribbean.
- To confirm, within The UWI Open Campus, the value of non-formal education and learning in its educational construct.

As the literature indicates, and as our experience has confirmed, women generally prefer distance learning because of its very nature which allows them to optimally combine learning and career development with domestic responsibilities (May 1994, Kokkos and Lionarakis 1998, Keegan 2000). Furthermore, it enables them to learn at their own pace, while minimizing costs - saving money and time on commuting and child care. Older women students, in particular, comment that the "virtual classroom" minimizes the discomfort and alienation they sometimes experience on conventional college campuses populated by 18 to 22 year-olds. (Kramarae 2000, Furst-Bowe 2001).

Another factor is made manifest by the fact that further difficulties may present themselves in lessons that demand the extended use of computers for example (Furst-Bowe 2001, May 1994) due to the fact that women may have (whether they believe or not) less ease of use and experience working with technological interfaces. Female students may have less experience with working with technology than do their male counterparts and may become frustrated with distance learning courses that require extensive use of computers. Despite this, the belief continues to persist that females are by nature technologically ignorant and unable to absorb scientific and technological information or to acquire technical skills.

The main challenge is to create an infrastructure from which an IT learning environment can be launched and developed; ... once this is

achieved many benefits can be realised (Ward, 1999). Technology infrastructure includes all the elements that support the integrated use of technology: the computers themselves, the wires that connect them, the administrative rules and regulations that apply to the acquisition and use of computers, the fiscal resources, and the professional development that is needed to use computers (Weikart, and Marrapodi, 1999).

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APPENDIX A

MODELS OF FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

	formal	non-formal
Purposes	Long-term & general Credential based	Short-term & specific Non-credential based
Timing	Long cycle / preparatory / full time	Short cycle / recurrent / part-time
Content	Standardized / input centered Academic Entry requirements determine clientele	Individualized / output centered Practical Clientele determine entry requirements
Delivery system	Institution-based Isolated from environment Rigidly structured, teacher centered and resource intensive	Environment-based Community related Flexible, learner-centered and self-governing / democratic
Control	External / hierarchical	Self-governing / democratic

JUDITH SOARES

She is Senior Lecturer and Head, Women and Development Unit, The University of the West Indies. As Head of the UWI's Women's Outreach Unit, her work centres on issues relating to women's social and economic advancement through non-formal education and distance learning, community income generating projects, research and documentation. jsoares@uwichill.uwi.edu.bb

MICHAEL THOMAS

Formerly Research Officer at the UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC), Michael Thomas is now Research Officer in the Institutional Research Unit, Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor and Principal, University of the West Indies-Open. A graduate of the Mausica Teachers' College, he had 25 years experience as a teacher in Trinidad and Tobago before joining the UWI and has taught throughout the education system from primary to adult education. He was Trinidad and Tobago's first Research and Development Officer in its then newly created Distance Learning Secretariat, Ministry of Information, Communication, Training and Distance Learning. He is also a Fellow of the COL/Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme and holds both a Postgraduate Diploma (PGDDE) and Master's Degree in Distance Education from the Indira Gandhi National Open University. He is the editor, author, and co-author of a number of articles and book chapters and has presented papers at a variety of international conferences on distance education in Africa, Canada, Hawaii and New Zealand as well as in the Caribbean. His research interests are in the area of adaptive mobile learning technology and its potential for revolutionizing distance education, blended learning, and trade issues related to higher education. mthomas99@gmail.com