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The Glory of Self-Learning

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Imagine a new world of innovative, inexpensive and successful learning, where dusty streets in rural towns in developing countries are lined with self-powered computer kiosks, and children from poor neighborhoods have the same ability to work with new technology as children in richer areas do.

Dr. Sugata Mitra, an Indian, has led several such revolutionary initiatives, which he believes can change how we approach teaching. His country is saddled with untold problems that inhibit free learning and open thinking for the young. Of the one billion people or so who live in India, more than half are illiterate. Millions subsist on less than \$1 a day.

A scholar of computer science, Dr. Mitra had been playing with the idea of unsupervised learning and interactive technology for years. He began his Hole in the Wall experiments in children's learning more than a decade ago in the slums of New Delhi. The trial studies encouraged children to use battery-operated computer kiosks set up in playgrounds and on neighborhood roads to spark their interest in self-teaching. The project gave children freedom to play with the technology, using educational software.

Children from across India, including rural villages, were quickly drawn to the kiosks. Dr. Mitra, who is also a professor of educational technology at Newcastle University in Britain, explained that first the children were not sure they were allowed to touch the computers, but after a short while, they overcame their timidity and quickly learned to play the educational games.

Dr. Mitra has won many prizes, including a social innovation award from the Institute for Social Inventions in Britain (now part of Global Ideas Bank). Vikas Swarup, who wrote the novel *Q & A*, which was made into the Academy Award winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*, said he was inspired to write his novel partly by the resourcefulness of the Indian children whom he observed interacting with the Hole in the Wall computers.

In an interview via Skype, Dr. Mitra told me his group started as a single project for disadvantaged Indian children, but his minimally invasive education techniques, as he calls them, have worked so well he now has kiosks in Africa, Asia, Australia and Latin America. Dr. Mitra thinks that his success in expanding the use of the kiosks to countries outside India is based on the assumption that all children can educate themselves regardless of their class or cultural background, as long as they can do so in a familiar, pressure-free environment.

"What it showed is that children can teach themselves to use the Internet even if they have never seen or used a computer before," Dr. Mitra said. But, he added, they have to be in groups and they have to be unsupervised.

Dr. Mitra acknowledged that such strategies go against widely shared beliefs about what makes a good education. He pointed out, however, that teachers in many poor communities often work long hours with little or no access to resources, and his project seeks to ease some of their burdens and to supplement their efforts.

Dr. Mitra's latest initiative, "the granny cloud," a project sponsored by Newcastle University, involves working with 200 retired teachers, mostly women, in Britain who are beamed into classrooms throughout India via Skype to guide the independent learning process. "You can have electronic mediation for free and it is a great win-win situation," he said.

Despite his critics, Dr. Mitra contended that he did not necessarily want to do away with teachers in the classroom. "As long as the current education system remains, we will need teachers. However, do we need teachers to stand in front of the classroom to deliver a lecture for half an hour? Couldn't the child get the same information from Google in five to 10 minutes?"

He has also been criticized for his ideas on the future of higher-learning institutions. "What will happen to the universities? Well, I think the undergraduate programs need to be looked at very carefully first, because they are under the biggest threat," he said.

"The great big classrooms and the huge halls, they will not be needed for too much longer," he added. "I don't know what will happen to them. Could it be that in 2022, you would pay \$10 to enter the main building of MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] to see an exhibition of the history of education? Would they all become museums? Sounds funny, but it has happened before. And it will happen again, I think."