

NON FORMAL EDUCATION AT A DISTANCE: A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

Barbara Spronk

Director

International Extension College, UK

e-mail: lec@dial.pipex.com

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the definition of non formal education and to provide a framework for discussion by establishing characteristics, categories, issues and current developments.

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Non formal education at a distance: a framework for discussion

Aim of the paper

Non formal education is unquestionably the most elusive and ill-defined sector of distance educators' work world-wide. The label gets pasted on such diverse activities as health education, agricultural education and training for farmers, women's group activities, income-generation activities, adult literacy classes, leisure time education for adults, out-of-school schools for young dropouts, second language teaching, AIDS awareness campaigns, and work-based training at worker and management levels.

The aim of this paper is to lift the label and rearrange what lies beneath it into some characteristics, categories, issues and current developments that will both provoke discussion and provide a framework for it. The first task is to plunge into the welter of definitions of the sector.

Defining non formal education

Defining non formal education is notoriously difficult. The definition offered by Coombs, Prosser and Ahmed (1973), which assigns NFE its place in the educational universe, has become a classic. Carron and Carr-Hill (1991:5-6) summarise the distinctions they offer as follows:

... *formal education* ... (is) the institutionalised, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured education system, running from lower primary school to the upper reaches of the university, generally full time and sanctioned by the state; *non-formal education* ... (comprises) all educational activities organised outside the formal system and designed to serve identifiable clientele and educational objectives ... with all remaining educational activities being categorised as *informal education* ... (is) the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experience and exposure to the environment...

Non formal education, then, occupies the middle ground between the traditional school system and informal learning practices, with no particularly clear or sharp edges at the boundaries. For instance, forms of schooling for children that happen not to take place within classroom walls, yet which teach the formal curriculum in somewhat more flexible fashion and which potentially feed into the formal examinations and credentialling system, are often lumped in with the informal system. These, however, are perhaps more usefully termed "alternative" schools within the formal system. This is the case in Kenya, for example, where schools organised by slum communities in Nairobi are called "non formal" yet are in fact "informally formal". A Kenyan colleague terms these *Jua Kali* or "open air" schools (Jedidah Mujidi, personal communication).

Schooling for adults who have never been to school or whose schooling has been exceedingly limited also tends to be labelled "non formal". In many countries, during the last two decades, governments have established departments of non formal education as part of their ministries of education and have given these departments responsibility for all adult and out-of-school education, with a vague responsibility for co-ordinating adult education activities carried out by other ministries, such as agriculture, health, and rural development. Often the main focus of their work is adult literacy and continuing education, parallel to the formal system, for school leavers and dropouts. This falls into a category which Carron and Carr-Hill label "paraformal NFE", most of which is adult basic education, or "ABE" (acronyms abound!). ABE and NFE are overlapping descriptors. Many, perhaps most, ABE activities do fall within the non formal sector, although in exemplary cases they may also lead, in "laddered" fashion, to credentials which enable participants to continue their education within the formal system.

At the other end of this "formal-non formal-in formal" continuum, non formal initiatives often appear to be so "informal" compared with the rigours of the formal system that they tend to merge with the informal sector. Three main points from the Coombs et al. definition are helpful here, in terms of setting NFE off from the

informal sector. First, non formal education is organised. That is, it is planned, designed, structured and managed; it does not happen casually. Second, NFE serves “identifiable clientele”. In other words, NFE offers opportunities for learning to clearly identified target audiences. And third, NFE also has clearly defined educational objectives. Although it is outside the formal system, NFE shares these characteristics with formal education, and this helps to distinguish it from informal education.

Back to the formal end of the continuum, more recent discussions of NFE have attempted to distinguish non formal from formal education by contrasting their characteristics For instance, Rogers (1996:3 3) offers the following comparison:

	<u>Formal education</u>	<u>Non formal education</u>
Target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mainly young • universal • compulsory • selective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mainly adults • those interested • voluntary • open
Time scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • full time • primary activity of participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • part time • secondary activity of participants
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • separate from life • in special institutions • in sole purpose buildings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrated with life • in the community • in all kinds of settings
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • run by professionals • excludes large parts of life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participatory • excludes nothing
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one kind of education for all • set curriculum • compartmentalised • subject-centred • controlled by teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • education to meet learner-defined needs • open curriculum • integrated • problem-centred • controlled by learners
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teacher-centred • mainly written 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learner-centred • much is oral
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conformist • set by teachers • competitive • individualist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promotes independence • set by learners • collaborative • collective
Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • present
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hierarchical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • egalitarian
Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • terminal at each stage • validated by education • profession 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continuing • validated by learners

As Rogers notes, however, there are drawbacks to this approach to defining NFE, drawbacks which immediately leap to the eyes of distance educators, since most of the features listed under NFE are also virtues claimed by distance educators. It is clearly the case that the positive virtues attributed here to NFE are idealised. Rather than characteristics of NFE, they are goals toward which NFE - and indeed much formal education and especially distance education - is striving. Although this gives such lists limited utility in making clear distinctions between formal and non formal education, it is nonetheless possible to identify some important differences between the two sectors. For instance, NFE courses do tend to be geared more to the immediate needs of learner, they tend to give learners more influence in shaping their experience of teaching and learning by not holding the hammer of external testing and validation over their heads.

Another way of approaching the definition of non formal education is to emphasise the dynamic nature of the education process and focus on this issue of control. If teachers control the educational programme, then it is formal; to the extent that control passes to the learners, it becomes a non formal programme. This also allows for a process of change over time. In the early stages of establishing a non formal programme, control may still rest largely with the educational provider who is setting up and starting the programme. However, as the programme continues, control can, indeed should, pass gradually from the provider to the learners, who will increasingly take over the programme and shape it to meet their own needs. In this sense, non formal education again becomes a goal to be aimed for rather than a static set of identifying characteristics.

Implicit in these approaches is an ideological commitment to the linking of non formal education to the process of individual and community empowerment, to the idea that non formal education should lead to individual and communal/community action, and to the important role played by NFE in the processes of social change and socio-economic development. This of course begs a whole series of questions about the nature of social change and development, and indeed of learning itself. Nonetheless it represents a significant shift, from a formal and academic approach to education to an action-oriented view of education as an agent and vehicle for community-led social and economic change.

Incorporating distance education in the mix

Additional issues of definition arise when one incorporates the methods of distance education into NFE and ABE programming. Almost by definition, NFE has been provided on a piecemeal basis, set up to meet the learning needs of a particular group, in a particular place, at a particular time. NFE programmes tend to be small scale, lacking the national structures of formal education as well as its resources. Governments and educational policy makers tend not to take NFE very seriously. Similarly, remedial education for adults who have never been to school - the illiterate majority in many developing countries - has always been considered a second-rate part of national education systems, a moral obligation but not a political or economic priority. Thus the impact of NFE and ABE programmes on societies and their development has been very limited. Though in many countries they are the main, and sometimes the only, ways of meeting the learning needs of the vast majority of the population, to date NFE and ABE have failed to meet the expectations and challenges for rapid social and economic development which have been set out for them.

It is largely for these reasons that non formal and adult basic educators have turned to the media of distance education, seeking to harness innovative technology to achieve their ambitions of national large-scale social impact. Print is employed extensively in this way. Choosing representative organisations that use print effectively in NFE programming is impossible. INADES, the Institut Africain pour le Développement Economique et Social set up in Côte d'Ivoire and now operating in several countries of francophone Africa, and AMREF, the African Medical Research and Education Foundation, are, however, examples of organisations that have been active in this sector for a number of decades.

Radio and television have been put to the service of development for almost as long as they have existed. Broadcast media can be used to inform and raise awareness, motivate and mobilise, challenge and stimulate, describe and explain, demonstrate and illustrate, teach and instruct, provide advice and guidance. For example, in countries as diverse as Canada, India, Ghana and Zambia, Radio Farm Forums have brought farmers together into study groups to discuss in local terms the issues being raised in nation-wide broadcasts and provide feedback through letters written to programme organisers on programme content. The *escuelas radiofónicas* (radiophonic schools) of Latin America and the Canary Islands are another enduring example of the effective use of radio in NFE programming.

In talking of the use of television in support of non formal education programmes, however, one is more inclined to use the past tense. The decade of the 1970s was the heyday of the use of television for non formal education programming. Since that time television for these purposes - apart from mass awareness-raising campaigns (see below) - has declined for reasons of cost, but Dodds in his recent study (Dodds 1996a:50) still lists a number of non formal education initiatives that make use of television, including the "Village World" programme in Gujarat, India and the Mauritius College of the Air.

Audio and video cassettes provide a powerful alternative to broadcast transmission. They can perform all the educational functions served by radio and television without the difficulties presented by fixed broadcast schedules. "They offer the advantage of learner control, since they can be listened to or viewed when, where, how and as often as the students choose. For example, there are a few open universities around the world that offer NFE programmes of which audiocassettes are a central feature (e.g., Allama Iqbal Open University), and the Sudan Open Learning Organisation uses cassettes to good effect in its programming for refugees and displaced peoples. In francophone Africa, CESP (Centre de Services de Production Audiovisuelle) supplies communication support to development projects by means of original and targeted video production.

The importance of group interaction

Most non formal education programmes that use these media enhance their impact and effectiveness by using them in a study or learning group context. Such groups give learners an opportunity to discuss the relevance of what they have been listening to or viewing, to share ideas and experience, and to undertake group-based learning activities which allow them to apply knowledge, practise skills, and explore attitudes and values. The idea is perhaps best captured in the slogan adopted by the Radio Farm Forums: "Listen, Discuss, Decide, Act".

As Dodds (1996b:68) points out, however, enthusiasts of distance education for non formal and adult basic education often have a difficult time convincing either distance educators or adult educators that the two can go together. Distance education purists argue that most of these so-called NFE programmes at a distance are really face-to-face learning projects supported by texts and audio-visual aids. They do not meet the normal criteria by which distance education is defined. Adult educators, on the other hand, often dismiss the use of mass media for such purposes as not being education at all, but merely information distribution and, occasionally, exhortation and propaganda.

Dodds goes on to point out that there is clearly a continuum between the two. At one end are the programmes that employ primarily face-to-face learning supplemented with texts and audio-visual aids. At the other lie the mass media information programmes. In between the two, however, are many programmes that strive to combine face-to-face communication, either between teachers and learners or among learners themselves, and interactive media-based dialogue with carefully structured printed, audio or video materials which make central inputs to the teaching/learning processes.

Thus, for example, the radiophonic schools of Latin America provide organised learning opportunities which are equally dependent on the study group meetings and on the media. The information, ideas and even the sequence and structure of the learning come from the media, and the support and guidance to the discussions from trained *monitores* or facilitators. Feedback to the programme organisers is encouraged through letters and through the student newsletter. Feedback and comments back to students, however, are not always as carefully structured as in a correspondence course.

Likewise INADES provides materials both to learners individually and to students in groups. The latter are sometimes comprised of peasant farmers with low or no reading skills, who rely on an extension officer or *animateur* who can read the materials to lead the discussion and record the answers for feedback to headquarters. Again, the booklets are clearly the source of information and the animateurs the moderators, not the teachers. The feedback system in this case is highly structured, through assignments, from groups to headquarters and through their returned tutorial comments from headquarters back to the groups.

Using telecommunications technologies

What the various communication technologies offer, of course, is the opportunity to expand the boundaries of the local community to encompass an entire district, a region, a country. Indeed, for the truly ambitious, conferencing technologies, whether audio, video, or computer, can connect people around the globe. A recent publication based largely on Canadian experience offers examples of these technologies being used outside the formal system in a number of creative ways to provide extracurricular enrichment, adult upgrading, and professional and staff development (Roberts et al., 1998).

These are, without question, exciting possibilities, and as a distance educator (and co-author of the just-mentioned publication) I think it is important to mention them. At the same time, however, I am also somewhat fearful of doing so, lest discussion become sidetracked into the byways of Websites and ISDN lines. I find it both amazing and alarming how much time, energy, presentation and publication time, and not least money, gets devoted to the power and prospects of these new technologies, and how little to the technologies such as radio which are so much more accessible to the vast numbers of poor communities in the world and which, in combination with print and study circles, are so powerful an educational tool.

Fortunately, the advent of new versions of the radio - the Baygen Freeplay" wind-up radio, for example, that runs without needing a power source other than the human arm; solar-powered receivers; and digital radio transmissions via the WorldSpace satellites that are being launched with footprints that cover the continents of Africa, South America and Asia - are reviving interest in the radio as an educational medium. Even so, it is of critical importance that we not lose sight of the principles of access, learner-centredness and appropriate use of technologies that underly all our practice as distance educators. In the realm of NFE in particular, there will continue to be a tension - creative, one hopes, rather than destructive - between serving the immediate and basic needs of a given set of communities, in their own languages and within their own political and cultural contexts, and rushing to globalise, with the goal, not always carefully thought through, of offering these communities the widest possible horizons.

Recent developments

One of the most important developments in this sector in recent years has been the publication and discussion, in a number of international workshops, of the Dodds report (1996a) and the follow-up research which is now underway. In 1995 Tony Dodds, under the auspices of IEC, received funding from COL to undertake a world-wide survey of the uses to which distance learning approaches were being put in non formal education. He compiled a directory of all the programmes for which there was information available, classified geographically and cross-referenced by content and media used. In the concluding section he then pointed to a number of issues which had arisen from the survey:

- that in dealing with NFE we are not dealing with a 'system' with recognisable boundaries and approaches and structures which are common to different levels and countries in the way that formal education can be characterised;
- that NFE at a distance is very poorly and uncritically documented;
- that such programmes, however enthusiastic their launch, are very rarely taken seriously by governments and especially ministries of education. Rather, much of the work is carried by the NGO sector and is usually seriously under-resourced except in the pilot phase. The result is a vicious cycle of low status, poor resourcing, low staff morale, low quality and poor results.
- that there are some serious gaps in the programming if it is to make life-relevant education available to all adults, which related to practical income-generating training, to science and technology, and to environmental issues;
- and, on an optimistic note, that there is an impressive breadth and depth of experience on which to build, and that there is research needed urgently to both document this experience and test the lessons which can be drawn from it.

Some of the research which Dodds urged be done is now underway, in the capable hands of Richard Siaciwena. The work is being funded by DFID and overseen by COL, aided by an international steering committee. Richard is directing a team of seven researchers who are undertaking detailed documentation of NFE projects that use distance education methods in seven African countries, using guidelines that include purpose, clientele, costs, and impact. These studies will provide a basis of solid information from which lessons can be drawn and recommendations made for continued research, this time action research which will implement the lessons and test the results.

There is further research and publication forthcoming, via IRFOL, on basic education at a distance, an area closely allied to non formal education, as we have seen. Palitha Edirisingha of IRFOL is in the midst of a two-year research project on basic education, focusing on OLSET in South Africa and the National Open School in India, with the purpose of raising the research capacity of developing country open and distance education institutes that provide basic education. In addition, the second volume of the COL *Annual Review* series will be on basic education, edited by IEC. IRFOL also plans to do further work on the application of mass communications to basic education.

In addition to this important work, UNESCO, COL and the Working Group on Non Formal Education of ADEA, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, are collaborating in organising an international seminar on policies and strategies in adult learning, non formal education, and open learning, to be held in Harare in the second week of March 1999. This seminar is part of the follow up to the Fifth International conference on Adult Education held in Hamburg in July 1997, and implementation of the Hamburg Declaration and Agenda for Future Action. Non formal education at a distance is clearly back on the world agenda. Let us hope for - and continue to work towards - global recognition in high places of the critical importance of this sector of our work as distance educators. and the support that is needed to fulfil its promise.

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