Indian children to benefit from new School in the Cloud

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Prof Sugata Mitra's vision to create seven Schools in the Cloud to help children everywhere tap into their innate sense of wonder is another step closer.

The penultimate learning lab will officially open on Wednesday 3 December 2014 in Phaltan, a small town in Maharashtra, India.

Initiated by Newcastle University and TED Prize, this School in the Cloud lab will be the first to be located in a school where English is simply taught as a subject alongside all the others.

The language used throughout the school is Marathi, which has the fourth largest number of speakers in India and the official language of Maharashtra state.

"Imagine using an Internet where there is hardly anything at all in your mother tongue – that's what it's like for these children," says Dr Suneeta Kulkarni, Research Director for School in the Cloud.

The School in the Cloud involves SOLEs (self organised learning environments) fuelled by big, child-focused questions and self-discovery. Working in groups, children find their own answers using the Internet, supported by educators of all kinds – from Skype Grannies to parents and educators - who give them the freedom to explore their curiosity.

When the Granny Cloud was first used at Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) in September 2013, the children were very inhibited and apprehensive about doing a reading test in English. However, six months later, everything had changed. "The same students strolled in with their heads high refusing to talk in Marathi," says Dr Kulkarni. "Even when I spoke to them in Marathi, they replied in English!"

The children had soon realised that Google translate was not always giving them the most accurate translation so they combined this with a Marathi Wikipedia and other sources to give them a more accurate result. This is one of the key proficiencies being tested in all of the School in the Clouds – whether children can learn by themselves to discriminate between bad and good information. They are also being assessed on reading and basic comprehension and overall confidence levels.

One of those planning to be at the launch, albeit virtually, is 'granny' Lorraine Schneiter, who has been a big part of these children's lives most Thursday mornings for the past year.

Lorraine, who lives in Southern Spain, is part of the Granny Cloud of e-mediators who form an integral part of the School in the Cloud project. She has a strong connection to India as she was born in Mumbai to an English mother and Indian father and lived there until she was 12. Many of her family members still live near the lab in Pune. "I understand the life they are living which helps a lot when I'm working with the children," she explains.

"They're talking a language I understand. In some ways for me it's about giving something back to India, but I also learn much more from them than they learn from me. It's so much fun and creative; you can do anything with them and they just love it."

This School in the Cloud is located close to the school gates and overlooks the playground and residential area, so is easily visible to the local community. The lab is maintained and run by the Grade 7 students.

The school population is from a very diverse socio-economic group – there are children from very rich homes to the caretaker's children and those who live in rough huts.

"Many foreign students and other friends used to visit our school in the past," says Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) headteacher Dr Manjiri Nimbkar, who left a career in medicine to become an educator. "This enabled the students to talk in English and share thoughts with them. We had always felt the lack of such opportunities recently and had invited several volunteers to our school - but they are not easy to find. That gap is filled by the Granny Cloud."

Many lessons learned from building the other Schools in the Cloud have been taken into account during this construction, including the glass windows stopping at eye-level. "That kind of design where the glass is up to the ceiling is fine in the UK but there's much more light here and it makes it difficult to see the screen – it also gets too hot!" explains Dr Kulkarni.

Connectivity, as with many of the more rural School in the Cloud sites, is one of the greatest challenges here and so a back-up dongle is being used in case the regular broadband fails.

The children have been given a free hand with the furniture, choosing bright colours of red and yellow tables with green chairs. The tables are also lower than previously and the chairs are sturdier. With five tables and one large screen, there is also more room to move around and an entire class of 30 or more can be accommodated at once.

Almost the entire school will be involved in this lab, with just Year 10 not taking part due to exams.

This means research can be carried out on much younger children than previously (six-year-olds). "It will be interesting to see what happens with the really young children," says Dr Kulkarni. "We've already seen they have none of the baggage of the older children and no inhibitions at all – these children had never used a computer before and yet walked straight up to it."

This lab is also unique in that the Granny Cloud has been operating there already, so this will provide further data about how effective this method of learning can be.

The School in the Cloud supports children all over the world to work together to tap into their innate sense of wonder.

It involves children, SOLE facilitators (teachers, parents, community leaders) and Skype Grannies who are setting up or already running SOLEs. Together, this global community is creating fun and intellectual learning adventures where children ask big questions, work together and use technology to seek answers, and then present their findings. In non-English speaking and disadvantaged parts of the world, SOLEs also enhance reading comprehension and English language skills because children have the freedom and curiosity to learn together and on their own.

The Granny Cloud

The term Granny Cloud refers to the many e-mediators across the world who enable this project to work on a day-to-day basis. They are not all 'grannies' - many are actually granddads – and this term is actually becoming less tied to gender or age as it is seen by many as a 'badge of

honour'!

What all these relationships share is the universal 'grandmother' approach, where children get to interact with a person who is encouraging and appreciates their efforts, irrespective of whether or not they understand what they are trying to do.

It began to take shape when SOMEs (self organised mediation environments) grew out of the SOLEs (self organised learning environments). The SOLEs were originally initiated to provide educational support for children in remote, disadvantaged settings in rural and urban areas in India.

What began as primarily a storytelling activity rapidly grew to include puzzles, quizzes, sharing pictures, free flowing conversation and even craft activities. The objective was that children would become confident and become more fluent in English, which would help their studies.

How does a SOLE work?

Research over the past four years has shown that groups of children (6-12 years old in groups of 4 or so) can learn almost anything on their own, given unrestricted and adequate access to the Internet. It doesn't matter who or where they are. This has been tested in India, North East England and elsewhere across the world.

Children can competently search for answers to 'Big Questions', drawing rational, logical conclusions from it. These are questions far ahead of what is expected of them in their school curriculum. This kind of learning is activated by questions, not answers.

Provided by Newcastle University