

USING MOBILE PHONES TO PROMOTE LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION AMONG OPEN SCHOOLING STUDENTS: Promises, Possibilities, and Potential Strategies

Dr. Pradeep Kumar MISRA
Associate Professor (Educational Technology)
Faculty of Education and Allied Sciences
M. J. P. Rohilkhand University, INDIA

ABSTRACT

Across the globe, life skills education has been usually developed as part of a school initiative designed to support the healthy psychosocial development of children and adolescents. In other side, formal education system not always provides young people with good opportunities to become confident and realize their potentials. In this back drop, the biggest challenge is to identify the best strategies for providing effective life skills education to those many children who never attend secondary school or reach an age of high vulnerability and risk taking behaviour in the years immediately before reaching secondary school. Considering the situation that in different parts of the world, majority of the youths is having a mobile or will have a mobile soon, the researcher is of the view that mobile phones can be a viable option to offer life skills education to open schooling students coming from different cultural and social settings and backgrounds. Following this approach, present paper mainly discusses about: promises offered by mobile phones for life skills education; possibilities for using mobile phones as an effective, efficient and economical option for offering life skills education; and potential strategies to offer mobile phones supported life skills education to open schooling students.

Keywords: Mobile phones, open schooling students, life skills education, M-learning Strategies

BACKGROUND

Life skills education is a concept which originated in thinking about training and education about skills and competencies that an individual needs for sustaining and enriching life (Bender, 2002). At the heart of life skills education is the learning of life skills. Life skills are abilities for adaptive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. In particular, life skills are a group of psychological competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and curatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner' (WHO, 2001, p.8). The ten core life skills as laid down by WHO (1997) are: *Self-awareness, Empathy Critical thinking, Creative thinking, Decision making, Problem Solving, Effective communication, Interpersonal relationship, Coping with stress, and Coping with emotion.*

Life skills are developed as a result of a constructive processing of information, impressions, encounters and experiences, - both individual and social - that are a *part of one's daily life and work* and the rapid changes that occur *in the course of one's life*. The social dimensions are particularly important as they condition life itself and compel individuals to purposefully acquire skills, develop attitudes and values in order to face and master real life situations (Ouane 2002). Considering these benefits, countries are now considering the development of life skills education in response to the need to reform traditional education systems, which appear to be out of step with the realities of modern social and economic life. Problems such as violence in schools and student drop-out are crippling the ability of school systems to achieve their academic goals. Furthermore, in addition to its wide-ranging applications in primary prevention and the advantages that it can bring for education systems, life skills education lays the foundation for learning skills that are in great demand in today's job markets (WHO, 1999. p.2).

LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION TO STUDENTS: Purposes and Challenges

Initiatives to develop and implement life skills education has been undertaken in many countries around the world, although, these initiatives differ in nature and purpose. In Zimbabwe and Thailand the impetus for initiating life skills education was the prevention of HIV/AIDS. In Mexico, it was the prevention of adolescent pregnancy. In the United Kingdom, an important life skills initiative was set up to contribute to child abuse prevention, and in the USA there are numerous life skills programmes for the prevention of substance abuse and violence. In South Africa and Colombia an important stimulus for life skills education has been the desire to create a curriculum for education for life, called "Life Orientation" education in South Africa and "Integral Education" in Colombia (WHO, 1999, pp.1-2). In addition to help the individuals to adopt positive and protective behaviours, life skills education has been seen as empowering and enabling them to take more responsibility for their actions.

Life skill education is aimed to help the individuals in many ways, as observed by Francis (2007), "Life skill education is a value addition programme for the youth to understand self and able to assess their skill, abilities and areas of developments. Which also enable them to analyze their capacity to enhance the function in a most productive way. Life skill education allows the youth get along with other people, able to adjust with their environment and making responsible decision. Which also incorporate to build up their values and to communicate effectively." Regarding the psycho-social impact of life skills education, a report from UNICEF (2005, p.5) presents very interesting note, "The literature indicates that there is little evidence to suggest that teaching general life skills in school will lead to desired behaviours. Yet the literature on HIV prevention programming, which takes a life skills approach, shows that people can be taught to adopt and sustain desired behaviors if certain criteria are adhered to."

Across the globe, life skills education has been usually developed as part of a school initiative designed to support the healthy psychosocial development of children and adolescents. In other side, formal education system not always provides young people with good opportunities to become confident and realize their potentials.

Rather, young people who are not so successful in learning competition may lose their confidence and hopes for their future prosperities. For some people, education backgrounds and names of University enlarge future possibility and prosperity.

For many people, education background could become a lifetime complex (Miyazawa, 2011). In this back drop, the biggest challenge is to identify the best strategies for providing effective life skills education to those many children who never attend secondary school or reach an age of high vulnerability and risk taking behaviour in the years immediately before reaching secondary school (UNICEF, 2005). Mobile phones, recognized as one of the most used, easily available and economically viable communication devices in the world, can help a lot to promote this cause.

MOBILE PHONES FOR LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION: Promises and Possibilities

Mobile phones are used for a variety of purposes, including keeping in touch with family members, conducting business, and having access to a telephone in the event of an emergency. Beyond their utility as a technology of information exchange, cell phones have inserted themselves into the cultural fabric of societies across the world (Bell, 2006). An editorial from Heeks and Jagun (2007) suggests that mobile phones have brought three kinds of benefits. First, incremental benefits, improving what people already do-offering them faster and cheaper communication, often substituting for costly and risky journeys; Second, transformational benefits that offer something new, e.g. m-banking and m-commerce that are bringing enabling people to use mobile phones to pay for goods and services; and Third, production benefits that result from the creation of new livelihoods, not only through professional telecommunications jobs but also through activities like re-selling airtime or phone cards. Probably, they missed the fourth and foremost benefit of mobiles- offering educational services to millions of people at minimal cost (Misra, 2012).

The mobile learning (m-learning) value proposition, albeit underdeveloped, purports to extend the reach of learning opportunities to remote areas, thereby supporting the expansion of educational access. Mobile learning also enables an improvement in the quality of education by opening up new avenues for informal, personalized and situated learning. In addition, mobile learning can potentially promote social equity by allowing marginalized groups access to decision making (Isaacs, 2012). Looking at m-learning in a wider context, we have to recognize that mobile, personal, and wireless devices are now radically transforming societal notions of discourse and knowledge, and are responsible for new forms of art, employment, language, commerce, as well as learning. Cobcroft et al. (2006) suggest that m-learning can support the social construction of knowledge amongst learners by enhancing their critical, creative, collaborative and communicative engagement within the sites of application of knowledge.

Mobile markets across the globe are experiencing continued rapid growth. Considering the situation that in different parts of the world majority of the youths is having a mobile or will have a mobile soon, we can use mobiles to educate youths about life skills education.

This argument is based on the fact that m-learning has the potential to improve efficiency in the education sector and expand educational opportunities to underserved communities in remote areas. Depending on the context, m-learning can be useful in number of areas like expanding educational opportunities; increasing efficiency; enhancing quality of learning; enhancing quality of teaching; sustaining lifelong learning; facilitating skill formation; advancing community development; improving policy planning and management (Meleisea, 2005).

The findings from the "m-learning.org" project of European Union reveal that mobile helps learners to improve literacy and numerical skills, raises learner confidence; encourages independent and collaborative learning; and removes formality from the learning experience.

Talking about the possibilities of using emerging technologies for offering life skills education, International Youth foundation (2006) advocates, "Whether it be e-mail, the internet, digital cameras, video and audio-recording equipment, computer software, or mobile phones, technology can be a valuable asset in delivering life skills programs. Of particular benefit is that young people find working with such media exciting and creative. Today's technologies offer youth a means of expressing their views, of connecting with the wider community, and acquiring 'hard skills,' ranging from increased computer literacy to proficiency in operating a video camera. Other essential life skills developed through technology-oriented programs include self-confidence, communication, decision making, problem solving, and teamwork." Banking on this positivism, efforts of varied nature are taking place in different parts of the world to use technologies including mobiles for offering life skills education.

In Netherlands, Youth Press Agency (YPA) offers participants to create a video, a website, a radio broadcast, or a newspaper to explore issues ranging from homosexuality to careers to how community members coped during a major heat wave. The findings suggests that programme helped participants to work together to achieve a common goal. The Cámara! Programme in Mexico offers youth an opportunity to shoot videos focusing on the harsh realities e.g., poverty, crime, and pollution. One of the greatest benefits of the programme was engaging young people in the life of their communities and addressing the alienation experienced by youth who often feel marginalized in their societies. In U.S. a programme called Make a Connection Thru Art, makes it possible for young people to work with professional artists to create visual art and written works and share their final creations online and on CD and DVD. This programme has also helped them to experience, discuss, and learn from the works of their peers (International Youth Foundation, 2006).

Slowly more specific efforts are also taking place to use mobiles for life skills education. In South Africa, the Dr Life Orientation and Life Skills (LOLS) project uses mobile phones to provide advice and subject-support to learners and teachers of LOLS, a recognized subject in the South African school curriculum geared toward personal growth and social, intellectual and emotional development. LOLS topics include-HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, child abuse and study skills. The learners have reported that they gained technological and digital literacy skills related to mobile phone use and internet safety, as well as other life skills, through the programme. Participating teachers indicated in interviews that they learned more about the curriculum, improved their texting skills and overcame their fears of technology (CSIR, 2010). In India, a report from Centre for Women's Development and Research underlines that mobile are ideal and more effective than computers to reach out the rural adolescent girls to provide comprehensive sexuality education and life skill training to develop relevant skills needed to plan their career and life (Renuka, 2005).

Revealing about one such effort in Thailand, Miyazawa, (2011) observes, "The penetration of mobile phones in Thailand is high. If they are more than 18 years old, all of them literally have mobile phones. Some already have smart phones and spend considerable time in social networks.

We try to feature the 21st Century skills that have been advocated by the governments and private corporations as much as possible. To support young people to obtain these skills, we would like to take three main approaches. One is the daily mobile learning. Young people will receive interesting, useful and inspiring SMS messages on life skills /21st Century skills every day and night. They will keep them in their minds, think of them and create new questions with their curiosity. They are expected to respond with SMS from time to time.” These observations lead us to believe that m-learning with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence can be a viable option to offer life skills education to youths coming from different cultural and social settings and backgrounds.

USING MOBILE PHONES TO PROMOTE LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION AMONG OPEN SCHOOLING STUDENTS: Potential Strategies

A look on these past and present initiatives of using mobile establishes two things. First, it is practically possible to use mobile phones to transform the delivery of life skills education and training in as the obtained results are encouraging and promising. Second, all these initiatives are more or less country and context specific as none of them propagates to use mobile phones in wider perspective. Whereas, need of the hour that we must think out of the box and try to utilize the real potential and promise of mobile phones for life skills education. In this backdrop, following strategies that are based on the ‘affordable cost and reach to illiterate’ feature of mobile phones (Misra, 2011) can help a lot to open schooling institutions and agencies to promote life skills education among students.

Sending Mobile Alerts About Life Skills Based Audio Programmes

Mobile companies offer the facility of mobile alerts to their customers. Under this facility, companies alert their customers about special offers, latest events and other useful information. Open schooling institutions/agencies can use this feature of mobile services in a unique way. As first step, the institutions/agencies will be required to put different life skills based audio education programmes on institutional websites for live streaming or download. Afterwards, institutions/agencies may send mobile alerts to students detailing about nature, purpose and availability of programmes.

These mobile alerts and regular updates will especially help the students to listen life skills based audio education programmes as per their convenience and ease.

Distributing Life skills Based SMSs/MMSs

The other notable use of mobile will be to send ‘life skills based ‘SMSs/MMSs’ to students with a request to spread these SMSs/MMSs to other youths. These SMSs/MMSs will help to create awareness about life skills in youth community and this awareness will ultimately help them to join life skills movement for social and individual benefits. Open schooling institutions/agencies can also request youths to share their innovative and indigenous life skills practices with other students in the form of SMSs/ MMSs.

Broadcasting Life Skills Based Education Programmes on FM Channels

Students often use mobile for listening FM radio programmes. Banking on this tendency, the open schooling institutions/agencies can broadcast life skills based programmes like stories, drama, expert talks, discussion forums, etc. on FM channels.

The students of open schools may be informed and advised to learn from these programmes by sending mobile alerts. The students may also be motivated to record their own programmes on life skills education via mobiles and send them to FM radio stations for broadcast.

Establishing Life Skills Education Mobile Call Centres

Every mobile company has customer care centre to provide free of cost consultancy to their customers. Taking clue from this scheme, open schooling institutions/agencies can establish Life skills education centre via mobile network to provide consultancy and counseling to students. The interested students can contact these centers by using toll free numbers. This step will be helpful to improve the communication and awareness about life skills education among student community. Besides, these centres will also help students to put their queries and apprehensions about life skills education to experts without disclosing their identity.

Encouraging Students To Make Life Skills Based Video On Mobile

The best way to teach students about life skills education is to help them to learn from the experiences of others and their surroundings. To make this happen, open schooling institutions/agencies can ask the students to make mobile based videos related to different aspects of life skills. The students can also be encouraged to share these videos via MMSs. To promote this life skills videos making habit among students, open schooling institutions/agencies can run special training programme/courses for open schooling students. The institutions/agencies can also organize life skills based video competitions for open schooling students. These competitions will help the students to showcase their videos for use and benefit of other students.

Offering Life Skills Based Mobile Games

Students use mobile a lot to play games. This tendency of students can be exploited to promote life skills education among them. The open schooling institutions/agencies can develop different mobile based life skills games and put it on mobile platforms for free download. These games will help the students to understand and realize the importance of life skills education in their lives. Besides, everyday playing of these games will help the students to make life skills practices and habits a part of their life.

CONCLUSION

Talking about the challenges of promoting life skills education, UNICEF (2005, p.5) observes, "In South Asian schools, life skills are taught as a stand alone curriculum, a component of an existing curriculum (i.e. social studies), an extracurricular activity, or a blend of these....This is problematic given that many students in South Asia never attend secondary school and that many are vulnerable or are exposed to risks in the years prior to secondary school. It is also unfortunate that many in-school life skills programmes do not question the societal structures underlying the vulnerabilities and risks they seek to reduce, and have difficulties linking the development of knowledge, attitudes and life skills to the practice of positive and protective behaviours."

This observation clearly establishes that societies need to provide more information and opportunities about life skills education to students. The use of mobile offers immense possibilities to face this challenge. The researcher has a belief that adoption of proposed strategies by open schooling institutions/agencies will certainly be helpful to promote life skills education particularly among out of school students.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHOR



Dr. Pradeep Kumar MISRA is an Associate Professor (Educational Technology) in the Department of B.Ed./M.Ed., Faculty of Education and Allied Sciences of M. J. P. Rohilkhand University, Bareilly. His research specializations are Educational Technology, Teacher education and Lifelong Learning. Dr. Misra has received the prestigious Doctoral and Senior Researcher Scholarship of DAAD, Germany; European Commission's Erasmus Mundus Visiting Scholar Scholarship; and Postdoctoral Research Award of UGC. Dr. Misra was Visiting Scholar in Danish School of Education, Arhus University, Copenhagen in 2009 for International Masters in Lifelong Learning: Policy and Management Programme. He has to his credit a number of publications in these areas, authored a book 'Educational Television in Germany' and completed R&D Projects. Dr. Misra is also the founder member and Secretary of Society for Professional Development of Indian Teachers (SPDIT). His academic visits include- Germany, UK, New Zealand, Nederland, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, Vietnam, and Malaysia.

Dr. Pradeep Kumar MISRA
Associate Professor (Educational Technology)
Department of B.Ed./M.Ed., Faculty of Education and Allied Sciences,
M. J. P. Rohilkhand University, Bareilly (U.P.) -243006 INDIA
Email: pradeepkmisra@yahoo.com

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