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Creating engaging self-learning opportunities for out-of-school children in Sri Lanka: employing constructivist design principles for distance and open learning

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**CREATING ENGAGING SELF-LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR OUT-OF-
SCHOOL CHILDREN IN SRI LANKA:
EMPLOYING CONSTRUCTIVIST DESIGN PRINCIPLES
FOR DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

From

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

By

Nandawathie Wanniarachchi Kankanange

BEd (Hons), Dip in Social Studies), MEd, MPhil

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
2003

Certification

I, Wanniarachchi Kankanange Nandawathie, declare that this thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution

N. Wanniarachchi

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ABSTRACT

Education plays a vital role in improving people's quality of life and is an essential part of social and human development. Addressing the issue of access to quality education is a matter of urgency, and yet the formal education system has not tended to provide education for all. For out-of school children, therefore, distance and open learning methodologies have been adopted by developing countries as an alternative path to address their educational needs. The challenge is how to develop suitable programs and learning materials to motivate and engage learners to learn.

The purpose of this study was to investigate appropriate design principles for developing self-learning materials to promote learner motivation and engagement. The study was guided by a constructivist theoretical framework. Utilising a multiple case study approach and a naturalistic methodology the study was conducted in three phases. The process of data collection began by designing a training program concerning instructional design for course writers. This training program made the course writers aware of instructional design principles and assisted them to develop skills of writing self-learning materials embedded in constructivist theory. At the end of the training program the course writers tested the sample materials developed with a targeted group of out-of-school children. For both learning situations (course writers and children) the data were collected using multiple data gathering techniques and results were presented as individual stories of the course writers and children.

The overall findings have provided conclusive evidence that constructivist design principles do support the creation of active, constructive and meaningful learning and learner-motivated learning materials. The findings indicate that this type of material was practical and meaningful and students were excited when they were learning what they deemed relevant. The materials were able to engage the students in a continuing learning process and they were successful in integrating the whole environment (family, community members and peers) into students' learning, successfully providing multiple avenues and multiple resources for students' learning processes.

The findings provide practical implications for designing self-learning materials that relate to the learner's context and their real world problems. The important implication for the Sri Lankan context and indeed other contexts is that it is possible to design a new learning culture to promote flexible, cooperative, friendly learning environments that help to immerse the learners in a wider society.

The findings demonstrate that a constructivist learning environment introduced to the target groups a new path for experiencing enjoyable, interesting and exciting learning. The study indicates that a paradigm shift is possible in the design of out-of-school learning activities.

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