Professor Sugatra Mitra is the originator of the “Hole in the Wall” experiment, a computer project that has increased learning among children in some of the world’s poorest areas. The project began in 1999, when Mitra and colleagues installed a computer in a playground wall in Delhi, India, and left it there. Eight hours later, neighbourhood children, who had never seen a computer before and had no knowledge of the Worldwide Web, were surfing the internet. Over the ensuing decade, Mitra introduced the same methodology, which he calls minimally invasive education, across India, Cambodia and other regions with similar results.

From the initial “Hole in the Wall” experiment when a computer was embedded within a wall in Delhi slum for street children to experiment with, Professor Mitra has shown that groups of children can complete educational objectives by themselves, using the internet.

This is a very powerful discovery that helps us to rethink the transformative powers of learning and opportunity. Professor Mitra observed in the original “Hole in the Wall” experiment that children learnt well when there was an adult present who was able to give them encouragement. This then led to the use of “Skype Grannies” - a group of retired school teachers from the North East of England, who could talk to the children in rural villages in India, over the internet and encourage the development of their learning. In the example of Montevideo, Uruguay, Professor Mitra and colleagues have researched the positive influence of internet access for children in their learning environment. Experiments consisted of children attempting to answer ‘deep’ questions in groups, children trying to read beyond their expected levels in Spanish and English, and whether children would read better in groups than individually. The research suggests that children in groups can perform better at ‘hard’ problems than they can individually. They are also shown to be capable of researching effectively using the Internet. By 2012, teachers around the world were using these methods of Self-Organised Learning Environments to help children learn.
Professor Sugata Mitra aims to construct a physical and highly visible self-organised learning environment in a public space in Newcastle’s Science Central. The intention is to allow children from the NE to benefit from the SOLE approach, to demonstrate this to parents, teachers and the public, and to evaluate its success in this very different setting. This could be part of a wider facility for student (school and university) interaction with technologies and a place for teacher professional development, as well as exciting student learning opportunities. It would draw on the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences’ expertise and its extensive network of Enquiry Based teaching specialists. This constitutes an investment for the region for the long term, with good pedagogical knowledge underpinning the design of innovative technologies applied to learning in the STEM subjects. If successful, this might create a lasting legacy.

“Sugata started a movement that is changing how we think about education.”
Katrin Macmillan, CEO and founder of Projects for All

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