Afterthoughts

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Having read each other's papers, the two writers were invited to provide some afterthoughts:

Sugata Mitra
As Dr Arora observes, the Hole-in-the-Wall approach has shown that the absence of a teacher can sometimes encourage children to explore more'bravely' than they would in their presence. In our trials we have been exploring the limits of self-motivated and self-managed learning by the children. So yes, if we had involved teachers in the usage of these kiosks, they would have dictated the nature and pace of the learning, defeating the whole purpose of the project. However, as she again observes, institutional indifference may result in abdication of responsibility and lack of sustainability. We need a solution to this.

Unfortunately, the abandoned facility in Almora is not an isolated case.My book on *The Hole-in-the-Wall* (Mitra, 2006) documents the cases of other vandalised kiosks, the lessons learned from these and how such situations may be avoided. However, it is important to note that while the kiosk at the more affluent Almora was vandalised, the one in Hawalbagh, the poorer community, was not.

While Iwould agree that over the years the Hole-in-the-Wall approach has captured the world's imagination, I would not agree that it has 'triggered a romance which tells of learning free from the restrictions of formal schooling and children liberated through self-learning'.What ourwork has been concerned with is providing access to education for children in places where good schools do not exist and good teachers do not want to go. And we have found, as in this latest study, is that children are able to learn to use computers and the Internet on their own, irrespective of their social, cultural or economic backgrounds.

It is certainly incorrect to suggest that free access to outdoor-located PCs is all that is involved and that HiWEL aims for independence from schools. It sells its products to schools and hence locates its kiosks on school playgrounds. But more importantly, as our study and work with *some* shows, we are now endeavouring to establish whether the use of locally-recruited or online mediators can help to overcome some of the problems that Dr Arora has identified in these two central Himalaya communities. Dr Arora asks whether there is such a thing as *free learning*, and is it possible to escape schooling and more importantly, is it desirable? She also wonders whether placing of

computers in playgrounds may not only breed collaboration but competition and discrimination. In those locations where there are already schools, we also need to explore the relationship between the local or online mediators and classroom teachers. Conflict and confusion must be avoided and opportunities for collaboration and educational development encouraged. These are important research questions requiring further work.

Reference
Mitra, S. (2006). *The Hole in theWall: self-organising systems in education*. Noida, UP: Tata McGraw Hill.

Payal Arora
Iwould like to focus on just two aspects of the Kalikuppam experiment: the design of the experiment itself and the role of the mediator. The results achieved by these village children with the aid of the mediator were indeed impressive when compared with those in the high-performing private school. However, the village children had 75 days to engage with the material at the HiWEL learning station and I would like to know whether the children at the private school spent the same amount of time on the same material. Teaching and learning in such schools can be intensive, and what these findings do not reveal is what else the children in the private school learned within those 75 days. The claim that the village can match the private school's performance does not take into account what else and how much else was learnt by both sets of children within that same timeframe.

I would also be interested to learn about the kinds of incentives that can encourage a voluntary mediator such as 'Prerana' to persevere in this work for 75 days Also, about the amount of time she gave to this, how she managed to encourage and sustain the children over such a long period of time, how much of a 'teaching' and 'guiding' role she played and how her role and performance were perceived by the children and compared with that of their normal classroom teachers. It is important to bear in mind that the children coming to these learning kiosks also continued to be taught in the formal classroom.

If village children are to be the agents of their own learning, their capacity to tap into Internet-based, community and other learning sources is an important factor. This complicates the measuring of self- and ICT-based learning at the HiWEL stations against the learning in formal schools because it does not take into consideration other avenues for learning. Also, in self-directed learning, children may encounter inappropriate or inaccurate content, develop bad learning habits, and accept material uncritically. Sadly, there is also the danger of online predators. So some form of risk management is clearly needed here.I mention these points just to illustrate how much more research and analysis is needed to ensure that this approach achieves its expectations. Innovation without some failure is impossible and there is no taking away from the important pioneering work of Holein- the-Wall and HiWEL. As India and other emerging markets commit to providing technology in rural and remote areas, the issues we have both addressed in our papers can contribute to changing 'mindsets' in planners, schools, communities and most importantly,

the children themselves. It will be fascinating to see how this unique approach maintains and even rejuvenates itself in the face of new challenges.