

Full Length Research Paper

Building the capability of non-formal education teachers to develop a learning society for promoting lifelong education in Thailand

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This study aims to study Thai non-formal education teachers' perceptions of their opportunities to obtain knowledge about the learning society; identify the knowledge of non-formal education teachers need about the learning society which could be obtained through a distance learning package; and to develop and evaluate distance learning package on the learning society for the non-formal education teachers. The study sample was 264 non-formal education teachers in local areas from 24 district non-formal education and informal education centres in 12 provinces across the country. Research instruments were questionnaires and interviews. Data obtained were analysed by percentage, mean, standard deviation, and content analysis. Results of the study showed that the non-formal education teachers agreed that knowledge about the learning society was important for their work in promoting lifelong education for people. They strongly agreed that they needed knowledge and understanding about developing a learning society. The self-directed distance learning package on learning society was accepted by 10 experts in the field. Moreover, it was found that after the teachers had studied the distance learning package, their knowledge and understanding about the learning society was significantly higher. They were also highly satisfied with the printed media and the video cd (VCD) in the learning package.

Key words: Lifelong education, learning society, non-formal education teachers.

INTRODUCTION

In Thailand, the importance of lifelong education has been recognized since 1940 when the government established the Adult Education Division to provide non-formal and informal education for post-school-age people and adults. But the concept of lifelong education was officially introduced in the National Education Plan in 1977. This Plan stated that "education is a continuing

process through-out life" (Office of National Education Commission, 1977).

Later, in 1999, the National Education Act 1999 was promulgated. The Act proposed a lifelong education philosophy as a principle and a framework for organizing the whole education system of the country (Office of National Education Commission, 1999). The main aim for

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reforming education under this Act was to make concerted efforts to develop a truly workable lifelong learning process. Since then most of the plans and policies related to education have emphasised lifelong education. For example, the National Education Development Plan 2009 to 2016 (Office of National Education Commission, 2010) and the Proposals for the Second Decade of Education Reform 2009 to 2018 (Office of National Education Commission, 2009) have focused on lifelong learning for all. The National Education Development Plan 2016 to 2036 (Ministry of Education, 2017) has the vision to let all Thai people obtain quality lifelong education.

In light of this Education Act and the Plans it can be argued that lifelong education for every person is the goal of education of the country. In order to enable lifelong education in Thailand reach the designed goal: quality lifelong education for all, the government has encouraged all sectors to take part in organizing and promoting lifelong learning in every area of the country. Moreover, a number of strategies have been introduced. One among them is developing a learning society - enabling each community/society to become a learning community/society. The learning community/society can extend lifelong learning opportunities to reach all people in local areas of the country.

A number of educators have researched the learning society. For example, Smith (2000) stated that the concept of learning society is accepted worldwide. It focuses on human resource development through lifelong learning. Moreover, Candy (2005) concluded that the concept of learning city or learning society has been implemented in more than 300 cities in the world. It relies on the principle of lifelong learning and aims at developing the quality of life and living situation of people. According to the definitions and concepts provided by educators in the field, such as Edward (1997), Van Der Zee (2013), Raggatt et al. (2013), Choi (2003), Longworth (2006), Ahmed (2014) and Stiglitz and Greenwald (2015), it can be concluded that in a learning society/community, learning is employed as a main instrument for developing the individuals and the community as a whole. A learning society can be of any size - such as a city or a town or a community. In the learning society, people will recognize the necessity of lifelong education. Various kinds of learning activities are made available continuously within the community for every person to access them easily and conveniently.

Many countries in Europe, Asia and other regions have introduced and implemented the concept of learning society (Choi, 2003; Candy, 2005; Ahmed, 2014; Longworth and Davies, (014). For Thailand, the importance of the learning society has been raised within lifelong education for quite some time. When the National Education Development Plan 2016 to 2036 was promulgated in 2017, one of the objectives emphasized

the learning society. It aimed at developing Thai society to be a learning society, and an ethical, virtuous and united society and to promote collaboration from all to enable the country to reach the goal of sustainable development by following the philosophy of economic sufficiency. Therefore, in order to make this objective successful, the concept of learning society is needed to be implemented.

According to the National Education Plans and Policies mentioned earlier, every sector, whether government or non-government agencies and private sectors, are encouraged to provide lifelong education. However, the organization which has the main responsibility for this is the Office of Non-formal and Informal Education promotion (ONIE), under the Ministry of Education.

Within the Ministry of Education, the Office of Basic Education Commission is responsible for primary and secondary education for school age people while the Office of Higher Education Commission is responsible for higher education. The Office of Non-formal and Informal Education promotion is responsible for all out-of-school people, including youth who dropped out of formal education, working adults and the elderly. The number of out-of-school people is approximately 50 million out of a total population of 65 million.

Consequently, the ONIE has a very big responsibility and its duty is to provide lifelong education. The administration structure of the ONIE is: it has a head office within the Ministry of Education; at regional level, it has five regional non-formal and informal education centres across the country; within each region, there are about 20 to 25 provinces each with a provincial non-formal and informal education centre; within each province, there are about 10 districts, each with a district non-formal and informal education centre. The district centres can be regarded as the operational centres. Each has about 10 to 15 educators and teachers. The district centres can directly reach people in local areas across the country. At present there are 878 districts, 7,256 sub-districts and 75,032 villages across the country (Centre of Information Technology and Communication, 2017). If the teachers in each District of Non-formal and Informal Education Centre have knowledge and understanding about developing a learning society, they can assist their district to become a learning society or learning district. When every local district becomes a learning society or learning district, a variety of learning activities will be available to every group in the community. Finally, the goal of lifelong learning for all will be achieved.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were:

- (1) To study Thai non-formal education teachers' perceptions of their opportunities to obtain knowledge

about the learning society.

(2) To identify the knowledge of non-formal education teachers need about the learning society which could be obtained through a distance learning package.

(3) To develop and evaluate a distance learning package on the learning society for the non-formal education teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in three phases. Phase 1 included a document analysis and the field research for objectives 1 and 2. Phase 2 was the development of a distance learning package, and Phase 3 was the evaluation of the distance learning package.

Phase1: The document analysis and the field research to obtain data to achieve objectives 1 and 2.

The document analysis

The researcher studied the concepts, principles and guidelines for developing learning societies from related literature and research. Case studies of learning societies from other countries were also studied.

The field research for obtaining data to achieve objectives 1 and 2

The details of the field research were as follows:

Population and sample: The population for the study was the teachers of the district non-formal and informal education centers from every region of the country. For the sample, the researcher randomly selected 12 non-formal education (NFE) and informal education (IFE) provincial centres from each of the four regions of the country, three centres from each region. Each provincial centre usually looks after all the district centres within the province. Then from each provincial centre, two district centres were randomly selected which made the total of 24 district centres. After that, 11 teachers from each district NFE and IFE centre were randomly selected. Thus from 24 district centres, 264 teachers were identified. Research instruments were a set of questionnaires and interviews. Data were collected through the cooperation of the directors and staff of the sampled district centres. The researcher herself went to explain the research and distribute the questionnaires to the teachers in each district centre. In addition, one or two teachers from each district centre were interviewed. Data from the questionnaires were analysed by frequency, percentage, means and rank of order, and data from interviews were analysed by content analysis.

Phase 2: Developing a self-directed distance learning package on the learning society

The data from the document analysis and from the field study in Phase 1 were synthesized to construct the draft of a distance learning package on "developing a learning society" for the non-formal education teachers. The distance learning package was composed of printed materials or text-book, and a VCD. Then the researcher invited 10 experts in the field of lifelong education and

learning society to a seminar to validate and advise on the proposed distance learning package. Then the learning package was adjusted according to suggestions of the experts.

Phase 3: Evaluation of the self-directed distance learning package on the learning society

The researcher invited 50 non-formal education teachers from two district centres to study the learning package "developing a learning society". On the first day, all of them were oriented about how to do self-directed study with the distance learning package and did the pre-test at the district centre. Then they were given the distance learning package which was comprised of the printed text and the VCD to study on their own at home over two weeks. They then came back to the district centre to discuss the contents that they studied and ask questions. The resource person helped them with their questions. Then they did the post-test and answered the questionnaires about their satisfaction with the printed media and the VCD in the learning package. The data obtained from this phase were analyzed by frequency, mean, standard deviation, t-test and content analysis.

FINDINGS

There were four main findings from the study.

(1) Thai non-formal education teachers' perceptions of their opportunities to obtain knowledge about the learning society.

The study found that most of the teachers had heard about and obtained some information about creating a learning society but not in a lot of details. Most of them obtained this kind of knowledge from internet. They stated that detailed knowledge about the learning society was not yet available to them. They had not found any text-books or training on this topic. They all agreed that knowledge about the learning society was very important for people like themselves who work in the field of non-formal education, informal education or lifelong education as showed in Table 1. According to Table 1, the non-formal education teachers at the district centres agreed that the learning society was highly important to society ($\bar{X} = 4.08$ on the 5 point rating scale). All six individual items were rated at highly important to the participants too. On individual items it was found that "developing Thai society to become a learning society is a necessity" had the highest mean score ($\bar{X} = 4.19$). Next were the item "non-formal education administrators should have knowledge and understanding about the learning society" ($\bar{X} = 4.16$) and "non-formal education educators and teachers or all personnel should have knowledge and understanding about the learning society" ($\bar{X} = 4.11$).

(2) Identifying the knowledge of non-formal education teachers need about the learning society which could be

Table 1. Perception of non-formal education teachers toward the importance of a learning society.

The importance of learning society	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of agreement
Developing Thai society to become a learning society is a necessity	4.19	0.83	High
Non-formal education administrators should have knowledge and understanding about the learning society	4.16	0.94	High
Non-formal education educators and teachers or all personnel should have knowledge and understanding about the learning society	4.11	0.87	High
Personnel of NFE and IFE centres should take part in developing their communities to become a learning society	4.04	0.85	High
Personnel of NFE and IFE centres should be able to disseminate knowledge about the learning society to people in their community	3.98	0.95	High
Personnel of NFE and IFE centres should be able to encourage people in their communities to participate in creating a learning society/community	4.01	0.97	High
Average	4.08	0.90	High

Table 2. Content about the learning society needed by Non-formal education teachers.

Scope of contents needed	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of needs
Definitions of learning society	3.43	0.99	High
Relationship between learning society and lifelong education	3.64	0.96	High
The importance of learning society	3.65	0.92	High
Reasons for developing each society to be a learning society	3.74	0.91	High
Characteristics of a learning society	3.59	0.86	High
Size of a society to be able to become a learning society	3.64	0.89	High
Principles of learning society	3.62	0.95	High
Policies, laws or national development plans which relate to Learning Society	3.53	1.09	High
Process of developing a learning society	3.64	0.96	High
How to start developing a learning society	3.60	1.08	High
How to maintain a learning society	3.67	0.96	High
How to extend a learning society to other societies	3.63	0.94	High
The agencies responsible for creating a learning society	3.61	0.93	High
The role of the Non-formal and Informal education staff in developing a learning society	3.66	0.94	High
The role of local organizations in developing a learning society	3.65	0.87	High
Participation of local people in developing a learning society	3.73	0.87	High
Participation of networks in developing a learning society	3.72	0.88	High
Average	3.63	0.94	High

obtained through a distance learning package. The study found that the non-formal education teachers at district centres across the country reported that they had a high need to obtain knowledge about the learning society. The content about the learning society that they reported they need is presented in Table 2. According to Table 2, participants identified a wide range of content they had a high need to understand in order to develop a learning society (\bar{X} =3.63). Each individual item was rated as a high need. The item which reported the highest mean score was “reasons for developing each society to be a learning society”(\bar{X} =3.74). Next were: “participation of

local people in developing learning society” (\bar{X} =3.73), “participation of networks in developing learning society”(\bar{X} =3.72), “how to maintain learning society” (\bar{X} =3.67) and “process of developing learning society” (\bar{X} =3.64). Apart from the content required, the teachers were also asked about methods that they needed for obtaining knowledge about the learning society. It was found that they rated learning from a distance learning package as a high need (\bar{X} =3.77).

(3) The distance learning package on developing a

learning society for the non-formal education teachers was composed of printed media (or a document) as the main media and VCD as a supplementary media. The printed media (or a document) comprises of three units: Unit I basic knowledge about the learning society, Unit II principles and processes of developing a learning society, and Unit III developing a learning society for Thai society. The VCD provided examples of learning societies in addition to the content of the printed media. The distance of learning package was verified and accepted by the 10 experts in the field of lifelong education and distance education. The process of developing a learning society for Thai society proposed in the learning package, included 11 steps. They were: selecting a community, initiating and setting up a core group, expanding interests, identifying stakeholders and setting up a committee, conducting a needs assessment and developing a community plan, encouraging participation, organizing activities, approaching the target groups, managing follow-up and evaluation, publicizing the results, and creating a network.

Step 1 selecting a community: The community that will be developed to be a learning community can be a big or a small community such as village, sub-district, district, or province.

Step 2 Initiating and setting up the core group: This step included identifying the beginner or the key person(s). The key person should be the one who was respected and trusted by people in the community, such as the abbot, the head of the village, a local wise person or the elderly people. The core group usually consisted of the representatives of people and local agencies. For example, a representative of the village committee, elderly people, women's group, young people, occupational groups, and related agencies in the community.

Step 3 Expansion of interests: The core group promoted knowledge and understanding about the learning society/community to people in the community through various channels. This aimed at helping people to understand and accept this idea so that they would participate in developing their community into a learning community.

Step 4 Searching for stakeholders and setting up a committee: The core group searched for those who could help to develop a learning community. Stakeholders included representatives of the village committee, local organizations, private agencies, the religious sector, local schools, and the local wise people.

Step 5 Conducting needs assessment and developing the community plan: At this step, the committee, which included the core group and the stakeholders, analysed the situation, and identified the needs of people in the community by comparing them with the social and environmental changes that were affecting them. They

then developed the community short-term plan and a long-term plan.

Step 6 Encouraging participation of stakeholders: According to the community plan, each stakeholder analyzed their own capacity in order to identify the kind of support they could provide. Moreover, people participation was strongly encouraged.

Step 7 Organizing learning activities: Since learning is the main tool for developing a learning community, the learning activities provided need to be able to be continued as a lifelong process, to be flexible, accessible and be varied to serve people's different needs.

Step 8 Approaching the target groups: The organizers used a variety of methods to approach and invite people in the community to participate in learning activities.

Step 9 Following up and evaluation: The organizers followed up and evaluated the activities to identify the advantages and the problems in order to improve them. Moreover, lessons learned from other learning communities could be used to improve the activities.

Step 10 Publicizing the results: The results or the outputs from the learning community should be publicized throughout the process. This would help people to understand and accept the significance of the learning community. The participation rate could then be increased.

Step 11 Creating a network: Creating a network with other learning communities can enable learning exchange, sharing and supporting among them. Moreover, the chance of creating new learning communities across the country is increased.

(4) Result from the evaluation of the distance learning package on the learning society for the non-formal education teachers: The evaluation was conducted by letting 50 non-formal education teachers from two district centres studied the learning package for two weeks. The results showed that their post-test score ($\bar{X} = 9.83$) was statistically significantly higher than the pre-test score ($\bar{X} = 5.81$). Moreover, the non-formal education teachers were highly satisfied with both the printed media, in the aspects of clearness, understandable and usefulness of the contents ($\bar{X} = 4.16$) and the VCD, in the aspects of content and presentation ($\bar{X} = 4.20$).

DISCUSSION

Developing every community, village or local society as a learning society is an important part of extending lifelong learning opportunities to all Thai people. To achieve this, it is necessary to have a suitable coordinator for each learning society. The non-formal education educators/teachers who work at the district centres

across the country could take this role. This is because they work very closely with people in every local and rural area, such as sub-districts and villages. If these educators/teachers understand the process of developing a learning society, they could encourage all sectors, especially local people in their community, to take part in creating a learning society. This study was carried out to develop a self-directed learning package about the learning society for the non-formal and informal education teachers.

The results of the study showed that the distance learning package was accepted by the 10 experts in the field of lifelong education and distance education. Moreover, after 50 non-formal education teachers studied the learning package, it was found that their post-test score was statistically significantly higher than their pre-test score. The non-formal education teachers were also highly satisfied with the printed media and the VCD provided in the package.

According to the results of the study, it can be argued that the distance learning package developed is suitable to use for upgrading the knowledge of the non-formal education teachers across the country. This is because the researcher followed the principles of constructing a distance learning package developed by a number of educators such as Sookpredee (2004), Brommawong (1998) and Brommawong et al. (2008). The principles for developing a distance learning package include five steps:

- (1) Identifying needs of the target groups;
- (2) Studying the existing knowledge of the target groups;
- (3) Developing curriculum by using information from 1 and 2;
- (4) Constructing a distance learning package;
- (5) Evaluating the learning package.

For the content in the distance learning package, especially the content on the principle and process of developing learning society, this study proposed a process which has 11 steps. The principle and the proposed process are similar to those proposed by a number of educators such as McCullough et al. (2003), Sungsri (2009), Cisco (2010), Longworth and Osborne (2010) and Ahmed (2014). Although each of them proposed a different number of steps the details were quite similar. From these studies it can be concluded that the process of developing learning society includes the following main steps: identifying the beginners; extending knowledge and understanding; setting up objectives; setting up a committee, searching for stakeholders; planning activities; administering activities; evaluating; publicizing; and creating a network.

The author argues that, with the appropriate administration and application of this distance learning package, non-formal education teachers would have the

capabilities needed to help develop a learning society in their community. They would be able to assist people in their community to transform that community into a learning community or learning society. Then lifelong learning for all in Thailand would be able to be achieved.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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