

# An Interview With Muriel Visser

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**T**exting, Facebook, Twitter, Blogging, Blackboard, Wikis, the Internet! How can we fathom education and especially distance education without this technology? In several parts of the world, though, educators are still changing the lives of many without some or all of these tools. I had the great opportunity to interview Muriel Visser, an international expert in distance education and curriculum design who often develops and implements change and hope with minimal or no technology.

Since 1990, Visser has been involved in the development and implementation of educational training material for many

world organizations, including the Ministry of Education of Mozambique, The United Nations Children's Fund, Finnish Development Organization, Danish International Development Agency, and other organizations throughout the world. Visser's current work is developing international guidelines and toolkits for HIV/AIDS workers in all sectors to help them offer better educational opportunities to international communities being devastated by this pandemic.

Visser and I communicated through e-mail because of our great distance. I researched much of her written material and focused my questions on her work and research on implementing HIV/AIDS education into the curricula and also her work in distance education in remote communities.

Lack of technology and political interference have always been hurdles in Visser's work, but her perseverance has developed great strides in HIV/AIDS prevention and distance education programs being implemented. While we are desperate to find a wireless signal, she has supported a local nongovernmental organization in Mozambique develop a program for over 10,000 children, whom, with the use of radio and study guides, have been able to achieve an upper primary education. This program is still in place and expanding. In some cases, students are even receiving texts on their cell phones (today cell phones are becoming widespread even in poor countries) to remind them of assignments and other snippets of information. Although Visser



says the decision makers in the African government (Ministry of Education, etc.) remained convinced that distance education is a measure of last resort, it's apparent that her work is offering hope and opportunities.

In Visser's research and articles (many are located at <http://www.learndev.org/>) you can see that the impact she was hoping for hasn't been achieved and there is frustration in the results. I asked her about the great obstacles that she battles in finding solutions in Africa for the education of HIV/AIDS and if distance education has achieved its potential.

**BEDFORD:** Where do you see distance education in Africa in 5 years?

**VISSER:** I am not sure distance education will be that much further in Africa in five years. We must also not forget that distance education often requires a substantial upfront investment (although afterwards the cost is often lower than conventional delivery) and that many countries don't have the resources to make these kinds of investments—e.g., in Mozambique 96% of the education budget goes to teacher salaries!

There is still too little political commitment to distance education and too strong a belief that children and adults can only learn if they are in a classroom, in front of a teacher, receiving information. Unfortunately in many (developing) countries, ministers of education are politically appointed and don't necessarily have a background in education. This underscores, I believe, the importance of doing much more research into distance education programs. It also implies much greater efforts in reflecting on what learning really means and how it can be achieved (just think about how much we learn—in a less structured manner—from surfing on the Internet).

Although Africa is struggling with the HIV/AIDS pandemic there has been some progress in other countries involving the

integration of HIV/AIDS education into the curriculum. This progress has helped Visser to develop the toolkit for other countries in developing similar education. I asked Visser to explain the process of the training program and the constraints she has encountered.

**VISSER:** There has been a lot of progress, particularly in countries with generalized HIV epidemics. Some good examples include Kenya, Namibia, and South Africa. The most successful cases have been where teachers are given substantial training (a week or longer) and where this training includes strategies for dealing with "difficult to teach content" such as sexuality and talking about condoms. This includes getting teachers to explore their own feelings about sex and their own sexual behavior. The advantage of this strategy is that they become more comfortable with talking about these issues, more knowledgeable, and they also become aware of the fact that HIV is something that can affect everyone (and not just something abstract), which increases their commitment to doing something about it. In some of these contexts, some very successful teacher resources have been developed, focusing on interactive pupil-centered materials. Also successful has been the use of drama and music in schools as a way of getting the messages across, as well as the use of peer educators. The peers were students themselves who then receive specific peer training. In Kenya, for example every school is required to have an AIDS club where students can talk to a trained peer about issues related to HIV/AIDS.

So, yes some progress has been made but there are still a lot of constraints, just to mention a few:

- Teacher training does not consistently include a component on HIV/AIDS and sexual reproductive health, so a lot of in-service training has to be done, which is expensive and more difficult to put in place.

- The focus of the teaching is too often still very academic—teaching the theory of the problem, but not the practical issues.
- Teachers still engage in selective teaching, meaning they teach what they feel comfortable with, and this is usually not the part that relates to issues of sexuality or of condoms. This is related to a lack of consistent support from their supervisors.

The conclusion is that it is not sufficient to train the teachers. School directors, school inspectors and senior education managers also need to be trained so they can encourage and support this important work that teachers are doing.

**BEDFORD:** How far back do you think your work in educating people on AIDS/HIV was put by the Pope's comments on condoms?

**VISSER:** Unfortunately, people's behavior in general is not very rational (just look at how many people smoke even though they know it is bad for them). So the Pope's comments were—to put it mildly—extremely unhelpful. And in Africa and Latin America, where large numbers of people are Catholic, his words will have had a major impact.

**BEDFORD:** What is your current research?

**VISSER:** For the past 5 years I have been working as a consultant with many different development agencies, mostly on HIV prevention in the education sector. Your question is very pertinent because in spite of my best intentions, I have not recently been involved in much research. Most of the work that I do is in developing guidelines for people who work on HIV/AIDS and education issues, doing case studies, and also lots of evaluation work. Here are the links to some of my recent work:

- <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001566/156673e.pdf>

- <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001627/162723e.pdf>

**BEDFORD:** If you could have one wish for the implementation and success of one of your programs in distance education that never reached fruition what would it be? What program has given you the most satisfaction? The most success?

**VISSER:** In the mid 1990s I was working with my father on a very innovative program, "Learning Without Frontiers," which aimed at creating learning opportunities using a variety of different media. Unfortunately, it got ensnared in a political fight and the funding never was made available to put the design into practice. You can read more about the LWF initiative at: [http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/lwf/lwf\\_docs.html](http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/lwf/lwf_docs.html)

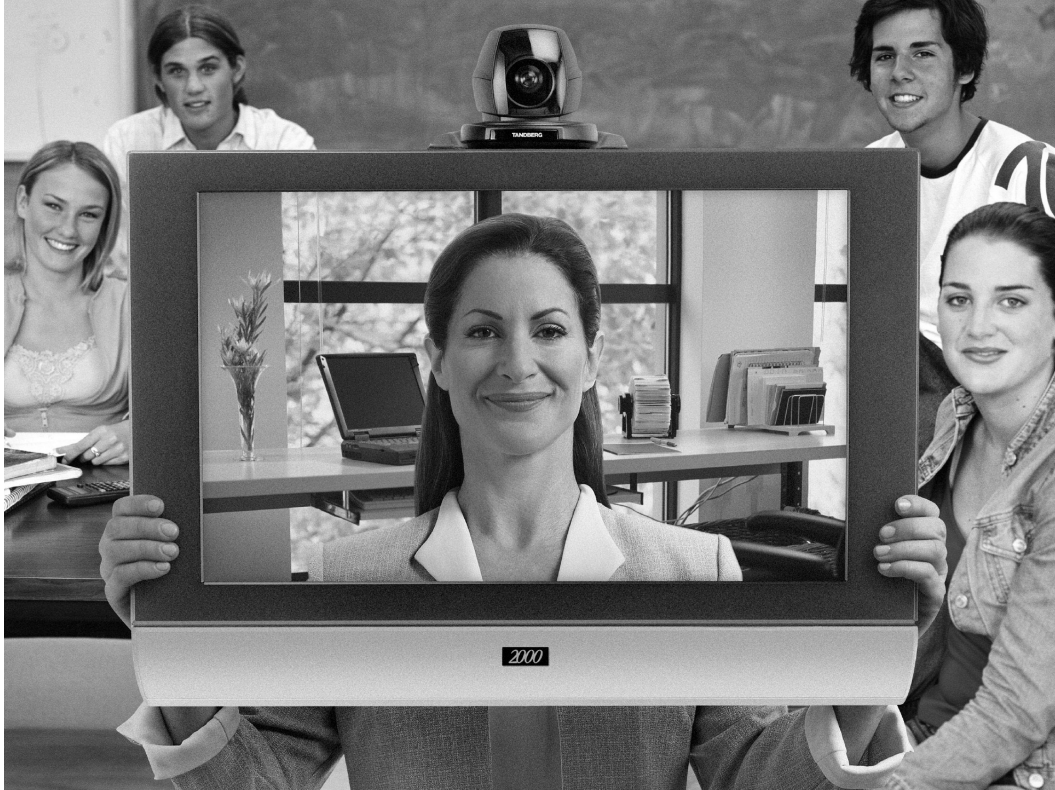
**BEDFORD:** If you were offered the opportunity to do any project no matter the size, scope or budget what would it be?

**VISSER:** I would most certainly focus on training of senior managers on the importance of addressing HIV/AIDS, gender, and sexual reproductive health through their policies and practices.

## SUMMARY

The Internet is a great tool, but what I realized is that discussing the issues with the author of the research brings a much greater depth and understanding of the subject and the material. What truly surprised me was how Visser's answers were able to convey not only pride but also the frustration in trying to not only bring education but understanding to a community.

Visser has dedicated much of her work helping with the development and implementation of distance education programs to communities that would otherwise not have an opportunity of learning. Her work has offered change and hope and her current research will lay a framework for the future of educating about AIDS/HIV.



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