

Learning: Our Common Wealth



Millennium Lecture

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be with you and a privilege to give this Millennium Lecture. The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation is world renowned and your founder and chairman, Professor Swaminathan, is revered around the globe. It is an honour to be giving this address, which is partly about alleviating poverty and hunger, in the presence of the father of the Green Revolution. My institution, the Commonwealth of Learning, learned much by working with this Foundation on the application of information and communication technologies to the challenge of literacy, so I have been greatly looking forward to this visit.

May I also say that I am honoured by the presence with us of Professor Kalundaiswamy, whom I first knew when he was Vice-Chancellor of IGNOU. IGNOU is one of India's great success stories in the last twenty years and I am pleased that Professor Kalundaiswamy continues to promote distance learning as chairman of the Tamil Virtual University project.

The title of my remarks today is Learning: Our Common Wealth. This is a play on words. My institution, the Commonwealth of Learning, received its name serendipitously. Back in the 1980s there was concern that the physical mobility of students between Commonwealth countries had decreased substantially. This was because higher fees in the richer countries made access to their universities more difficult for students from poorer countries. The Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility could see no immediate prospect either of reversing the policies of higher fees for foreign students, or of raising sufficient scholarship funds to compensate for it. It concluded that if you could not move the students overseas to the courses, then you should move the courses overseas to the students.

To examine this idea further the Commonwealth set up a group chaired by social historian Lord Asa Briggs. The Briggs Report, published in 1987, had the title Towards a Commonwealth of Learning. The Report did not intend this to be the name of a new institution. It had called for the creation of a University of the Commonwealth for Cooperation in Distance Learning. The Commonwealth Heads of Government reviewed this report when they met in Vancouver in 1987. Their communiqué talked about promoting cooperation in distance education, about the creation of a university and college network for distance education and about the need to attract more funds, concluding that 'once sufficient resources were available it might be possible to proceed with the University of the Commonwealth'.

As a first step, however, they decided to create the Commonwealth of Learning. Your former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had a major influence on this decision. Not only did he argue persuasively for the importance of distance education, he also pledged that India would make a significant contribution to the budget of the new institution in hard currency. That contribution continues to this day and India has been a member of the board of the Commonwealth of Learning since its inception.

It would be unfair to say that the model for the University of the Commonwealth in the Briggs Report was an institution beaming courses by satellite from a single point to the rest of the Commonwealth, but there was an element of such thinking. However, this concept of a satellite University of the Commonwealth was never implemented because, once the Heads of Government had given their approval in principle to the Commonwealth of Learning, a planning committee was set up. A new set of players then came on stage from the developed countries.

I declare an interest because I was one of those players. I was then president of Ontario's Laurentian University and accepted an invitation to chair the planning group. The representation on the planning committee from the developing countries was similar to that of the Briggs' Group, including, in the case of India, the towering figure of G. Ram Reddy, the founding vice-chancellor of the Indira Gandhi National Open University. He was assisted by Abhimanyu Singh, whom I worked with again at UNESCO over the last few years, where he was a wonderful colleague.

However, the developed donor countries fielded new teams to the planning committee. University representatives had played a major role in the Briggs Group but now, as planning began in earnest, the international development agencies, AusAID, CIDA and DfID, appeared on the scene. This was because the funds to create and operate the new organisation were earmarked from their budgets. The great virtue of the international development agencies was to bring to the planning committee a clear world view. That view espoused two principles in particular.

The first was that development was not about giving people fish but about teaching them to fish. The second was deep scepticism about the application of western technological solutions in the developing world. The upshot was that the notion of a university in the north beaming courses by satellite to the south was quashed. It was replaced by the concept of an agency that would help developing countries to build an indigenous capacity for open and distance learning in order to answer their most pressing educational and training needs, whether at university level or not.

That is what the Commonwealth of Learning does today and I believe that it does it effectively. Over the last fifteen years COL has helped many Commonwealth countries to develop policies, institutions, systems and applications of open and distance learning that are serving them well. India has in the last ten years become the world leader in the application of distance learning at scale and COL is now helping to transfer Indian know-how and technology to the rest of the Commonwealth.

I shall come back to the work of the Commonwealth of Learning later. For now, let me simply comment that I find its name very evocative. Learning is indeed our common wealth and your Foundation, MSSRF, is doing excellent work to share that wealth more widely and to create more of it. I particularly admire the approach that you are taking to your Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre, namely to be top-down in your approach to technological connectivity, but bottom-up in relation to content and knowledge management.

In this lecture I shall begin by asking whether humankind shares a common universe of thought. Finding the answer in the negative, I shall reflect briefly on the evidence that Asians and Westerners think differently and conclude that these differences enrich humankind.

I shall then dwell briefly on development and the role of learning in development, something that is very close to the preoccupations of this foundation. This will lead me, appropriately since this is a Millennium Lecture, to note that the Millennium Development Goals, which are a particular expression of our aspirations to improve the lot of humankind, require a massive increase in human learning.

How can we achieve the expansion in the scope and scale of human learning that attaining these Millennium Development Goals requires? I shall explain why the approaches, techniques and principles that we call open and distance learning provide a powerful response to that question.

Finally, I shall show how the Commonwealth of Learning is attempting to apply open and distance learning to each of the Millennium Development Goals. One of our programmes involves close cooperation with institutions in this state of Tamil Nadu.

The Geography of Thought

My title claims that learning is our common wealth. I start from the premise that the use of human reason, and the knowledge that flows from it, is the key to enabling all people to live healthy, decent and free lives. Clearly, the chance for a good life does not depend on knowledge and learning alone. Many other factors set a context which may be more or less favourable to the enhancement of our lives as individuals and collectivities. Political decisions set the legal frameworks of our countries, trading arrangements influence our economic opportunities, war and terrorism limit our security, and the behaviour of other countries can harm our living environment. Whatever the context, however, learning, knowledge and thought are important. Indeed, the more difficult the context in which we live, the more important they are.

Thought is important, but is it universal? All people think, but do they think in the same way? Without having reflected deeply on the matter I had tended to assume that everyone perceives and reasons in much the same way. In other words I was a universalist, believing that we all have the same cognitive processes and that reasoning depends on the use of logic.

A recent book, *The Geography of Thought* by Richard Nisbett, has made me revisit those assumptions. Nisbett, who is a psychologist, records the day when a Chinese student said to him: "the difference between you and me is that I think the world is a circle, and you think it is a line". The student then added: "The Chinese believe in constant change, but with things always moving back to some prior state. They pay attention to a wide range of events; they search for relationships between things; and they think that you can't understand the part without understanding the whole. Westerners live in a simpler, more deterministic world; they focus on salient objects or people instead of the larger picture; and they think they can control events because they know the rules that govern the behaviour of objects".

This exchange led Nisbett, who had previously held universalist views about the nature of human thought, to conduct a long programme of research comparing the ways that western people and East Asian people perceive the world and think about it. I shall not try to summarise his results here. Suffice it to say that the differences in philosophy and politics observable between ancient Greece and ancient China are still alive and well today.

The Greek concept of nature, for example, as the universe minus human beings and their culture, arose in no other civilisation. We also have from the Greeks the notion of objectivity, which actually arises from subjectivity because the more we distinguish between the different ways that individuals represent the world, the more we have to focus on what exists independently of these individual representations. Such perspectives contrast with the Chinese emphases on the group, on relationships and on interdependence, which lead them to a more relativist view of the world.

Nisbett found that westerners and East Asians continue to think in these different ways. His main focus in Asia was on China, Japan and Korea, so I leave you to consider how India fits into this spectrum of modes of thought. In one experiment that did compare Indians and westerners he found that Indians, like Chinese, tend to interpret events in terms of context whereas westerners explain them through individual personalities and dispositions. But elsewhere Nisbett groups the thinking processes of Indians, and indeed of the whole Commonwealth, with the West.

The countries of the Commonwealth are indeed united, in their diversity, by great common bonds, which you can express as the three 'L's' of law, language and learning. These shared traditions of law, language and learning make collaboration in the Commonwealth particularly natural and fruitful. However, I leave you to reflect on how much these countries actually think alike.

An important question for the future is whether civilisations and modes of thought are converging or diverging. One answer, articulated by Francis Fukayama, is that history has ended as the whole world has converged on democratic forms of government and market economies. The opposite view, argued by Samuel Huntington, is that different world views are beginning to produce a clash of civilisations. As you

reflect on that I make two observations.

First, we must not confuse modernity with western values. Japan has been modern for a long time but remains profoundly un-western. Second, where I live in Vancouver, Canada I see neither convergence nor divergence but blending. Vancouver is a great multi-ethnic city where no one group is in the majority. But there is a great sharing of traditions. Most of the people going to yoga are not Indians and many of the people using Chinese medicine are not Chinese. In this respect I see Vancouver as a model for a future in which different cultures and modes of thought will blend and enrich each other. It may be no accident that Vancouver is consistently rated by the United Nations as one of the world's most liveable cities.

Open and Distance Learning for Development

This notion of the blending and mutual enrichment of modes of thought is important as we turn to role of open and distance learning in development. What do we mean by development? Here at the M.S.Swaminathan Foundation you know far more than I do about the principles and practice of development so let me just say that I am inspired by Amartya Sen's definition. This distinguished Nobel Laureate describes development as the enhancement of freedom. A nation develops by increasing the freedoms that its people enjoy. He adds that freedom is not only the aim of development, but also the means by which it is reached. People, acting as free agents, are the most effective drivers of development.

What freedoms are we talking about? World leaders, meeting at the United Nations in 2000, set eight Millennium Development Goals that aim to transform the condition of humankind in the 21st century. These goals are now guiding the policies of governments and the priorities of development agencies. Achieving the MDGs will require a massive expansion of human learning. Traditional methods of education and training cannot address the scope and scale of the task. Technology has already revolutionised other areas of human life and the world must now harness it to education and training. Open and distance learning is the key to achieving such a revolution.

The Iron Triangle

Throughout history educators have been constrained by what I call the iron triangle. Our aim must surely be to make quality education, training and opportunities for learning available to all people at low cost. You can imagine this as a triangle defined by the vectors of access, quality and cost.

Unfortunately, with conventional methods of teaching, the triangle becomes an iron triangle, a straitjacket or, at best, a zero-sum game. If you increase access by putting more people in each class people will accuse you of lowering quality. If you simply add classrooms and teachers costs will go up steeply. Most approaches to raising quality also increase cost, and so on. We have become so used to accepting these constraints that we have allowed an insidious link to develop in our minds between quality and exclusivity. You can't have quality in education unless you exclude many people from it. That is why, at the beginning of the third millennium, Education for All is still the key development challenge.

The good news is that we can now break the iron triangle. Open and distance learning, using the mass media, has created a revolution. With the mass media big is beautiful. You can operate at large scale with high quality and low costs. The most celebrated pioneer in harnessing the mass media to higher education was the UK Open University, which reshaped the triangle by acting on all three vectors: access, cost and quality.

At its creation in 1969 the Open University immediately became the largest university in Britain. When it celebrated its 25th anniversary there were more students in the Open University alone, some 150,000, than there had been in all UK universities combined in the year that the creation of the university had been announced. Cost studies conducted by the UK government show that, however the calculations are done, the total cost of an Open University degree is substantially less than in conventional institutions. Regarding quality, the most recent independent rankings of the quality of the teaching programmes in UK universities put the Open University in 5th place out of 100 institutions.

Here in India you have taken that revolution to new heights. IGNOU now has 13 lakhs of students and some of the state open universities are doing well too. I am not saying that success is automatic, it never is, but the ingredients of a revolution are now available to competent educational revolutionaries.

Interaction and independence: getting the mixture right

However, I would leave out an important part of the story if I gave you the impression that open and distance learning simply takes advantage of the economies of scale of the mass media. Part of the motivation for the creation of the UK Open University was a desire to improve the quality of university teaching. That required people contact. The objective was to break with the legacy of poor correspondence education that abandoned students to struggle and drop out on their own. This led the Open University to develop extensive and intensive student support services, to help them with both the academic aspects of their courses and with the novelty of being distance learners.

Student support is inherently more labour intensive than using the mass media to allow students to learn independently. It requires people and does not have the same potential for economies of scale. Therefore the fundamental dilemma in designing a distance learning system is to get a good balance between using the media so that students can learn independently and using tutors so that they can be well supported.

That balance has to be right in economic terms, in pedagogical terms, in cultural terms and in terms of convenience for the student. Too much personal support, such as meetings and other timetabled events, can put constraints on students that make learning less open as well as more expensive. On the other hand too much reliance on media and independent learning can undermine the student's motivation. My earlier reflections on the geography of thought are relevant too, because the optimal balance of independence and interdependence also depends on the cultural context.

The successful open universities have got this balance right, and their success has inspired developments at other levels of education. Your National Institute of Open Schooling is a good example. I am sure that the NIOS would not yet claim to have achieved the quality to which it aspires in the long run. However, at

the Commonwealth of Learning we can see that this too is a revolution and other Commonwealth countries are asking for our help so that they too can benefit from India's pioneering work.

ODL and the Millennium Development Goals

A key question, for both your Foundation and for COL, is what contribution can open and distance learning make to Millennium Development Goals. At COL we have analysed the targets behind each goal in order to determine where ODL can have the most leverage. Let me share our conclusions and inform you briefly about COL's work

Poverty and Hunger

The first Millennium Goal is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, specifically to halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who suffer from hunger. What are the critical obstacles to the attainment of this goal? At COL we consider that fighting hunger and sustaining a liveable environment means empowering millions of farmers and smallholders and giving the masses in the rural areas of the world more control over their lives.

There is a real divide to bridge here. Many organisations conduct research on agriculture and try to share the results. The Green Revolution, which Dr Swaminathan initiated, is the most notable advance of our generation in this regard. In helping people to take advantage of revolutions such as that one the most difficult bridge to cross is the last mile to the individual farmer. This is not just a matter of packaging information in an attractive way, such as through a radio soap opera, and pushing it at the farmers. Communication must operate in two directions, so the first step is to help farmers and smallholders define their own needs. Step two is to enable agricultural extension workers, through dialogue, to match these needs to real possibilities. Technology can help to scale up this process.

The Commonwealth of Learning will be working with institutions here in Tamil Nadu to put these ideas into practice. The Tamil Nadu Open University could play a major role in converting the knowledge base into distance learning materials. The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University and the Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Science University, with their vast experience in agriculture and animal husbandry, can help provide knowledge that is rooted in the local circumstances of the villages. Anna University with their excellence in Technical Education could help in promoting IT and Community Radio as a tool for massive social and economic transformation. The horizontal transfer of knowledge is a crucial aspect of the project and we hope that this Swaminathan Foundation can play a major role here, not least through its National Virtual Academy for Food Security and Rural Prosperity.

I myself am particularly excited by idea of linking this project with the greater availability of rural credit through the State Bank of India. Learning and knowledge will be much more effective if we can also create a more helpful environment for the farmers. C.K.Prahalad and Stuart Hart have done a service by urging large banks and businesses to get more involved in the rural areas of the developing world, noting that ICTs allow such organisations dramatically to reduce the transaction costs of such involvement with rural ICT kiosks.

All this is to say that an important part of COL's future programme is riding on the outcome of our project here in Tamil Nadu. If we can make this work we shall have created a model that can make a notable contribution to the eradication of poverty and hunger around the world.

Primary Education

The second Millennium Development Goal is to achieve universal primary education so that by 2015 all boys and girls complete primary school. This is the most fundamental of the goals because development is freedom and education is the royal road to freedom. Few would argue that open and distance learning has a major role in the primary education of children. But it has a crucial role in removing the major bottleneck to the achievement of universal primary education, which is the training and retraining of tens of millions of teachers.

There are 20 million teachers in the Commonwealth. Many of them need further training to be effective. Millions of new teachers must be recruited and trained as countries seek to expand education with a teaching force that is shrinking through retirement, migration and AIDS. ODL has already proven its effectiveness for training teachers in many countries. The divide we have to bridge is to equip existing teacher training institutions and individual teacher educators to deploy these methods and to network themselves into professional communities. In this context one of our projects at COL is the formulation of pan-Commonwealth quality assurance indicators for teacher education. That work is starting here in India.

Gender

The third Millennium Development Goal addresses gender disparities, the first aim being to eliminate disparities between boys and girls in primary and secondary school by next year. The second, more demanding, goal is to achieve gender equality, meaning equality of outcomes, by 2015.

COL is working to bridge the gender gap in the use of ICTs and we much admire the work of your Foundation in that area. One of the challenges here is a knowledge divide. Using its advanced expertise in knowledge management, COL maintains a virtual library of resources and documents on gender equity that has been developed in collaboration with the Forum of African Women Educationalists. You can find it at www.colfinder.org/dev.

Health

The next three Millennium Development Goals are all concerned with health. First, to reduce infant mortality by two-thirds in the next ten years; second, to reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth in the same period; and third, to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria in particular. The achievement of such goals depends on the improvement of health services. However, it also depends - at least as much - on making it possible for people to learn how to avoid disease and how to keep themselves and their children healthy.

This means giving them access to information that they can understand: not just because it is presented in their own language, but because it is rooted in their culture - even if it challenges some of the habits of that culture. Here again we must be aware of the diverse geography of thought. The best way to reflect local modes of thought is to equip and train people to produce the health messages themselves.

That is what the Commonwealth of Learning is doing through its partnership with the World Health Organisation. We train local WHO representatives to expand the impact of their work by using the techniques of distance education and work with NGOs. COL has, for example, equipped and trained an NGO in Kwazulu Natal Province of South Africa to reach much greater numbers with health information and training, notably about the problem of HIV/AIDS stigma. Similarly, mobile units with projectors and generators use radio and television to deliver information about malaria to the villages of Sri Lanka.

Environment

Millennium Goal Seven addresses the question of environmental sustainability directly. Here COL is helping institutions in India to develop a range of specialised courses in ODL format. These address directly some of the crucial issues for environmental sustainability, such as municipal water and waste management and solid waste management. These programmes will be made available to other developing countries.

Global Partnership

Finally, the eighth Millennium Goal calls for a global partnership to improve governance, to make the benefits of ICTs more widely availability and to give particular attention to the needs of landlocked and small island developing states. In the area of governance we have applied ODL to the training of electoral officers and those who draft legislation. We are now asking ourselves how ODL could help train the hundreds of thousands of people now being asked to play a role in local democratic councils in India, the panchayat.

Conclusion

Let me conclude. Learning and knowledge are our common wealth. Fortunately that wealth is not a fixed quantity that creates winners and losers when we share it. The only limitation on the expansion of knowledge and learning is the inadequacy of traditional means for sharing it.

Educational technology in general, and open and distance learning in particular, allow us to break through that limitation. We can give all of the world's people the chance to be full citizens of the 21st century. The Commonwealth of Learning looks forward to working with the M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation and various education and training institutions to make that vision a reality in Tamil Nadu, in India and in the wider world.