The Commonwealth of Learning: Making Learning our Common Wealth

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to attend my first official function at the Royal Commonwealth Society. Since I joined the Commonwealth of Learning last year I have been to this building several times, but most of those visits were in quest of an RCS tie.

These were out of stock at the end of last year and the beginning of this, but the receptionist's warning that the RCS tie was not for the fainthearted only strengthened my determination to get hold of one. You can see that I was eventually successful and I am pleased to say that it has been widely admired by people whose tastes I respect!

It is a pleasure to speak to you this year when Education was the theme of Commonwealth day and the RCS has arranged various activities on the theme: Education: Creating Opportunity, Realising Potential. I viewed with interest and admiration the thirteen shortlisted films, finalists in the 2004 Commonwealth Vision Awards, which the RCS has put on a CD-ROM.

I have the challenge and the privilege of working for the advancement of education in the Commonwealth as President of the Commonwealth of Learning. I shall begin with a few words about this unique organisation. We one of the rare Commonwealth organisations not based in the UK; so you may not know much about us.

The Commonwealth of Learning is the only intergovernmental organisation ever created in Canada. The Commonwealth Heads of Government decided to set it up at their 1987 meeting held in Vancouver. Canada won the subsequent competition to host COL and decided to locate it in Vancouver. That is where we are today and we have a small associated centre, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for...
Asia, which is based in New Delhi.

The Commonwealth's two other intergovernmental agencies, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation, are both located in the UK, as are nearly all the pan-Commonwealth non-governmental organisations. Being located in Canada and India gives us a special and different perspective on the Commonwealth, which is healthy.

Moreover COL is the only international, intergovernmental organisation of any kind that focuses exclusively on helping countries to use technology to increase the scope and scale of education and training. Technology has already revolutionised many areas of life and our job is extend that revolution to learning.

For this reason, because I like to give my remarks a title, I have called this short address: The Commonwealth of Learning: Making Learning our Common Wealth.

I feel that this title resonates well with the themes of the short films on the RCS CD-ROM that I mentioned earlier. Some showed the benefits of education to particular individuals, others showed how learning helped communities, all urged that everyone should have the opportunity to learn, whether through formal education and training or through informal means.

In 2000 the United Nations convened the largest meeting of heads of government ever held. They expressed their ambitions for the new century in a Millennium Declaration that articulated a series of ambitious goals for human development. The goals aim to reduce poverty and hunger and call for the improvement of education, health and the environment. To reach these targets requires action on many fronts, but the common need is for everyone to learn new ways of living.

The Millennium Development Goals

So what are these goals? What is the Commonwealth of Learning doing?

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, including many Commonwealth universities, conduct research on agriculture and try to share the results. The most difficult bridge 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 operates in two directions and 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.

This is the basis of our programme of Lifelong Learning for Farmers in some of the villages of Tamil Nadu. I visited one of them, Govindanagaram, last month. The programme is based on four principles.

The first is to work with the farmers and villagers to make them aware that life could be better and to help them articulate demands for information that could help them improve the rural economy. Those demands tend to be formulated in pragmatic and holistic ways that do not necessarily correspond to the way that those who have the information structure it.

So the second principle is to get those with the information to work together in consortia so that they can respond to such holistic requests. In Tamil Nadu we have helped to create a consortium of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, the Tamil Nadu University of Veterinary and Animal Science, the Tamil Nadu Open University, Anna University, which is very strong in Engineering, and the University of Madras. Instead of each institution sending its specialist extension people into the villages in an uncoordinated manner, they work together to answer the real questions from real people.

Principle three is to use technology, such as the ICT kiosks now present in many villages, or community radio, to speed up and extend the process of information exchange. The fourth and final principle, because the overall aim is to improve the rural economy, is to get the banks involved and to favour commercially operated ICT kiosks, since the farmers are happy to pay to access information if it is genuinely useful to them.

Our aim in all this is to produce a dynamic that is not only self-sustaining but self-replicating. The process must be so obviously beneficial that people copy it spontaneously.

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, as Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen argues, development is freedom and education is the royal road to freedom.

The major bottleneck to the achievement of universal primary education is the training and retraining of tens of millions of teachers. In our own parish, the Commonwealth, there are 20 million teachers. 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. Most agree that conventional methods of teacher training are not up to the scale of the challenge.

However, this is an area where open and distance learning has already proven its effectiveness for training teachers in many countries. One of the staples of COL’s work is to help universities and teacher training
colleges to become, in the jargon, dual mode institutions, that is to say institutions that operate both at a distance and in the classroom.

The divide we have to bridge is to equip existing teacher training institutions and individual teacher educators to deploy new methods and to network themselves into professional communities. One of our projects at COL is the formulation of pan-Commonwealth quality assurance indicators for teacher education.

**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, even more demanding, goal is to achieve gender equality, meaning equality of outcomes, by 2015.

In this case the divide that COL and others are working to bridge is the gender gap in the use of ICTs. We now have a good fix on the barriers that women face in using ICTs and have worked with others to make this a prominent issue in the World Summit on the Information Society.

In this area, as in many other areas of development, one of the challenges 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](http://www.colfinder.org/dev).

In some respects we are progressing towards gender parity. Many universities, in both developed and developing countries, now have a majority of female students, and this is particularly true of the newer open universities. Moreover, in nearly all countries women are now outperforming men in universities. Indeed, the underperformance of boys is a now particular problem in the Commonwealth, notably in the Caribbean and southern Africa. For this reason COL is focusing some of its effort to promote gender equity on the boy problem rather than the girl problem.

**Health**

The next three Millennium Development Goals all target health. One is to reduce infant mortality by two-thirds in the next ten years, the second is to reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth in the same period, and the third is to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria in particular.

The achievement of such goals clearly depends on the improvement of health services. However, it also depends 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.
The best way to bridge that divide is to equip and train people to produce the information themselves. We call that Media Empowerment and that is what the Commonwealth of Learning is doing through its partnership with the World Health Organisation. As well as training local WHO representatives to expand the impact of their work by using the techniques of distance education, COL has, for example, equipped and trained an NGO in Kwazulu Natal Province of South Africa so that it can make videos 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. On a wider scale COL is producing open source radio content with messages of importance to poor people about filtering domestic water and growing food in the cramped conditions of urban poverty. These will be available in various languages.

COL has found that the notion of peer health educators is particularly powerful. This involves training a number of students, preferably equal numbers of men and women, to spread messages about healthy practices across the school. We at COL then help NGOs to capture the work of the peer health educators on video and take their messages out to the wider population in the villages through what we call village cinema.

Environment

Millennium Goal Seven addresses the question of environmental sustainability directly. Here COL is helping institutions in India to develop a whole range of specialised courses in an open and distance learning format. These address directly some of the crucial issues for environmental sustainability, such as municipal water and waste management and solid waste management. These courses are based on a big investment that COL and UNESCO made in the 1990s to produce teaching material on the environment that was scientifically sound and pedagogically effective. This is now being versioned in various ways.

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. Such states are particularly vulnerable to natural calamities, as we have seen in the recent spate of hurricanes raging through the Caribbean, and they usually have a very narrow economic base.

Here I should mention an initiative of the ministers of education of the small states of the Commonwealth dating from 2000, which they are calling the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The aim is for small states to work together on technology-based learning materials so that they do not always have to rely on importing educational resources from larger countries. We can come back to that in the discussion.

Here again COL's aim is to help states use technology to achieve their education and training objectives. Across the Commonwealth more widely, the aim is to take learning to scale, whether it be the training of
the hundreds of thousands of people now being asked to play a role in local democratic councils in India, or the difficult challenge of equipping disaffected male school dropouts in the Caribbean with usable life skills and occupational skills.

Democracy is a fundamental requirement for Commonwealth membership. COL looks for ways to support the excellent work of the Commonwealth Secretariat in democracy and governance through, for example, the training of electoral officers or of those charged with drafting parliamentary legislation.

These are some examples of the work of the Commonwealth of Learning in relation to the Millennium Development Goals. I have not talked much about higher education.

In higher education COL focuses particularly on helping countries implement quality assurance systems and on helping institutions to use educational technology effectively. COL is pleased to be working with Dr John Rowett and the Association of Commonwealth Universities to try to create a renaissance of Africa's universities and teacher training colleges as a major outcome in the follow-up to the Africa Commission.

The theme of this session was, Education: Creating Opportunity, Realising Potential. COL supports everything that strengthens formal education systems. However COL, as you have seen, is increasingly preoccupied by those who need to learn outside the formal system. Informal learning also creates opportunity and helps people realise their potential.

But if we are to get leverage on the huge challenge of development we need to be very clear about the concepts that underpin our work. They need to be powerful and effective concepts. It is no use just piling into sectors like agriculture, education and health with a myriad of atomistic activities.

We often say that we want sustainable development. We can interpret this in two ways, both important. The first is development that is sustainable in the environmental sense, namely development that ensures that the use of resources and the environment today does not restrict their use by future generations. The second, more prosaic interpretation of sustainable development is simply development that continues. I mean development that does not peter out when funding is withdrawn or the equipment breaks down. Indeed, at COL our ambitions go beyond sustainability. We are tiny; we can only operate in a few places. Even if all our programmes sustained themselves nicely when we left the overall impact would be small.

Our ambition is for our initiatives to be self-replicating. We want them to be so obviously effective that others copy them spontaneously. A number of conditions follow from such an ambition.

The first is that the input from outside should consist not primarily of new funds and external people but of ideas, organisation, training and a little technology. We are not against increases in foreign aid to developing countries, far from it, but we believe that getting existing local systems and institutions to operate in new ways is more likely to create self-replicating success stories.

A second condition is that external bodies like COL should be catalysts. In chemistry a catalyst is a
substance that makes a reaction happen without being used up in the reaction. Once the reaction has happened the catalyst can be used again with another set of ingredients. The implication is that COL should quickly make itself dispensable so that the programme can continue without us.

Condition three is to maximise the use of local resources. Continued subsidies rarely promote sustainable change and for many people what has no cost has no value. Poor people, by definition, do not have much money. But they are prepared to spend some of the money that they do have on things of value. Farmers are prepared to pay for information that is useful to their livelihoods. The commercial banks, like big business generally, have tended to avoid poor people because their business models do not work with them.

However, as C.K. Prahalad shows convincingly in his book The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid, different business models can work. In particular, ICTs are helping the banks develop a presence in the villages and to increase their lending. This holds the promise of a sustainable increase in prosperity.

This touches on the fourth condition, which is to exploit the advantages of information and communications technology wherever possible. At COL we believe that the ability to hold and transfer learning materials electronically is a huge breakthrough. It may be a while before eLearning is widespread in the developing world but already the technologies that underpin eLearning, such as Learning Management Systems and Learning Object Repositories, are promoting both the creation of learning materials at the local level and the sharing of materials at the global level.

I end with three examples of putting these principles into practice. The first is Lifelong Learning for Farmers in Tamil Nadu, India that I already described.

All COL has really done is to configure the village reality by using ICT kiosks to connect farmers to helpful sources of knowledge and getting the banks to provide credit and improve the marketing of the farmers’ produce. However, we think that this could be a major and self-replicating step in rural development.

The second example is the media empowerment of peer health education. Local people - local young people - develop health messages, often using drama, in their own language and culture. Other local people working with an NGO, make video programmes of these messages and create village cinema using a sheet hung between two trees and a video projector run off a pick-up truck with a diesel generator. In The Gambia nearly half the entire population have seen these videos and the authorities credit them for the fact that the HIV/AIDS infection rate is no longer growing. The programme is now run by Gambians for Gambians.

Finally, we are amazed by the take up of eLearning in Africa and the enthusiasm of those doing it. Last July we held a workshop in Nairobi on eLearning for policy makers and practitioners. Since then Jomo Kenyatta University has trained forty of its academic staff to develop materials which students now study online outside classroom hours. It would have been much more costly - probably impossibly costly - to
produce such materials in physical form with colour, graphics and so on. This is an example of ICTs empowering local people to improve the quality of education at low cost.

Conclusion

I shall stop there. The challenge of development is a challenge to promote learning on a massive scale. New approaches and technologies are the only way of making it possible for people to learn on the scale required. At COL we are helping countries introduce such new approaches and technologies in such a way as to make them self-replicating. If the Commonwealth of Learning can achieve that we will truly be able to talk about learning being our common wealth.