The Commonwealth of Learning — Its Role in Small and Island States

The Commonwealth of Learning - Its Role in Small and Island States by Dr. H. Ian Macdonald, Chairman, The Commonwealth of Learning, to a conference sponsored by The Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management, Seychelles, April 14, 1997

Introduction

I find that not many here are familiar with the brief but varied history of the Commonwealth of Learning. Therefore, I propose to make this presentation in three parts, but not like the clergyman who said his sermons always consisted of three parts: first, I tell them what I am going to tell them, then I tell them, and finally I tell them what I told them. First, I want to show you a short video to provide the flavour of COL as an innovative educational institution. Then, I will describe briefly how and why we were created, as well as illustrating some of our activities. Finally, I want to suggest how COL could be relevant to small and island states in partnership with CAPAM and in support of government reform initiatives.

The Work of COL

The mandate of COL, in the founding Memorandum of the Heads of Commonwealth Governments, is rather prosaic:

"The purpose of the Agency is to create and widen access to opportunities for learning, by promoting co-operation between universities, colleges and other educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education and open learning, and by the application of communication technologies to education. The Agency's activities aim to strengthen member countries' capacities to develop the human resources required for their economic and social development, and will give priority to those developmental needs to which Commonwealth co-operation can be applied".

However, I much prefer Her Majesty the Queen's Commonwealth Day Message last month when she suggested: "Recent advances in communication technology now enable us to talk to each other and to see each other without ever needing to leave home. The Commonwealth uses this sort of technology for its distance education programmes, especially through the Commonwealth of Learning based in Vancouver."
Through communications like these, the barriers of distance can be removed and we can talk together, almost as if the whole Commonwealth was in one room”. And what a wonderful thought and image - in one room! In such a case, I would like to think of that room as a school-room to which all of the Commonwealth had access for education, because access to education is what the Commonwealth of Learning is all about.

During the course of university teaching over a period of 40 years, I have encountered a number of interesting students - mostly successful but often unusual. I think here of two in particular. In the first class that I taught on the Principles of Economics, there was a young man in his early thirties who was already a multi-millionaire: he had benefited from the post-war boom in Canada to make a fortune in housing development. And I was to teach him the Principles of Economics? When I asked him why he had now come to university, he replied that he wanted to be a successful human being as well as a rich entrepreneur! The second took his degree at age 87. He had left school when only 14 to help support his family, and had worked all his life at a variety of jobs. When I asked him the same question, he replied that he wanted to be better prepared for the after life than he had been for the first!

Whatever the merits of the case, it could certainly be argued that both were enjoying a luxury, in contrast to the millions of people in the world who are denied an education even of the most basic kind. However, both cases illustrate two points about education:

- the primary importance of access;
- the more enduring purposes of education.

The miracles of educational technology make access possible now on a scale heretofore unimaginined. In 1982, during my first visit to India, I vividly recall a conversation with the late Madame Gandhi who said that India's educational objective was to have every child with access to primary education by the year 1995. But, to realise that objective by conventional means would require the addition of 10 million school places a year until 1995; as a result there had to be another way! Thirty years earlier, my good friend and colleague, the late Marshall McLuhan, was talking about "schools without walls". At that time, he was confronted daily by a combination of people who neither understood his message nor believed it possible. Indeed, only a few years ago, ET as exemplified by the well-known film meant extra-terrestrial; opportunities such as now exist were perceived to be only within the realm of another world.

Today, ET means educational technology capable of taking education to people rather than people to education. To serve that objective in the 53 nations of the Commonwealth is the mandate of the Commonwealth of Learning. Founded in 1987 at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, and established in 1988, COL is the only formal Commonwealth institution located outside of London. With headquarters in Vancouver, Canada, COL is governed by a distinguished Board drawn from different parts of the Commonwealth. The Chairman is elected by the Board, on the recommendation of the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, and I was honoured to succeed the founding Chairman, Lord Asa Briggs, one of my Oxford professors over 40 years ago. Working to support education at all levels - primary, secondary, tertiary and non-formal, and employing all means of communication - print, audio, visual and electronic, the Commonwealth of Learning seeks to support open learning and distance education through the design and implementation of programmes that:
• promote the utilisation of communications and information technologies for the purpose of distance learning;

• facilitate access to affordable, high-quality learning materials and resources in support of formal and informal education;

• provide access to training in the adoption and use of distance learning techniques and technologies;

• supply information and advice regarding distance learning systems, programmes and technologies, both to practitioners and developers alike.

In the process, we work:

1. in collaboration with other institutions and groups to foster research activities in the field of distance education;

2. in collaboration with other institutions to develop a network for the delivery of specialised teaching in defined areas, and to foster the development of improved student support services for distance learning.

Needless to say, I could spend the next two days describing our activities, but let me just reveal the tip of the iceberg - a suitable Canadian metaphor - with four examples which illustrate how we try to design a programme that meets the special needs and strengths of the local area:

1. Finding the right media: in the case of our work in Ghana, this turned out to be a field recording unit for radio production.

2. The integration of technology and training: in the case of our assistance to the Maldives, this took the form of computer-based desktop video editing systems.

3. Sustainability in the face of recurring costs: this led COL to establish a communication network in the Solomon Islands linking a group of sites through a teleconference bridge.

4. Meeting the relatively newly perceived needs for "tele-medicine": we are at the moment establishing the Malaysian Medical Teleconference System, a teaching network combining audio data with supporting graphics.

When the history of these times is written, I suggest that it will pronounce the new communications technologies to be of equal of even greater significance than the Gutenberg era, and we are privileged to be a part of it. However that takes me to the second point with which I began: the enduring purposes of education, and several necessary caveats, which I try to impress on my colleagues at all times.

1. Educational technology is a significant supplement, but it does not replace the human element and the qualitative role of the teacher.

2. Education is not simply about the enlargement of the gross national product. Indeed, in these days of concern over sustainable development, we must continue our efforts to take some of the
grossness out of the gross national product, and to produce a world of greater peace and compassion.

3. If the final result, both in terms of nations and individuals, should be that the rich get richer and the lot of the poorer is not enhanced, then we shall have failed utterly. Therefore, we must never turn our backs on those for whom technology will be slower to take root, in the interests of building monuments to ourselves as distance educators.

4. We must ensure that increasing use of educational technology does not encourage a paternal as opposed to a partnership approach between individuals, institutions and nations. I can assure you that the Commonwealth of Learning, in employing open learning and distance education as a means of ensuring greater opportunities and greater equality, operates from the principle that we will all learn from one another in the process. In that sense, we are a catalyst rather than a missionary.

CAPAM, COL and Training

Now let me turn to the potential scope for collaboration between COL and CAPAM, and for working with the CAPAM network of government officials, represented at this important gathering of small and island states.

My first exposure to COL was in 1993 when I was invited to Chair a Commonwealth Committee - the Progress Review Committee - for the purpose of evaluating the first five years of COL. That, incidentally led to my appointment as Chairman of COL, effective January 1, 1994. In the course of our assessment of COL programmes, operating in some 38 Commonwealth countries, I became aware of the limitless needs and ever-expanding expectations for our services. Consequently, I was convinced that working with other agencies in constructive partnerships was the only hope of meeting those needs. I am pleased to say that we have enjoyed a most constructive relationship with the Commonwealth Secretariat in many of our programmes. Then, only last month, the Chairman of COMNET-IT and I signed an agreement in London, designed to achieve a working partnership between the Commonwealth of Learning and The Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development.

Now, I believe that COL and CAPAM can be natural partners in working towards the goal of government reform, particularly through up-grading of personnel and provision of training by means of distance education. As nations strive to become more open in their economic activity, transparent in their governance, global in their outlook and democratic in their practices, the need to have a well trained and continuously learning public service becomes an imperative not just a desire. Because of their small populations, history, and educational infrastructure, the smaller nations (with a few exceptions like Brunei and Singapore) face a much bigger challenge than the larger ones in providing the necessary "career-long" training in knowledge and skills. Their reliance on external sources to provide the training is great and will be long term.

For a number of reasons, the conventional way of imparting training whether it is short courses or long study programmes, becomes daily less attractive as an option. These reasons include:
1. Cost: moving bodies across the globe is not an inexpensive business. While the size of the training budget continues to be small, the cost of the training keeps on increasing. A lesser number of trainees and less frequent training will be a consequence.

2. Inconvenience: environmental dynamics require constant upgrading of skills; moving people for such training, even if it is for a month, means leaving behind an empty desk, class room, office or hospital ward; small population countries lack the ability to replace these absences.

3. Brain Drain: it is common knowledge that many trainees, especially those reading for higher qualifications, do not return to their countries of origin for one reason or another.

4. Productivity Loss: post experience training does not have to be at the expense of productivity loss, even temporarily; training while working is feasible with modern technology and pedagogical techniques.

The last ten years have seen a proliferation of initiatives where industry and business in particular have successfully applied distance teaching methodologies (especially, but not exclusively, technology driven) to provide continuous professional education for their employees without taking them away from their daily productive activity. Such training when done in association with institutions of learning can lead to credits and credentials as well.

There are, indeed, many courses and programmes which are available for remote learning across the Commonwealth and which may serve the interest of CAPAM and its members. These cover many diverse fields but, in particular, the following:

- Management of Public Enterprises;
- Public Administration;
- Educational Administration;
- School Management;
- Health Management;
- Legal Drafting
- Judicial Training; and
- Government Reform

Now, it is feasible for these and similar courses to be made available or delivered to learners in their home location at a much lower cost, thereby avoiding many of the risks and concerns surrounding traditional forms of training. It is further possible to develop new courses, where they are not already available, for use in many locations. The newer technologies will enable both the providers and recipients of training to interact as often as they want, while the training progresses.
COL is by no means alone in possessing this capacity, but in COL, the Commonwealth has an agency that is able to provide technical support in the acquisition, adaptation, delivery and assessment of training using distance education.

Let me conclude by several illustrations (and I could suggest many more) of training for up-grading of personnel using distance education techniques:

1. Legislative Drafting. The first 30 students, from legal departments of 14 Commonwealth countries, were enrolled in February 1996 for the pilot year of the COL/Commonwealth Secretariat Legislative Drafting programme. When these students complete their work, they will be available to assist other governments in meeting their needs.

2. Certificate in Agriculture. As you know better than I, sustained growth in the small island states of the Caribbean, S.E. Africa and the South Pacific is tied to the efficient use of production resources. We are presently preparing for a Certificate to be offered by the University of Saskatchewan in Canada, via distance education, in support of the agricultural industry. Such certificates can readily be designed in a variety of areas of governmental service.

3. The Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme. Under our Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme, 100 students from 15 different Commonwealth countries are studying for a Masters in Distance Education Degree, offered through distance education, by the Indira Gandhi National Open University. They will complete their degree without ever having left home. As educators themselves, they will apply their newly acquired skills directly to their work in their communities. Now, with the assistance of CFTC, we are developing a Commonwealth consortium of Open Universities to design a distance education Masters' degree programme in Business and Public Administration - once again, a natural for public servants at their home base.

Whether a programme to develop a particular skill in legislative drafting, to provide basic technical knowledge for agriculture, or to offer further formal education such as a Master of Distance Education degree, such training will be a priority for COL in the future, and I invite your ideas and suggestions.

With:

- ComSec's knowledge of needs;
- CAPAM's network of government officials;
- COMNET-IT's information technology know-how; and
- COL's distance education experience;

we could make unimagined inroads into government reform and personnel up-grading. I very much hope such a partnership will evolve.

H. Ian Macdonald

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