

Open Learning: The Distance Ahead



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By
Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan
President, The Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver

I consider it a great honour and a special treat to be here on the same platform with young Michael to share a few thoughts on Development and Distance Education in an increasingly interdependent and badly bruised world in which we live. Also, I wish to share with you, at the same time, the question as to how far we should still travel to reach that ambitious philosophical ideal behind the establishment of the International Extension College 25 years ago. In his essay - A Vision of Development - in the book commemorating the 80th Birthday of Michael Young, my friend Tony Dodds described the philosophy 'as both large scale and ambitious: everybody has a right to education; education is about life and every individual's opportunity to self-fulfilment.' Coming from a development agency dedicated to promoting educational access to deprived communities, you can empathise with me if I plead that more than ever before we still need philosophies with that big ambition and philosophers with big hearts and visions.

2. While it is true that in 1996, we are almost seeing the end of colonialism; the achievements of science and technology are finding their way to many parts of the world; there seems to be a freer flow of information; there is greater access to education and health for many and, in principle, the acceptance of equality for all human beings. But look a little closer, and the achievements of our generation, though remarkable they are, begin to show certain warts. Significant numbers of people are still denied equal access to justice and decent living (particularly women and girls and young boys), we have, as we progress industrially, hurt our environment and in some cases irreparably; barbaric military practices are widespread and many of our governments continue to flirt with such

regimes and institutionalised terrorism is there in its many forms. Inequality takes many forms as well - one Swiss person, for example, still continues to consume almost as much resources as 40 Somalis; an average North American family of four use more energy than the total consumption of a small-sized Indian village, the life span of a Cameroonian is shorter by about 30 years as compared to that of a Canadian.

3. Nowhere is the equation of disparity as pronounced as in education. Consider the following:

. In the developed OECD countries of the world, participation rates in pre-tertiary education are between 88 and 93%, and at the tertiary level for every 100,000 head of population, between 3000-6000 individuals participate;

. In (non-OECD), East Asia and the Pacific Islands, while participation rate at the primary school level is nearer 90%, some 100 million young boys and girls are still out of school;

. In South Asia, participation in primary education is near 70% but some 380 million people continue to be illiterate;

. In Latin America and the Caribbean, about 31 million or roughly 86% of young children are able to go to school, but less than half of those entering Grade 1 reach Grade 5; 20 million boys and girls are out of school;

. In the Arab states, close to 23 million children are out of school and some 80 million individuals are illiterate;

. In sub Saharan Africa, 80 million or some 45-55% of the age cohort are out of primary or secondary school; and

. At the tertiary level, the situation is just as worrying. A comparison between Canada on the one hand (UN-HDI Rank No. 1 out of 174) and Mozambique on the other (UN-HDI Rank No.167 out of 174) makes the point clear. Canadians complain about cutbacks in educational access when they actually have more than 5,000 graduates per 100,000 head of population; in Mozambique the ratio is more like 16 per 100,000 head of population.

4. Less than 50 years ago, the other world had written off countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. At that time, half of Japan's workforce was in the paddy field, Singapore was still a mosquito ridden and politically volatile colony, Hong Kong, a small port, coping with refugees from Guangdong and other coastal provinces of the newly founded Republic of China, while the Republic of China (Taiwan) was hopelessly coping with its own stream of refugees from Shanghai and elsewhere and Korea was on the brink of civil war and was poorer than Sudan. How different the

situation is today! During most of the previous decade and until last year, these nations sustained an annual growth rate of about 7% continuously for over ten years, and growing at two to three times faster than any other parts of the world. The factors that have changed East Asia from being the planet's poorhouse to its powerhouse include among others, their commitment to education. They had consistently invested between 6 and 20% of their annual budget into education.

5. If we believe that education can indeed make the difference in these and other countries between wealth and poverty, health and misery, conservation and destruction, national unity and division as well as assist in eradicating inequalities between nations and within communities towards building a better 21st century world, then we have an obligation to revisit our paradigms of delivering education as well as what the education itself is on a global scale. For too long, the academic community has been smug and comfortable in delivering knowledge to learners who could come to them, meet their expectations or entry behaviour, afford their price and accept what they had to deliver at a time and situation that suited them best. While these may have worked earlier and also in certain societies, fundamental shifts have to be made in the way we deliver education as our aspirations go beyond providing education only to the intellectual elite or resource rich. The assumptions of teachers and their institutions as to the what, where, when and how of teaching will have to undergo profound change. The knowledge we have gained through 30 years of modern distance education and the present technologies along with those that are emerging have yet an realised potential for the delivery of all forms of education.

6. For the first time in the history of the human race, we have an opportunity to reach almost every single community on the planet. The technologies available today have made it possible for us to reach millions in a single moment. Consider for a moment some amazing feats that programming has done in the world of non-formal education through a combination of talent, human skills, knowledge and broadcasting technology in the last decade or so:

. The remarkable experience in Honduras, where within a year, a mostly illiterate population was able to learn - from a public health radio programme - the skills necessary to reduce the risks of diarrhoea dehydration by almost 40% through the use of a specific oral rehydration solution; or

. The case in India where a 600% increase in condom sales was achieved within a period of 12 years through a clever (or rude) television-driven consumer education programme; or

. A rock video in Mexico that motivated young people in Mexico to delay sexual activity and thereby reduce health and psychological risks; or

. The case of a mass campaign in Turkey that enabled it to increase the catchment for child

immunisation programmes.

7. Similarly, in the case of formal education, while the capacity to reach millions through interactive media may not be there as yet, the achievements of the Open Schools of India and New Zealand and the Open Universities of Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia and the UK in reaching hundreds of thousands of students adequately demonstrate that which is possible. In a recent report of the OECD, it was suggested that to serve the educational and skills needs of the 21st century of the developed world, major capacity building will have to be undertaken by not only the present open learning systems but also those that deliver education through traditional means. Such capacity building will not only be limited to staff training but also infrastructure building where:

- . All those who deliver content to mass catchments must use teaching methods that are resource-based and require students to take responsibilities for their own learning;

- . Teachers are expected to use the technologies of electronic networks, CD-ROM's, telephones, computers and a range of emerging multimedia tools as part of their professional skills;

- . Institutions practising distance education need to provide all their staff with configured workstations located in their offices and linked to libraries, knowledge bases, media centres, colleagues and students;

- . Students must be mature as independent learners and need to have access to technology and must be technology literate; and

- . Students need to have the capacity to pay for at least a part of the cost of their learning.

8. Countries which are already rich in the infrastructures relating to communication, computing and electronic technologies as well as the necessary human resource and personal incomes, a political will to create societies of lifelong learners may be all that is needed. But in the remaining four-fifths of the world, which are also the very parts of the globe where growth in educational needs will be the greatest, more than a political determination will be required; the distance to travel from today's reality to tomorrow's aspirations is long and demanding. Except for the big (India, Pakistan, Brazil and Mexico) or the well endowed (USA, Canada, Australia, UK and Western Europe) the supply of human talent to create, manage and sustain distance education even with modest technologies is in very short supply. In the last seven years that the Commonwealth of Learning has been in existence, some 600 individuals have been trained in one or another aspect of distance education. In a review of training needs in 1989 (long before discussions of the virtuality became the buzz word), COL identified some 78 different tasks for which training had to be designed; we have barely scratched the surface in our efforts to-date; I hesitate to even guess how many more new tasks would have to be added

to this list to meet those requirements listed by the OECD, and where should be the starting point for such training.

9. Whether the intention is to practice a second or a fifth generation type of distance education, apart from the basic human resources, a few other essentials are also necessary. At a minimum, there is need to have good media reproduction, postal and communication networks and reasonable study centre facilities. Personal telephone, facsimile, computing facilities as well as access to radio and television receivers can offer additional advantage. As many of you are aware, these facilities are far from evenly available across nations. For example, in Australia, for every head of population there are 2 radio receivers, 1.4 television sets, 2 telephone sets; on the other hand in Mozambique, there is perhaps 1 radio set for every 40 individuals, 1 television set for every 2,000 head of population and 1 telephone per 1,000 individuals. In this country, it takes a first class letter less than one day to arrive at its destination; in Malaysia it takes about three and in the Pacific, weeks rather than days would be the norm. These and the glaring disparities in the availability or distribution of other technologies such as facsimiles, publishing and other computing technologies make it increasingly difficult to predict whether, in the short-term, universal access to educational provision can be made available to all human beings.

10. Adding to this rather depressing situation is the further concern regarding other capacities to deliver distance education. Good practice in distance education calls for:

- . Commitment on the part of institutions to excellence of teaching for all of its students through pedagogic strategies that will meet the special demands of their clients;
- . Effective internal decision-making procedures for the setting up of standards, goals and priorities as well as a periodic self-evaluation of the system of accountability to learners;
- . Flexible and client-centred policies relating to enrolments, recognition of prior learning and seamless arrangements for learning progression to take place; and
- . Sensitive planning and management of arrangements for a system-based education especially one that requires up-front capitalisation and learner support systems for their region.

Good management and institutional leadership are pre-requisites to serving learners who may already be disadvantaged, and all available information seems to indicate that national capacities in most countries are sadly lacking and where they are available, suffer from a lack of political commitment to support the venture.

11. In countries where the political commitment of governments to create learning opportunities for all is strong and firm, distance education flourishes. It has been the case

here in the UK and in India, South Korea and Thailand. All these countries receive substantial provision and support for their distance education from their political leaders. This cannot be said for many other countries of the developing and in some cases the developed world; such lack of commitment has resulted in poor staffing, poor materials, even poorer learner support systems. This often leads to massive incompleteness rates, learner frustration, staff disillusionment which in turn results in political disillusionments; such vicious cycles have a tendency to perpetuate themselves.

12. It seems to me that unless there is massive external assistance in the educational affairs of the poorer parts of the world, the IEC's philosophy, a quarter century ago, of empowering every individual to realise their full potential will remain no more than a dream. The sensitive application of mass education techniques should be an important option on the education agenda of the world. International agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO, national aid agencies such as the ODA, CIDA, AusAID can all be helpful in promoting distance education. They along with national governments and institutions should assist in:

- . Creating policy frameworks that will enable open and distance learning to become important pillars of a nation's educational initiative;
- . Encouraging minimal standards of good practice for those involved in the delivery of open and distance learning;
- . Creating pathways for the free and easy movement of credits and credentials across the educational system; and
- . Encouraging international aid and lending agencies to require recipient governments to include open and distance learning provisions in the educational planning framework of their countries.

13. I am also tempted to suggest on this anniversary day of the IEC that organisations such as yours and the one I represent work out arrangements whereby we can jointly undertake to push the cause of distance education further. Some of the things that we as a community of distance educators can assist and support can include among others:

- . Influencing institutions engaged in the practice of distance education to subscribe to good practice especially in cases where their educational products are delivered away from their jurisdictions;
- . Helping to establish formal and informal networks around themes such as research, technology, training, etc.;
- . Influencing the direction of course development that would encourage the exchange of

materials;

. Creating opportunities for the mobility of credits; and

. Developing professional associations.

14. The progress of the first part of the next century in terms of human development may perhaps have only one yardstick of measurement and that is the level of equality of opportunity between nations and among people. Unless people, regardless of race, religion, nationality and socio-economic status, are empowered with knowledge and skills, achieving equality of opportunity will be difficult; not achieving that equality does not augur well for the welfare of the planet. Failure to transform today's imbalance of wealth and resources will become tomorrow's cause for conflict between and within nations. Peace and poverty, ignorance and environmental concern, under education and greater wealth, illiteracy and self esteem are not compatible. As the IEC celebrates 25 years of achievement and is looking beyond the next 25, I recollect Robert Frost in a slightly different context:

But I have promises to keep

And miles to go before I sleep

And miles to go before I sleep.

I wish you well in your endeavour to make this a better world for all of us.