

Technologies for Literacy

29 October 2020

General Meeting, Global Alliance for Literacy,
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning



Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

It is a pleasure to be virtually present at this session on Innovations and I thank the Director, UIL Mr David Atchoarena, for the invitation. My topic today is ‘Technologies for Literacy’ and I will share examples from some of the interventions made by my organization, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL.

As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organisation with headquarters in Canada and works in 54 Commonwealth countries which span all regions of the globe.

Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

The COVID-19 crisis has fast tracked the adoption of technologies. The future is digital but how do we ensure that it doesn’t widen the existing divides? The inequalities in our world are likely to grow in the post-pandemic period and adversely affect some of the most marginalised. The world was unprepared for the crisis—and this is not the only crisis that we will face—so how can we build the resilience needed to cope with pandemics and natural disasters?

The COL approach has been to use technologies that are available, affordable and accessible—anything from the printed text to online options. Our approach is to develop solutions keeping in mind the last person in the queue.

COL’s approach to literacy has been to enable the community to ‘domesticate’ the technology for various literacies. While functional literacy programmes usually operate at one level, the COL approach is to mobilise literacy strategies at three levels so that the learner acquires functional, interactive and critical skills.

It is clear that it cannot be ‘business as usual,’ and the global community needs to adopt alternative and innovative approaches to address the unfinished business of illiteracy.

During the pandemic, community radio (CR) became an important means of reaching the last mile in many Commonwealth countries. COL has used CR to convert the listener into a learner. For example, in a health-literacy programme for rural women, the community was mobilised, learning needs assessed and an active mechanism for feedback established. Learning outcomes are evaluated through a participatory approach which involves the family and the community.

COL has developed Aptus, a low-cost server that has been used for reaching remote locations. This device has a charger and a wireless router that can be accessed by mobile devices. It has been used

successfully in remote atolls in the Pacific for formal education. In the picture on the Slide it is used to train women in financial literacy through our partner Mann Deshi in India.

COL has developed MobiMOOC with a basic mobile phone interface that can be used in low bandwidth situations. With audio lessons in local languages, this has worked well during the lockdown. This is a MobiMOOC for malis or gardeners, where 90% of the learners remained active during the training programme.

In partnership with a civil society partner, COL was training 2000 artisans and weavers in various aspects of e-commerce when the pandemic struck. The in-person training had to pivot to online mode using WhatsApp, which was possible as most participants had smartphones.

From these examples, you can see the different technologies that were used in specific contexts. But it wasn't just the technologies. Identifying the needs of a particular learning community determined the content of what and how it is learned.

A targeted approach is needed to reach the unreached by tailoring solutions that are located within the specific social and economic value chain.

COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers has reached hundreds of thousands of farmers in 11 Commonwealth countries. Building on the foundations of social capital (strong sense of belonging), COL catalyses the productive linkages among the expert institutions, such as agricultural universities and veterinary colleges, banks, the market and the rural communities through appropriate ICT.

It is important to support communities to domesticate technology, which means the ability to access and own the technology, such as mobiles, and to use the technology within the household and society. This has empowered semi-literate women to develop websites and create content for use by their peers.

We have seen that technology is but one element in the whole process of literacy and learning. How can we be better prepared and more resilient for the uncertain future?

Governments will have a major role to play in providing connectivity, while international organisations, such as COL and UIL, can facilitate access to curated content and build the capacity of our stakeholders in self-directed lifelong learning.

Let me conclude with three important lessons that COL has learnt—first, that technology by itself will not promote literacy, unless it is placed in an appropriate social, political and economic context. Second, literacy must be seen as part of the whole development process. Third, the social capital of the community is essential to the success of any literacy intervention.

Thank you