

Open and Distance Learning and the Developing World



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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be back in Australia. Ironically, now that it has withdrawn from the Commonwealth of Learning, Australia seems to receive more visits from COL people than it did before, when this country contributed to COL and sat on the Board of Governors!

In that context I begin by thanking Anne Forster, Bruce King, all the members of ODLAA and the Australian vice-chancellors who rallied in support of COL when Australia withdrew its core funding. I am pleased to say that the dialogue between COL and AusAID continues and I was in Canberra to advance that dialogue two days ago.

Our aim is to do programme work for AusAID in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea as a way of demonstrating our competence and relevance and with the hope of eventually qualifying again for an Australian voluntary contribution to core funding. I believe that our approach to the Pacific nations is absolutely consistent with the principles that Kaye Schofield articulated so eloquently yesterday morning.

The timing seems propitious now that Australia has announced that its overseas aid spending will more than double. Of course, a lot of this will be spent on a more robust engagement with the Pacific Islands on security issues. The test will be to see whether this can be done without undue neo-colonialism.

Meanwhile, I am glad to say that New Zealand has very generously announced that it plans to double its voluntary contribution to COL over the next two years. This is excellent news because it will enable us to ramp up our work in the Pacific again just when as were preparing reduce our commitment because of the loss of Australian funds. Just one aspect of our work in the Pacific is to facilitate the attendance of colleagues from the Pacific Island countries at events like this. May I thank those colleagues who have attended this conference and the pre-conference workshop from all over the Pacific? You have made a wonderful contribution. I hope that what you have learned here will assist you in your important work back home.

This has been a most successful conference and I congratulate Anne Forster and all the organisers for a professionally rewarding and very friendly event for everyone. You have enabled COL to show that it is alive and well in Australia. We seem to have provided the bookends to this event.

COL organised a two-day pre-conference workshop on Open and Distance Learning as a Tool for Sustainable Development in the Australia-Pacific Region, and now here is COL's President giving the final keynote address on Open and Distance Learning and the Developing World. Meanwhile some of you have taken part in a strand on development running through the conference. You'd deduce from this that COL uses the words development and developing a lot - and you'd be right.

In these remarks I shall begin by leading you in a reflection on development and its link to human freedom. This will give you a deeper and more operational understanding of the links between learning and development. Third, I shall examine how open and distance learning can strengthen those links in various sectors. What kind of open and distance learning are we talking about? I'll talk about that too because it is a matter of confusion and debate.

I hope that these topics provide an appropriate dessert for the à la carte menu that you've had at this conference.

Your overall theme is Breaking Down Boundaries and this gathering is billed as a conference on the international experience in open, distance and flexible learning. Much of your discourse, understandably, has been carried out against the hi-tech background of Australia and other industrialised countries. But there has been some attention to the developing world, particularly your neighbouring Pacific islands. My aim is to focus your attention more sharply still on the situation of the majority of humankind.

I begin by stating the obvious. There is a link between learning and development. By and large the more that the citizens of a country have learned, the more developed that country is. People need to learn across a broad front and the categories articulated in the Delors Report: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to live together serve to define that breadth.

I used the words 'by and large' because the correlation between learning and development is far from perfect. The United States gets by quite well with a school system that is only an average performer in international terms.

On the other hand, jurisdictions like Cuba, Sri Lanka, and the Indian state of Kerala are widely admired for their educational attainments but do not seem able to exploit those attainments to achieve greater prosperity than their more ignorant neighbours. Note, however, that whilst people in these three places are not noticeably more prosperous, they do have greater life expectancy and better health than their less educated neighbours.

So however enthusiastic we may be about education, we must recognise that whilst it may be a necessary condition for development, it is not sufficient. I was in Kerala earlier this year. People in the state were

upset that the next-door state of Tamil Nadu, with a less-educated populace, had just won the bid to house a major Nokia manufacturing plant. The press explained that the politics of Kerala were just too complicated.

This was reinforced when we drove back into Kerala from Tamil Nadu. Just before the border our driver pulled into a service station and filled up with petrol, rocking the vehicle from side to side to get every last drop in the tank. I asked him why and he said, 'You always fill up before you go into Kerala because you never know when the gas stations will go on strike'.

In the case of Cuba it may be a combination of Marxist economics and the American boycott that prevents prosperity being commensurate with education. In Sri Lanka the failure of Sinhalese and Tamils to learn to live together harmoniously may have something to do with a disappointing economic performance.

It is not my intention, however, to argue by example. I shall begin by examining the concept of development before looking at the role of learning and specifically the contribution of open and distance learning.

What kind of development?

First then, what kind of development?

The title of Amartya Sen's inspiring book *Development as Freedom* provides the best starting point. He argues that development and human rights are two sides of the same coin and he defines development simply as the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. He gives two reasons why freedom is central to the process of development.

The first is an evaluative reason. For Sen the central criterion for the assessment of progress is whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced. I shall ask what these freedoms are in a moment.

His second reason has to do with making development happen. He argues that it is primarily through the free agency of people that development is achieved. Free people devote more energy to the development of their communities and their countries than those who are not free. So according to Sen the expansion of freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development.

What kinds of freedom? The Millennium Development Goals state these freedoms implicitly.

First, there is freedom from hunger. You cannot concentrate on much else if you worry constantly where your next meal is coming from. Hunger is a direct manifestation of poverty. Taking people out of abject poverty helps to free them from hunger and gives them other freedoms as well, notably some freedom from being pushed around by others and from having most of life's decisions made for them.

The freedoms that come with release from abject poverty, notably the freedom to make more decisions

about one's life, can better be exercised with some education and training.

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 rural people more control over their lives. There is a divide to bridge. Many organisations, including universities, conduct research on agriculture and try to share the results. The most difficult gap to cross is the last mile to the individual farmer.

This is not just a matter of packaging information attractively, say through a radio soap opera, and pushing it at the farmers. Communication must operate in two directions. Farmers must define their own needs. The outside world must then help them match these needs to real possibilities. This is the starting point for COL's programme of Lifelong Learning for Farmers in villages in Tamil Nadu, India. It works on four principles.

The first is to work with the farmers and villagers to show them that life could be better and to help them formulate requests for information that could help them improve their rural economy. Those requests tend to be formulated in a pragmatic and holistic way that probably does correspond to the way that the researchers who have the information structure it.

So the second principle is to get organisations, notably universities, to work together in consortia so that they can respond to the holistic requests from the villages. In this case we have a consortium of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, the Tamil Nadu University of Veterinary and Animal Science, the Tamil Nadu Open University and Anna University, which is very strong in Engineering. Instead of each institution sending its experts 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 Indian villages, or in Africa 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. Farmers are happy to pay for information if it is genuinely useful and a commercially viable ICT kiosk is more sustainable than one that comes as a gift from government. 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.

I realise that you might not call this distance education. Let's just call it technology-mediated learning. The point is that for most poor countries development must include the improvement of the rural economy and helping the millions of farmers and smallholders who are the backbone of that economy. Here technology stimulates a dialogue that produces useful information and provokes action on that information.

The second freedom is the freedom to have education and training.

Education, leading to various ways of using literacy, gives people greater freedom to communicate and interact with their environment. Training, leading to diverse skills that are the basis for livelihoods, gives people greater freedom as economic actors.

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. Conventional methods of teacher education are not up to the scale of the challenge. However, 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. I expect that many of your institutions are engaged in this process.

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.

The next freedom is equal freedom for men and women.

Here the first MDG addresses parity of access. Its aim is to eliminate disparities between boys and girls in primary and secondary school by this 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 UNESCO to make this a prominent issue in the World Summit on the Information Society coming up later this month. In this area, as in other areas of development, one challenge 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.

Most universities can be proud of their contribution to gender equity. Many universities, in both developed and developing countries, have a majority of female students, and this is particularly true of the

open universities. Moreover, in nearly all countries women now outperform men in higher education. Indeed, the underperformance of boys is a particular problem in the Commonwealth, notably in the Caribbean and southern Africa. For this reason COL is working with the Commonwealth Secretariat to focus some of its gender effort on the boy problem rather than the girl problem.

The next freedom is freedom from disease.

Three MDGs are concerned with freedom from disease: freedom from dying in infancy; freedom from dying while giving birth; and freedom from avoidable diseases like AIDS, malaria and polio. Clearly, freedom from abject poverty is a start towards achieving the health freedoms. We are also increasingly aware that the freedom to be educated and trained is also helpful in attaining the freedom of better health.

Clearly the achievement of such goals depends on the improvement of health services. However, achieving the goals also depends on people learning how to avoid disease and keep themselves and their children healthy. They must have 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 used radio and television to help people in Sri Lanka avoid the health dangers of following the tsunami. 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.

The next freedom is the freedom to live with a minimum of dirt, smoke and germs. There is a paradox here. In rich places like Adelaide individual people consume more than their share of the earth's resources but live in a nice clean environment with fresh water in the taps, clean air to breathe, and no piles of garbage to trip over. In developing countries individuals make fewer demands on resources but often have to live besides heaps of garbage, breathe foul air and make do with dirty water.

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.

The final MDG, number eight calls for a Global Partnership to address various issues, such as trade, good governance, more aid, decent work for youth, affordable drugs, and better availability of information and

communications technology.

It also calls for particular attention to the needs of landlocked and small island developing states. Such states, which account for two-thirds of Commonwealth countries are particularly vulnerable to natural calamities, as we have seen in last year's tsunami and the recent spate of hurricanes raging through the Caribbean. These countries usually have a very narrow economic base.

COL is now implementing an idea of Ministers of Education of these small states, which they call 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. Think of it as a network rather than a new institution. I'm sure that once these states feel they have achieved some mastery of the eWorld they will be very happy to work with larger states.

In the case of all the MDGs COL's aim, as you have seen, is to help states use technology to achieve their education and training objectives. The goal is to take learning to scale.

I have listed various freedoms, but some important ones are missing.

Here is where the Commonwealth comes in. The MDGs were the outcome of the largest ever meeting of heads of government ever held at the United Nations. Their Millennium Declaration, which included the MDGs, had to be a consensus document. Since many UN member states are not democracies there could not be an MDG about political freedoms. Talk of good governance was as close as they could get to this key issue.

The Commonwealth has no such scruples. Democracy is a condition of membership of the Commonwealth and countries have to leave the Commonwealth if they cease to be democratic. Both Nigeria and Pakistan had to leave for this reason but both are now back. Zimbabwe left of Robert Mugabe's own accord before it was pushed.

Strengthening democracy and governance is the Commonwealth Secretariat's most significant work and when the Commonwealth of Learning talks of development as freedom it gives a central place to political freedom. Indeed, although the MDGs are mute about democracy, people involved in development attach increasing importance to the role of democracy in furthering development. This takes us back to Sen's view that development is achieved through the free agency of people.

It is becoming clear that decentralising power, to make people free agents at the local level, is a powerful driver of development. The drive towards education for all in India started to take off when the management and funding of schools was decentralised to the local councils - the panchayats.

Even in democracies, both developing and developed, governments resist giving power to the people, whether it be through genuine local government or by allowing community radio stations. However, governments are coming around to the realisation that the risk of empowering the people has to be taken

because it is the surest route to development. But what kind of development do we mean? What we want, of course, is 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 projects that do not peter out when funding is withdrawn. I mean innovations that do not wither on the vine when the equipment breaks down. Some years ago development people talked a lot about 'the culture of maintenance' and I still find that an important concept. Indeed, I sometimes think that the key determinant of whether a country is developed or developing is whether equipment and systems are maintained.

The Commonwealth of Learning is a tiny organisation and it is not a funding body. For us it is very important for the developments that we facilitate to be sustainable in both senses: they continue after we have gone and do not benefit today's generation only at the expense of tomorrow's generation. Indeed, because we are small and can act in only a limited number of places our ambition goes beyond mere sustainability. We want our initiatives to be self-replicating, by which I mean that the ideas and processes are so obviously powerful and successful that others adopt them spontaneously.

These examples all require learning for adaptability. Human adaptability, which is grounded in continuous learning, is the key to sustainability and self-replication. It is not enough for farmers to learn to grow a new crop. They must learn to recognise when it is time to diversify from that crop to something else. It is not enough for people to learn to avoid a single disease; they must learn a culture of wellness. It is not enough for people to learn to install equipment; they must learn to maintain it and recognise when it needs replacing. It is not enough for children to learn the national curriculum; they must learn to learn.

What Kind of Open and Distance Learning?

These examples show that the challenge of development, which is the challenge of expanding the freedoms that people enjoy, is fundamentally a massive challenge of learning. The challenge is huge. There are four billion people living at the bottom of the world economic pyramid. Conventional methods of teaching and learning, however flexible and effective they may be in the right context, simply cannot address the scope and scale of the challenge.

In most areas of life technology has made it possible to address such challenges of scope and scale. Products and services that were once the preserve of the rich are now so much cheaper and so much better that they are now available and attractive to the masses. The huge challenge of development requires that we now apply technology to learning. That is the reason for COL's existence. Our fundamental task is to help countries, institutions and individuals to use technology as a means of expanding and improving learning. By technology we do not simply mean electrical and electronic devices with coloured lights. We mean the whole technological approach that applies knowledge and skills to practical problems and includes basic organisational principles like division of labour and specialisation.

Unfortunately we have a problem of nomenclature and anyone who can help us with that problem will be my friend for life. You could say that COL's business is technology-mediated learning, but that sounds at best like jargon and at worst like gobbledegook to most people. Because of this we usually employ the term for the most successful manifestation of technology-mediated learning, namely open and distance learning or ODL.

Competition in nomenclature is an irritating feature of the effervescent endeavour of applying technology to learning. In recent years new terms have filled the air like confetti: eLearning, virtual learning, flexible learning, blended learning and distributed learning are just a few of the terms that are used to describe attempts to use technology to enhance the scope and scale of learning. Few pause to define the terms or distinguish between them, but all pretend that their preferred term represents the height of modernity and all the others are old hat.

COL does not purvey a particular technology but simply tries to help countries and institutions integrate technology into education and training so as to increase the scope, scale and quality of learning and teaching. I guess that we have to live with the cacophony of terminology as best we can, trying always to use the term that is most likely to make our purpose understood with a particular audience.

COL understands, of course, that competition helps to drive the application of technology forward. However, an important part of our role is to be a catalyst for collaboration. An important new manifestation of that role is our commitment to open educational resources. We believe that that the combination of accessible and adaptable learning management systems for eLearning with learning object repositories that make a rich array of re-usable learning objects readily available is a major advance.

This combination of increasing connectivity and Open Educational Resources has tremendous potential for the developing world. We are enormously impressed by the speed at which some African institutions are taking advantage of these new possibilities. This combination gives a new meaning to the statement that learning is our common wealth. It also brings closer the day when the central proposition of COL's founders might become a reality. That proposition was that: "...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth".

For the last 18 years that statement has been a dead letter. However, in this era of open education resources it could become a reality. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which Ministers of Education have asked us to create, could be one network for putting this principle into practice.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude. My subject has been Open and Distance Learning for the Developing World. What kind of development are we seeking? We want development that increases human freedom on many dimensions. The condition for developing those freedoms is a massive increase in human learning.

Conventional methods of teaching are not up to the task. COL has the opportunity to help countries and institutions use technologies in order to rise to the challenge.

Learning is the common wealth of humankind. Our task is both to increase that wealth and to ensure that is not the private preserve of favoured individuals or institutions but indeed the common wealth of humankind.