Taking the Road Less Travelled: TEDx

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The COVID 19 crisis is forcing us to rethink the way we teach and learn. We have mostly associated education with the classroom and not really adopted alternative approaches. Is it time perhaps to take the road less travelled? I refer to open and distance learning or ODL which has existed for decades on the margins of mainstream education.

According to UNESCO, over 90% of students are unable to attend schools since the outbreak of the pandemic. Countries were clearly not prepared and had to look for immediate solutions to the crisis. Online provision was the preferred option for ensuring that students continued to learn.

But how many students have access to electricity, computers and connectivity? Only half the world's population have internet while there are over 100% mobile subscriptions. What technology do we use to reach our students?

Students in South Africa and Zimbabwe have called for a boycott of online learning calling it unaffordable and elitist. While we recognise that the future of learning is online, there are several tried and tested ways of reaching the unreached even without the internet.

My organisation the Commonwealth of Learning was established by Heads of Government to support Member States and institutions to use distance education and technologies for expanding access to education and training in 54 countries.

We have been promoting the use of open and distance learning or ODL to increase access, reduce costs and improve the quality of education using a range of technologies from print to radio, TV and the internet.

Distance education refers to the separation of the teacher and learner. Because learners and teachers are separated by time and space, some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them.

Open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. Open learning is not the same as distance education but they are complementary and the two terms are used together as open and distance learning or ODL.

Many ODL institutions do not insist on entry qualifications and allow learners to study at their own pace, place and time. Learners receive self-instructional materials in various formats and are provided ongoing tutorial support. It's a very well organised system that works but has not yet been mainstreamed.

Research shows that there is 'no significant difference' between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes; yet there is a lingering perception, especially in the developing world, that distance education is not as effective as class-based education.

When the COVID crisis struck and campus institutions were forced to close with implications for millions of students, open universities remained open. The 27 open universities surveyed in 2016 showed an enrolment of 4.4 million. The scale that open universities achieve drives down the costs per university graduate to less than half of what their campus counterparts pay.

As teachers make the difficult transition from classroom teaching to online provision, they need capacity building. Here again ODL can be deployed to train large numbers. For example, the National Teachers Institute, Nigeria which is a distance learning institution has enrolments of over 150,000 every year. In India, the government's online platform trained 1.3 million teachers in two years. These two approaches —ODL and online provision—are practical solutions for scaling teacher training.

Similarly, if the child cannot go to school, the school comes to the child. Open schooling, which is secondary education offered at a distance, is a cost-effective means of reaching learners who would otherwise not have the opportunity. Having left school at 12, when she was married, Rehana Sultan of Bangladesh was able to go back to school at the age of 22 when her three children asked her to help with their homework. This was only possible by enrolling in an open school.

In addition to the many benefits of ODL, it also has a low carbon footprint. Following research by the Open University, UK, COL conducted a similar study in Botswana, which found that the average carbon footprint of the campus learner is nearly three times greater than that of the distance learner. Emissions from travel were by far the greatest contributor to this disparity.

Social justice has always been the central mission of ODL. With the uneven development of technology in many countries how do we ensure that we leave no one behind?

In pre-COVID 19 days, these children in a remote region in Bangladesh studied in the boat schools. As this is no longer possible today, the only way to reach them is with books, possibly community radio and in some fortunate homes by TV. In fact, TV has had a second coming in many developing countries, where dedicated educational channels have been introduced.

When crisis strikes, it is girls who are the most at risk of dropping out of education. We have initiated Commonwealthwisewomen, a mentorship programme for underprivileged girls which links them with eminent women—politicians, academics and professionals—who talk to them through local translators on WhatsApp to develop leadership skills and aspire to a better future.

Another constituency that is in danger of being further marginalised during this crisis are people with disabilities. Even in normal circumstances, the participation of PWD in higher education has been low, especially in developing countries such as India and South Africa.

This is Preety Daby in Mauritius who could not pass her class 9 exam because of the lack of a braille textbook. Now that she has been provided learning resources and assistive devices she is doing well in class and plans to go to university.

Because ODL aims to include everyone, the technologies used are accessible and affordable and can help convert the digital divide into a digital dividend.

You can see from this photo, how these illiterate women in India learnt corporate finance through their basic mobile phones and established a farm producers company with COL support. This is how they

changed the digital divide into a dividend. In the past two years over 150,000 women in 11 countries have been lifted out of poverty and every dollar invested has resulted in assets worth 9 dollars.

Can Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs reach people who don't have access to computers or connectivity? COL's MOOC for Development provides simple technology solutions such as a basic mobile phone interface, social media integration and delivery in low bandwith situations to reach grassroots communities. These gardeners learnt horticulture in their local language through their basic mobile phones.

COL developed Aptus, a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in remote locations with access to digital resources. It is a server that works with a solar charger and a wireless router and costs approximately $ 150. These boys on a beach in Fiji can download content on their mobile devices without being connected to an electric grid.

In Tonga when all schools were destroyed by a cyclone, Aptus devices and tablets were sent loaded with secondary school content so that classes could be resumed.

The content that was sent was free and available under an open licence as Open Educational Resources or OER. As we know, OER can be adopted, adapted and translated to suit specific contexts. What are the benefits? A study in Antigua & Barbuda showed that not only did the use of OER save costs for the students but also improved learning outcomes. When the Ebola crisis hit West Africa, we sent OER for secondary schools to Sierra Leone for printing and distribution to students while they waited for schools to reopen. Today, there are hundreds of OER repositories, and these are especially valuable during this crisis when countries are looking for quality content.

In the past people have hesitated to opt for ODL. But after hearing about all these benefits, who's afraid of ODL?

COL has been working in this field for over 30 years and can confirm that ODL can help increase access, improve quality, reduce costs and support inclusion all with a lower carbon footprint.

Perhaps the time has come to embrace ODL. And everyone has a role to play. Intergovernmental agencies can proactively advocate for the use of ODL and online learning. COL has initiated the 'International Partnership of distance and online learning for COVID 19' where partners have come together to share resources and expertise.

Governments can develop and implement ODL and technology policies to transform educational systems to be more flexible and resilient to deal with future challenges. Any investment in ICT infrastructure must also make provision for reaching the last mile.

For institutions, the top priority would be to build the capacity of their staff in distance and online learning to cater to the needs of a wide diversity of students as they face an uncertain future.

We have a choice before us: to take the well-trodden path and continue to do what we were doing before the crisis or to learn from our experiences and opt for a new direction. That will mean taking the path less travelled which I am confident, will make all the difference.