

Something Very Important has Happened Here



Botswana Moodle Workshop for the Open School OER Project, Gaborone, 18 September 2009

Remarks at the closing session by Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here at the conclusion of this workshop. During the meeting of the Steering Committee for the Open Schooling OER project that was held across town over the last two days we felt the vibrations of energy and achievement emanating from you. I begin by congratulating you and your workshop facilitator, Maria Madiope, for your dynamism and commitment. Your presentations showed that you have taken a very thoughtful and considered approach to this work. Clearly this has been a splendid exercise in capacity building – which is development jargon for saying that you have all acquired new skills that will increase your competence and confidence as teachers.

I believe that something very important has happened here in the last two weeks, something with importance that goes beyond this group, that goes wider than Botswana, and indeed has global implications. I can best summarize the significance of what you are doing in three words. Coincidentally they all begin with the letter ‘S’: Synergy, Scale and Self-direction.

Synergy

By synergy I mean that you have demonstrated the beginnings of a process that will lead to much closer integration between open schooling and conventional schooling. You are preparing materials that are aimed, in the first instance, at the pupils of open schools, but which will very quickly find their way into conventional classrooms.

The availability of good learning materials is one of the major factors that enhances quality in all forms of schooling. Regular schools already use course materials from open schools but you will greatly facilitate and expand that process for two reasons. First, because you – and your colleagues in the six other countries in the project: Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia – are producing high quality materials in both print and eLearning formats that are thoroughly mapped on to national curriculum requirements. Second, you are making both the print and the eLearning versions available in digital formats as Open Educational Resources, meaning that they can be used and adapted by open and regular schools anywhere.

The developing synergy between open and conventional schooling is demonstrated by the composition of your groups, which include curriculum specialists from the Ministry of Education, teachers from regular schools, and distance learning specialists from BOCODOL, your open school.

This developing synergy is heartening to me personally and also significant in global terms. My own enthusiasm is related to a book that I have just written, to be published next year, entitled *Mega-Schools, Technology & Teachers: Achieving Education for All*. That book is about what we must do to achieve education for all and it focuses on two important mechanisms for that purpose, open schooling and teacher education. In the section about open schooling I categorise the existing open schools as either *complementary*, meaning that they offer the same curriculum as conventional schools, or *alternative*, to signify that they offer a somewhat different curriculum, usually with more focus on vocational subjects. However, I hypothesise that what are really needed now are *integrative* open schools, that operate in synergy with conventional schools to enhance the performance of national education systems overall. They would do this by making quality learning materials widely available – as you are doing – and by acting as a catalyst for improving the performance and efficiency of all schools through the use of technology.

When I submitted the manuscript of the book last month I thought that this concept of the integrative open school was just a hopeful hypothesis, but seeing the work you have done here makes me realise that you are turning it into reality. This synergy is important in global terms because the world's biggest educational challenge is now the extension of secondary schooling to hundreds of millions of children and young adults.

For two decades we have concentrated so single-mindedly on achieving universal primary education that we didn't stop to think about the consequences of reaching the target. Yet the goal is being achieved and a tidal wave – a tsunami – of children are now looking for secondary schooling. Many countries do not have the resources to build the conventional secondary schools that this requires in the foreseeable future, so open schooling must be an important part of the answer to this new challenge. It will be an even more helpful element in the solution to the secondary surge if, as I just proposed, open schooling is seen as a central element in a new educational ecosystem that brings ministries of education, communities, open schools and conventional school systems together in a synergistic and symbiotic way.

Scale

My second word to describe the significance of what you are doing is scale. The key challenge facing ministers of education is to achieve wide access at all levels at low cost and with good quality. I call this the challenge of breaking out of the Iron Triangle, because if you are limited to conventional teaching methods it is impossible to extend access, cut costs and raise quality all at the same time.

However, by scaling up the availability of free quality learning materials as open educational resources you are removing one of the blockages. I urge you to keep the concept of scale firmly in your sights. The numbers of children and young people without access to some form of secondary schooling is between

200 and 400 million, so small-scale solutions are no good.

Earlier Maria Madiope said that you had leapfrogged from your previous skills to those you have today. But I would extend the concept of leapfrogging much further. I believe you are leapfrogging the experience and practice of the West to create a more relevant approach to eLearning for the 21st century. The problem with the approach in the West is that it takes the traditional concept of education as a cottage industry of individual artisans and gives it a little technological sex-appeal. Each individual teacher prepares and administers his or her own eLearning courses. The distinguished distance education researcher Tony Bates calls this the 'Lone Ranger' approach. It doesn't take us very far because it probably decreases the overall efficiency and productivity of the educational enterprise rather than giving us the economies of scale that should accompany the use of technology.

You are leapfrogging the Lone Ranger approach in several ways. First, you are using a team approach to course development, both locally here in Botswana and by joining forces with five other countries to produce a full curriculum at the upper secondary level. Second, by making your courses available as open educational resources you are ensuring the possibility of their use at scale. Third, by building in quizzes, online forums and other means of learning with which pupils can engage directly, you are scaling up your own impact as master teachers.

Self-Directed Learning

Finally, my last 'S', you are fostering an approach to education that will be of increasing importance in the 21st century: self-directed learning. Quite apart from the fact that there are neither the numbers of classrooms nor the numbers of teachers required for everyone to learn in face-to-face mode, this is not the most appropriate mode for much of the learning that our times require. We are no longer preparing people for lots of standardised jobs, whether in factories or bureaucracies, but fostering the qualities of initiative, creativity and adaptability that will enable people to earn livelihoods in the rapidly changing environment of this century.

This means that people must learn to learn and a good way of doing this is to foster self-directed learning at an early age. I am not arguing that eLearning – or indeed print-based courses – automatically lead to self-directed learning, although they clearly require more self-organisation from the student than sitting in a classroom. But I do believe that the approach you have taken, by using instructional design and building in the various learning mechanisms for students to use themselves that I just mentioned, is moving us well down the road to self-directed learning. This is a major contribution and you should be proud of it.

Conclusion and Thanks

I shall stop there. Let me conclude by re-asserting that you are doing something of global importance that will make a signal contribution to the great challenge of the times, which is to extend secondary education to millions of people all over the world.

In closing I thank our hosts, BOCODOL, through the Director, Dr Daniel Tau, for the excellent facilities

they have made available to you and also for their help with the Steering Committee meeting that we have been holding in the last two days. I also thank our Project Leader, Frances Ferreira, and our Project Manager, Dominique Abrioux. They make an impressive team and they are hard taskmasters, but I sense that you think the results are worth it.

Finally, we would not be here without the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and its far-sighted support to the development of open educational resources for more than a decade. They are wonderful people to work with because, whilst they are very focused and clear about the objectives, they realise that projects like this do not always proceed exactly according to plan. We at COL much appreciate the understanding and flexibility that the Foundation shows when we need to find new ways around unanticipated obstacles.

I end by reminding you that this workshop is not the end of the story. It is an important milestone but there is still a long way to go in materials preparation before we achieve our ambition of producing 20 secondary courses as OERS in print and eLearning formats across six countries. I wish you well in the continuation of that work, I hope that you have found it a fulfilling experience as educators, and I thank you for inviting me here to share this closing session with you.