

Promoting Professionalism: The Key to Quality Distance Education



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Promoting Professionalism: The Key to Quality Distance Education

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Introduction

I am honoured to be with you and to bring you greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning. It is a pleasure to be in Sri Lanka again and I thank my good friend Professor Dayantha Wijesekera for inviting me. He and I have known each other for many years. I am particularly proud of having become an honorary doctor of the Open University of Sri Lanka during his tenure as Vice-Chancellor. OUSL was not only one of the first open universities - a true pioneer - but also one of the very few that decided to teach science and technology from the start.

I warmly congratulate Dayantha on his election a moment ago as founding president of SLADE. You have called him the father of distance education in Sri Lanka, so he is a wonderfully appropriate choice.

Since the creation of OUSL distance learning in Sri Lanka has diversified considerably. The Distance Education Modernisation Programme led by Mr Abeyawardena is a prime expression of that diversification. Another feature of that diversification is a second reason for my coming to your lovely country once again.

Professor Uma Coomaraswamy, another former vice-chancellor of OUSL, is leading a very exciting project called Lifelong Learning for Farmers that has achieved considerable success over the water in India and is now doing so here. This farmer, Mr A.D.Piyitissa from Hambantota, has increased his income by a factor of five thanks to this programme. The challenge is to multiply this impact.

This week we have formally launched pilot applications of this approach to improving rural prosperity in Hambantota, Batticaloa and Anuradhapura, which has given me a very pleasant opportunity to visit the southern part of your country for the first time.

Today we inaugurate the Sri Lanka Association of Distance Educators, SLADE. Thank you for inviting me to be part of the celebrations. I look forward to hearing the various short interventions that will follow and give us an overview of the richness and diversity of distance learning in Sri Lanka, which is increasing greatly thanks to the Distance Education Modernisation Programme.

I have entitled these remarks *Promoting Professionalism: The Key to Quality in Distance Education*. I shall first explain my title and then illustrate briefly the key elements of distance education that call for particular professionalism over and beyond the professionalism required in education generally.

Let me first affirm that the Commonwealth of Learning is there to help you in every way as you try to extend and improve the practice of distance education in Sri Lanka.

The Importance of Professional Associations

I have had a long involvement with national and international associations that bring together distance educators.

Back in the 1970s I became programme chairman of what was then the International Council for Correspondence Education, the ICCE. Those were the days when multi-media distance education was developing rapidly with the creation of institutions like OUSL. Such institutions brought a new approach to distance learning and were unhappy with having the term correspondence education applied to them. They thought it evoked a previous era and a poor image.

A group of us that included David Sewart of the UK Open University and Kevin Smith of the University of New England in Australia believed that the best way to serve the international professional interests of the rapidly growing number of distance educators was to reform and transform the International Council for Correspondence Education rather than to create a new organisation. Accordingly we took a resolution to the 1982 Vancouver conference of the ICCE which proposed changing the name to the International Council for Distance Education, the ICDE.

Later, without changing the acronym ICDE, the association added the word 'open' to its title and became the International Council for Open and Distance Education. This is not the place to give the history of ICDE since 1982. Let me simply say that from being a democratically run membership organisation the ICDE drifted into becoming more of a project management agency during the 1990s. I am delighted to say, however, that the tide has now turned back. A new constitution has given the ICDE back to its membership and reform is under way. I would like to pay tribute to David Sewart, who has once again played a central role in the positive evolution of this important international association.

My next involvement with a professional association of distance educators was at the national level, when I was president of the Canadian Association of Distance Education, CADE (which rhymes with SLADE) in the late 1980s. CADE has played an important role as a forum for professional discussion amongst distance educators across the vast landmass of Canada and last year it merged with the Association for Media and Technology in Education in Canada, AMTEC, in just one illustration of how distance education and technology must increasingly work hand in glove.

The next example of my involvement with professional associations of distance education was at the regional level - in Europe.

When I arrived at the UK Open University as Vice-Chancellor in 1990 the open universities of Europe had just created the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, EADTU. Indeed, EADTU is celebrating its 20th anniversary at a conference in Lisbon later this year.

EADTU, as its name implies, is an association of institutions - and a relatively limited number of institutions. Many of us felt that something more was needed to help with the professional development of the many Europeans who were getting involved in distance learning, not just in open universities, but more widely. Those were the days, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Berlin Wall came down and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe faced massive transformations of their economies and their polities. Many of them considered that distance learning had a major role to play in educating and training people to live in market economies and liberal democracies.

Distance educators in Western Europe wanted to help their fellow Europeans in the East to make this transition and this led to the creation of what is now EDEN, the European Distance Education and eLearning Network. EDEN is very much a network of professionals rather than a grouping of institutions. In that respect it resembles your own association, which is for distance educators rather than distance education institutions.

EDEN has done great work over the years thanks to its Secretary General, Andras Szucs and a succession of dynamic presidents and council members like Alan Tait of the UKOU.

Finally, since I have come to the Commonwealth of Learning I have had regular involvement with national and regional associations of distance educators, such as CARADOL, the Caribbean Regional Association for Distance and Open Learning, which was launched in 2005. COL works closely with such associations in organising the Pan-Commonwealth Forums on Open Learning that we hold every two years.

The next one will be held in London in July 2008 and will be a very special event. COL is organising it with the University of London, which is celebrating the 150th anniversary of its External Studies Programme. As you know, the establishment of the University of London External Programme in the 19th century was a seminal event in the development of distance learning and cross-border education. I hope that we shall see a strong delegation of SLADE members at the event.

The programme of this 5th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, PCF5, is a good illustration of how distance education is evolving. The overall theme is *Access to Learning for Development*. There is a special focus on the application of distance learning to health and to livelihoods - by which I mean the sorts of things we are doing here in Sri Lanka with the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme. This is vital, because the key to development, here in Sri Lanka as in many other countries, is to improve prosperity in the rural areas.

We are absolutely delighted with the beginnings of the Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme here. The Piyatissa family in Hambantota district used to live in the thatched hut on the left. Thanks to changing the crops they grow and the methods they use they have increased their income dramatically and

built the house on the right. This is the effect that we intend to multiply using ODL and ICTs to improve livelihoods.

Another important focus is on distance learning at secondary school level, which is becoming an imperative for many countries as they begin to achieve universal primary education but do not have the resources to create a traditional system of secondary schools to serve the whole population.

There will also be sessions on the application of open and distance learning, ODL, to governance, conflict resolution and social justice. This is a very different agenda from the focus on distance learning in higher education that might have dominated such a meeting ten or twenty years ago.

It shows that ODL is finding its way into more and more areas of life, which shows in turn why we need to provide opportunities for professional development in the field and why the creation of SLADE is such a welcome development.

The Professionalism of Distance Education

Let me conclude, therefore with a few words on the professionalism of distance education. Is there a special professionalism required in this field? Won't the professionalism that is associated with education generally suffice?

I argue that it will not suffice, because, however much we may talk about blended learning and the convergence of distance and conventional methods, distance education has a different dynamic. You can express this in various ways.

One is to say that conventional education is still a cottage industry where a single artisan, the teacher, working in a small space called a classroom, essentially supplies and controls all aspects of the process. There is nothing wrong with this approach for many purposes. However, it is not scalable and it imposes constraints of attendance that eliminates many potential students.

In contrast to the cottage industry distance education is an industrialised form of education that uses technology to achieve scale and flexibility. The term 'industrialised' may sound rather forbidding, evoking images of smoking factories and impersonal processes but its expression today is the knowledge-based society. The bottom picture shows young women at the University of Colombo's Plant Science centre in Welligatte doing tissue culture on bananas for the Lifelong Learning for Farmers project.

The essence of industry and technology is contained in the two concepts of division of labour and specialisation that were the basis of the industrial revolution. The famous Scottish economist Adam Smith described how the process of making a pin could be divided into a series of steps so that machines could be designed to carry out each step quickly and accurately. The result was the volume production of high quality pins at a much lower cost than an artisan could achieve by conducting every step in the process by hand.

Distance education takes the same approach. We begin by dividing the educational, training or learning activity that we wish to carry out into its component parts. There may be many such parts but we can group them into three main processes. Think of distance learning, if you like, as a three-legged stool.

The first leg of the stool is course or materials development. Distance learning achieves quality and economies of scale by capturing knowledge in a permanent way: in print, on video, or in electronic formats. It can then be reproduced cheaply in volume, which in turn makes it worthwhile to invest in giving high academic and pedagogical quality to the material.

The second leg of the stool is support to students. Some students can learn just by having access to the materials, but they are a minority. Most students need support from other human beings and over the last fifty years we have developed a huge body of knowledge about how to do this effectively and cost-effectively.

The third leg of the stool is administration and logistics. These are vitally important because unless you get them right you are wasting your time with the other two legs of the stool. Distance learning systems often involve large numbers of students and unless they are run efficiently the system simply doesn't work.

In conventional education one person, the teacher, has to tackle each of these three aspects: preparing lessons; having contact with the students; and organising the system. But in distance learning we specialise - and, of course, we often specialise within the three components that I have described. Because we specialise we can do a better job. We can bring greater professionalism to each step in the process, train ourselves for its particular requirements and conduct research on what works best. This is why it is so important to have a professional organisation like SLADE as a forum for discussion and mutual encouragement.

Finally, let me note that ever-changing technologies also generate the need for such a forum for professional development. New technologies are enormously promising for distance education and that is a whole lecture in itself. Your Distance Education Modernisation Programme is an admirable attempt to get to grips with new technologies on a national scale.

Let me just note that the new electronic media can make learning materials much richer. Note also the potentially revolutionary development called open educational resources, or OERS.

These are materials, developed on an electronic platform but downloadable to other media, which are freely available for you to take, adapt and use. The volume of OERS is growing rapidly and gives you all sorts of new opportunities to enrich your programmes without having to develop everything from scratch. I hope that OERs will become a feature of the products of the DEMP programme.

Regarding the second leg of distance education, student support, the rapid march of connectivity is making it easier to keep in touch with students, to put students in touch with each other, and to give rapid feedback.

Finally, concerning logistics, web-based student management systems allow students to do much of their own administration. This empowers them and saves money for the institution.

Conclusion

Let me sum up. Distance education is at a tremendously exciting point in its development. It is being applied in more and more areas of life and changing technology is making it more and more attractive and effective. To take full advantage of these developments the distance educators of Sri Lanka must constitute themselves as a vibrant community of professional practice. The Sri Lankan Association of Distance Educators is the mechanism for that. I congratulate you on creating it and I wish it every success. COL is there to help you.