

# *Education for All: Technology is the Answer – What was the Question?*

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*Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning*

## **Introduction**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you after dinner. Experience has taught me that these assignments can be more challenging than speaking at the conference proper.

The good news is that if your listeners have enjoyed their food and drink they will be in a tolerant mood. The speaker can then turn to advantage Samuel Johnson's observation that one of the disadvantages of wine is that it makes a man mistake words for thought.

The bad news is after a convivial evening like this, when conversations at table are well engaged, you may not want to hear a dinner speaker at all. As you know, the Emperor Nero liked to treat the citizens of Rome to bloodthirsty spectacles. He particularly enjoyed making Christians, who were considered seditious folk in those days, fight hungry lions.

This was about to happen in the Coliseum. The Emperor was in his imperial seat; a few Christians, armed only with short swords, were already in the arena and the Roman crowd was baying for the fight to commence.

The gate was opened and the lions rushed in, paused a second for their eyes to adjust to the sunlight, and then bounded towards the Christians. At this point one of the Christians was seen to walk calmly towards the leading lion and say something. At this the lion growled and lay down in sand and the other lions followed suit. The surprised crowd shouted even louder for action but the lions would not budge. Finally Nero called the Christian over to his box. 'What did you say to the Lion?' he asked. 'I said there would be speeches after the meal', he replied.

So after dinner remarks can be a tricky challenge. But this evening at least my choice of topic is easy. This is the Canada Annual Meeting of the Royal Commonwealth Society. I head the only Commonwealth

intergovernmental organisation based in Canada, the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver. It seems natural that I should tell you about it because I believe you can feel proud of COL and what it does.

## What is the Commonwealth of Learning

What does it do? COL is the only intergovernmental body in the world with a mission centred on using technology in education. I suspect that many of you, being small ‘c’ conservative folk, think that educational technology is an oxymoron. My task is to convince you that it is not. Indeed, I shall argue that it represents our only hope of achieving the elusive goal of giving all Commonwealth citizens the opportunity to learn to their full potential.

But I do accept that technology is too often oversold by both techno-enthusiasts and vendors, so I forgive you a degree of scepticism. That’s why my title tonight is: *Education for All: Technology is the Answer – What was the Question?*

The question is very simple: how can we bring education to all of the world’s people? This is eminently a challenge for the Commonwealth, where the global development challenges are writ large.

Half of the world’s AIDS sufferers and two-thirds of maternal deaths in childbirth are in the Commonwealth, as are half of the 75 million children who do not go to primary school. Think about that: the number of children missing out on primary school in the Commonwealth is greater than the total population of Canada: children and adults.

What are the answers that COL brings to the challenge of education for all through technology? Some people, who consider themselves visionaries, simply say ‘give them all laptops’. But that is nonsense. With friends like those, who needs enemies?

Such people lack perspective. They remind me of the American tourist who visited Windsor Castle and said that it was a nice residence but he couldn’t understand why the Queen had built it under the flight path into Heathrow Airport.

But first, why was COL built and why is it headquartered in Vancouver? During the 1980s, as a result of rising university tuition fees in rich countries like Canada and the UK, the number of Commonwealth students going abroad to study dropped sharply. The Commonwealth’s Standing Committee on Student Mobility prepared a report which suggested that if you couldn’t move the students; then why not move the courses instead.

In 1987, under Prime Minister Mulroney, Canada hosted both the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and the Sommet de la Francophonie. He encouraged new initiatives involving technology in education at both events.

At the CHOGM the Canadian initiative merged with the ideas about student mobility. Heads of Government agreed that technology had much to contribute to education, training and learning and the

Commonwealth of Learning was born with vigorous advocacy – and offers of money – by two large developing countries, India and Nigeria.

Canada and British Columbia campaigned eagerly to host COL in Vancouver and won the beauty contest. But what would this new Commonwealth of Learning actually do?

## Which Model?

There were two models on the table. The first was a hi-tech University of the Commonwealth for Cooperation in Distance Education that would use satellites to beam courses around the Commonwealth. The second model was an agency that would help countries to develop educational technology for themselves.

I had the privilege of chairing the planning committee that met in 1988 to weigh up these options. It opted firmly for the second, and ever since then COL has been helping countries use technology to expand education and learning. This is what Ian Macdonald called ‘indigenising development’ when he spoke at lunch.

But I note that in 2000 an echo of the first model resurfaced when the Commonwealth Education Ministers met in Halifax. The ministers from the 32 small states that make up two-thirds of Commonwealth membership were alarmed by the dotcom frenzy then at its height. The media were hyping the Internet as the future of everything, including education.

The Ministers decided that since their small states did not have the critical mass of people and technology to crack the eWorld individually, they should work together.

They asked COL to help them create a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which would not be a new university but a vehicle for collaboration between the governments and institutions in the small states. Nine years on their vision is really gaining traction. Yesterday, before I left Vancouver, I received a letter from the Minister of Education of Mauritius commenting effusively on the benefits that the Virtual University is bringing to Mauritius.

That’s because the VUSSC, as we call it, is totally consistent with our mission of helping countries do things for themselves instead of importing solutions from the North.

So what else does COL do? In two weeks’ time I shall present our new plan for 2009-2012 to the Commonwealth Education Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur. Its title is *Learning for Development*.

We share Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen’s vision that development means freedom. Development is about enhancing the freedoms that people can enjoy. Freedom is both the measure of development and the driver of development, because free people develop their families, their communities and their nations.

We root this concept of development operationally in the Millennium Development Goals, the campaign for Education for All, and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equity and the rule of law.

## COL's Activities

COL is a small agency that has a clear mission – to use technology to expand learning – and a tight focus. We work in two general areas. One sector, Education, works to improve the accessibility of formal education systems at all levels. There are four key issues.

The first, which I've already mentioned, is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Small states are challenged in many ways: by the terms of trade, by climate change, by rising sea levels, and by the cost of transport. The VUSSC will help them expand tertiary education at home, saving money and reducing brain drain.

Second – perhaps our hottest area – is open schooling. I said that 75 million children do not attend primary school. But progress is rapid. By 2006, primary numbers had grown by 40 million over 1999 and the gains continue. However, success in primary is sending a tidal wave of kids towards secondary school.

Many of them will not find regular schools, so COL is leading the international community in helping countries to create open schools that use a combination of distance learning methods and local study centres to educate children at scale. And I mean scale. India's National Institute for Open Schooling has 1.2 million pupils. Even in Namibia, with a population of only 2 million, the national open school, with 25,000 pupils, accounts for 40% of all secondary enrolments.

We also help countries scale up teacher training, which is a key bottleneck in achieving Education for All. The world needs 18 million more primary teachers by 2015 and this is not just a problem for developing countries. Conventional approaches to teacher education simply cannot provide the numbers needed.

We also help countries widen access to higher education and improve its quality by scaling up the use of distance and eLearning. One programme there also relates Ian Macdonald's remarks at lunch. Some years ago COL worked with the four open universities of South Asia: Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to produce two distance learning programmes: a Commonwealth Executive MBA programme and a Commonwealth Executive Master of Public Administration.

These complement the programmes that Ian runs at York but because they are done through distance learning they have reached thousands of students in South Asia and are now being offered in Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and Jamaica.

That is how we are helping countries expand their formal education systems. Our aim is to break that insidious link between quality and exclusivity that has been the bugbear of education throughout history.

With conventional classroom teaching you cannot expand access, improve quality and cut costs all at the

same time. Improving on one dimension tends to make the others worse.

But technology does allow that revolution. It helps you achieve higher quality, wider access and lower cost all at the same time. That is why technology is the key to learning for development.

Our second sector of work is *Livelihoods and Health*. Here the aim is to improve the income, livelihoods and quality of life of communities and their members through new knowledge, skills and economic opportunities gained through technology-based learning. That sector also houses four activities.

The first is skills development. Even before the economic downturn people needed more and better vocational education. Here again, conventional methods can't address the scale of the challenge.

Second, we are proud of the success of our Learning for Farming programme. By bringing together villagers, local information providers, banks and little Internet kiosks we have helped to make hundreds of Indian farmers, mostly women, more prosperous in sustainable ways. Today we are scaling up the model and taking it to Kenya, Papua New Guinea and Jamaica.

Third, messages about health are more effective if they are done by the people, for the people. So we foster the use of community media for health education and help people ensure that community media really are of the community.

Finally, COL faces an insatiable demand for training in eLearning. We scale this up using wiki technology to create of open educational resources that everyone can use.

## COL is Country Focused

Some of this may sound theoretical but I assure you that it is highly practical and impacts millions of people. Even though COL is small – fewer than forty staff in Vancouver and New Delhi combined – we focus resolutely on each member country. In Kuala Lumpur we shall distribute COL in the Commonwealth 2006-2009, a 200-page compendium of country reports showing what we have done in or for each of the 53 countries of the Commonwealth.

Thanks to this intense country focus the number of countries making voluntary contributions to our budget has grown from twenty to forty in just four years. COL is something of which you, as the Royal Commonwealth Society of Canada, can be proud.

## Can COL and the RCS Work Together?

Finally, we would like to work with the RCS on an important project. The former UK Prime Minister, John Major, choosing his words carelessly, once remarked that when you've got your back to the wall you must turn round and fight.

Our world has its back to the wall in the fight against intolerance and violence. The Commonwealth way

is to fight this with respect and understanding. You know of the report that was commissioned by the Malta CHOGM and presented at the Kampala CHOGM called Civil Paths to Peace. It was prepared by a distinguished panel of people with direct experience of conflict and chaired by Amartya Sen.

The conclusions and recommendations of their insightful report will have little impact if they are only taken to heart by people like us – that is merely preaching to the choir.

The Secretary-General has asked COL to lead in getting the message out to the youth of the Commonwealth – which if you count youth as people up to age 25 is half the population of the Commonwealth: a billion young people. The idea is to promote respect and understanding through the media and technologies that youth use so effortlessly. Not to preach to them, but to have them engage with in dialogue about tolerance and harmony by contributing short videos about their own experience.

At the formal level my colleague Willie Clarke-Okah has arranged for the large open universities of the Commonwealth to pool courseware about civil paths to peace to expand and enhance their programmes.

But we are looking to the RCS for help with something more informal and on a larger scale. I know that your energetic new leader, Dr. Danny, wants to increase the Society's engagement with youth and to take the RCS into the age of tweets, YouTube and Facebook. By working together we might start a tremendous popular movement for good.

## Conclusion

That's enough from me after a busy day. I have three messages for you. One: technology offers great hope for extending education to all. Two: the Commonwealth of Learning is a jewel of which Canadians can be proud. Three: COL and the RCS can help to create a more peaceful world by engaging youth in the campaign to spread respect and understanding.

Thank you