

Opening Remarks



*Educational Technology 2000:
A Global Vision for Open and Distance Learning*

*Singapore
August 1996*

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*by
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Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen,

During the course of university teaching over a period of 40 years, I have encountered a number of interesting students - mostly successful but often unusual. I think here of two in particular. In the first class that I taught on the Principles of Economics, there was a young man in his early thirties who was already a multi millionaire: he had benefited from the post-war boom in Canada to make a fortune in housing developments. And I was to teach him the Principles of Economics? When I asked him why he had now come to university, he replied that he wanted to be a successful human being as well as a rich entrepreneur!

The second took his degree at age 87. He had left school when only 14 to help support his family, and had worked all his life at a variety of jobs. When I asked him the same question, he replied that he wanted to be better prepared for the after life than he had been for the first!

Whatever the merits of the case, it could certainly be argued that both were enjoying a luxury, in contrast to the millions of people in the world who are denied an education even of the most basic kind. However, both cases illustrate two points about education:

the primary importance of access.
the more endearing purposes of education.

I believe that access is what this Conference is all about; it is certainly what the Commonwealth of Learning is all about. And the miracles of educational technology make access possible now on a scale heretofore unimagined. In 1982, during my first visit to India, I vividly recall a conversation with the late Madame Gandhi who said that India's educational objective was to have every child with access to primary education by the year 1995. But, to realise that objective by conventional means would require the addition of 10 million school places a year until 1995; as a result there had to be another way! Thirty years earlier, my good friend and colleague, the late Marshall McLuhan, was talking about "schools without walls". At that time, he was confronted daily by a combination of people who neither understood his message nor believed it possible. Indeed, only a few years ago, ET as exemplified by the well-known film meant extra-terrestrial; opportunities such as now exist were perceived to be only within the realm of another world.

Today, ET means educational technology capable of taking education to people rather than people to education. To serve that objective in the 53 nations of the Commonwealth is the mandate of the Commonwealth of Learning. Founded in 1987 and established in 1988, COL is the only Commonwealth institution located outside of London. Working to support education at all levels - primary, secondary, tertiary and non-formal, and employing all means of communication - print, audio, visual and electronic, the Commonwealth of Learning seeks to support open learning and distance education through the design and implementation of programmes that:

support and improve institutions already engaged in distance learning;
create better systems for distance educators to communicate and share information; and,
forge new partnerships between Commonwealth countries and distance educators.
Needless to say, I could spend the next three days describing our activities, but let me just reveal the tip of the iceberg - a suitable Canadian metaphor - with four examples:

1. Finding the right media: in the case of our work in Ghana, this turned out to be a Field Recording Unit for radio production.
2. The integration of technology and training: in the case of our assistance to the Maldives, this took the form of computer-based desktop video editing systems.
3. Sustainability in terms of recurring costs: this led COL to establish a communication network in the Solomon Islands linking a group of sites through a teleconference bridge.
4. To meet the relatively newly perceived needs for "tele-medicine": we are at the moment establishing the Malaysian Medical Teleconference System, a teaching network combining audio data with supporting graphics.

When the history of these times is written, I suggest that it will pronounce the new communications technologies to be of equal or even greater significance than the

Gutenberg era, and we are privileged to be a part of it. However that takes me to the second point with which I began: the enduring purposes of education, and several necessary caveats.

First, educational technology is a significant supplement but it does not replace the human element and the qualitative role of the teacher.

Second, education is not simply about the enlargement of the gross national product. Indeed, in these days of concern over sustainable development, we must continue our efforts to take some of the grossness out of the gross national product, and to produce a world of greater peace and compassion.

Third, if the final result, both in terms of nations and individuals, should be that the rich get richer and the lot of the poorer is not enhanced, then we shall have failed utterly.

Therefore, we must never turn our backs on those for whom technology will be slower to take root, in the interests of building monuments to ourselves as distance educators.

Finally, we must ensure that increasing use of educational technology does not encourage a paternal as opposed to a partnership approach between individuals, institutions and nations. I can assure you that the Commonwealth of Learning, in employing open learning and distance education as a means of ensuring greater opportunities and greater equality, operates from the principle that we will all learn from one another in the process. In that sense, we are a catalyst rather than a missionary.

For all of these reasons, COL is pleased to co-sponsor this conference, and, as Chairman of the Board of COL, it is my pleasant duty to welcome you and thank you for joining us. As well, COL will live or die according to its ability to work as a significant partner with other vital institutions. Therefore, we are particularly happy to join with AMIC and its Secretary General, Vijay Menon, during its Silver Jubilee Year. I congratulate you, Vivay, and my colleagues at COL, for preparing the feast of knowledge, which we are to enjoy over these three days.