

Expanding the reach of Literacy, Literature and Learning



*Association for Commonwealth Studies, the Literatures
of the Commonwealth Conference, Cumberland Lodge,
Windsor, UK 15 May 2005*

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Learning*

*By: Sir John Daniel, President & CEO
Commonwealth of Learning*

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be with you. It is especially good to be here in Windsor Great Park, because at age five I spent two years of my life overlooking this place from the hill above Runnymede where we then lived. Another unexpected pleasure is to meet so many old friends from the British-North American Committee, a splendid organisation of which I was a member before I joined the UN system a few years ago.

Being invited to speak at this Conference on the Literatures of the Commonwealth by my old friend Tom Symons is a third pleasure. Tom is a great Commonwealth figure who has a way of getting you to do things you hadn't expected to do. 21 years ago I arrived in Sudbury, Ontario, as president of Laurentian University. I had hardly got my feet under the desk when Tom called to point out to me that Laurentian was not a member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities and to ask what I was going to do about it. Needless to say we joined the ACU in short order and I gained greater satisfaction from the ACU than from any other university association.

I gave an equally rapid reply to his request that I address you tonight. As a relative newcomer to the world of Commonwealth organisations I am amazed by the number and vigour of the specialist groups, like yours, that the Commonwealth has generated. I look forward to getting to know more of them and it is a pleasure to start with you.

The pleasure is greater because you are the sort of folk who believe that wine enhances the discussion of literature. Samuel Johnson said that the disadvantage of wine was that it makes you mistake words for thought. But for a layman like me addressing experts like you that is an advantage. Please do mistake my words for thought.

I understand that this gathering includes authors, journalists, teachers and academics. Different perspectives are good. Although Oscar Wilde once remarked that the difference between journalism and literature is that journalism is unreadable and literature is not read, I prefer Karel Capek's more profound statement. He argued that literature is the expression of old truths in eternally new forms, while newspapers are eternally expressing new realities in a stabilised and unchangeable form.

An important principle in life, enunciated by Canada's former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, is 'to dance with the girl what brung you'. The Commonwealth of Learning, which I shall call COL, brought me to Windsor so I shall first tell you briefly what COL is and does. The *raison d'être* of COL is distance education and I shall argue that this relatively new approach to teaching and learning is having a particularly powerful impact on expanding the knowledge and appreciation of literature amongst a new adult audience.

I have given my remarks the title: Expanding the reach of Literacy, Literature and Learning. In talking to you I shall bear in mind the sage advice that my wife has given me at successive stages in my career in public speaking. When I was young it was 'say something interesting'; in middle age it was, 'don't be too long'; today it is simply 'stand up straight and pull your stomach in'.

It is both a relief and a challenge that you do not expect me to illustrate my remarks with slides. A relief because they might distract you from mistaking my words for thought; a challenge because it has been well said that there are two kinds of speakers, those with slides and those with ideas.

The Commonwealth of Learning

The Commonwealth of Learning emerged at the confluence of two trends. First, during the 1980s, as countries like the UK increased university fees for foreign students, the number of young Commonwealth people studying overseas fell. This led some people to ask, 'if we can't move the students to us, why don't we move the courses to them?'

By then the Open University was well established here in Britain and had shown that learning and teaching at a distance could work. Second, the communications revolution had created new opportunities for sharing courses between universities and countries.

These trends set the stage for a meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government in Vancouver in 1987. They received a report from a group chaired by Lord Asa Briggs, the social historian. The title, *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*, was evocative and its recommendations included the aspiration that "...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth".

The Heads of Government, inspired by the enthusiasm of India's Rajiv Gandhi, overcame the scepticism of Britain's Margaret Thatcher and decided to create a new Commonwealth intergovernmental agency called the Commonwealth of Learning. It is a perfect name because learning is - or should be - our

common wealth.

As often happens, the political decision to create COL was taken before fully resolving ambiguities of purpose. In 1988 I had the honour of chairing a planning committee charged with recommending what COL would actually do. The essential choice was expressed by the famous Chinese proverb: if you give a man a fish he will eat for a day but if you teach him to fish he will eat for a lifetime.

Would the Commonwealth of Learning provide fish for thought, by beaming lectures by satellite around the Commonwealth, or would it teach countries to fish for educational sustenance themselves? With the overseas development agencies of the richer countries well represented on the planning group the choice was not in doubt. COL would not be a university of the Commonwealth but an agency that would help countries apply various technologies, particularly distance learning, to enhance the scope, scale and impact of their education and training systems.

It was the right decision and that is what we do. We are small, with a total of 40 people based in Vancouver and in New Delhi but I believe that we are effective. I have visited 20 Commonwealth countries since joining COL last year and I find ministers of education very enthusiastic about our work. That is because we have such excellent and dedicated staff. Being one of the only Commonwealth bodies located outside Britain also helps by giving us a fresh perspective on the Commonwealth.

In the early days much of our work was advocacy. We cited the open universities as examples to show governments that it is possible to increase access to education whilst at the same time cutting costs and improving quality. This was a revolutionary message. Throughout history education has been locked in an iron triangle defined by the vectors of access, cost and quality.

Everyone had assumed that if you tried to increase access you would increase cost and lower quality. If you tried to improve quality you would have to raise costs and reduce access, and so on. The revolution of distance learning is that it allows you to increase numbers, improve quality and cut costs - all at the same time.

Today we are preaching to the converted. In January I was in West Africa where President Obusanjo received me in Nigeria and President Kufuor received me in Ghana. Both are fully committed to use distance learning to achieve education for all and each was personally involved in implementing the policies, systems and structures necessary. The Gambia was only a step or two behind and Sierra Leone sees distance learning as a vital plank in its daunting task of educational reconstruction.

These examples illustrate a general trend. Before joining COL I was Assistant Director-General at UNESCO, the first Briton to hold that post since Richard Hoggart, author of *The Uses of Literacy*. Indeed, my only previous visit to Cumberland Lodge, which is a splendid place, was to dine with Richard Hoggart at Alastair Niven's invitation.

At UNESCO my primary task was to re-energise the global campaign for education for all, that simple aspiration in the 1946 Constitution of UNESCO that has remained elusive for sixty years.

Learning for Development

The drive for education for all is now part of the wider challenge of attaining the Millennium Development Goals: eight goals from the UN's Millennium Declaration that aim to transform the lives of billions of our fellow human beings. These goals also define much of our work at COL.

We are in the business of increasing the freedoms of humankind because, following Amartya Sen's inspiring book, we interpret 'development as freedom'. Development is process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.

According to Sen the expansion of freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development. The central criterion for the assessment of progress is whether the freedoms of people are enhanced. Furthermore, it is primarily through the free agency of people that development occurs. Free people devote more energy to the development of their communities than those who are not.

What kinds of freedom? First, there is freedom from hunger. You cannot concentrate on much else if you worry constantly where your next meal is coming from. Hunger is a direct manifestation of poverty. Taking people out of abject poverty helps to free them from hunger and gives them other freedoms as well, notably some freedom from being pushed around by others and from having most of life's decisions made for them.

The freedoms that come with release from abject poverty can better be exercised with some education and training. Education, leading to various uses of literacy, gives people freedom to communicate. Training, leading to skills that underpin livelihoods, gives people freedom to work. There are other freedoms, including freedom for men and women to be treated equally, freedom from disease, and the freedom to live with a minimum of dirt, smoke and germs.

To these the Commonwealth adds the notion of political freedom because democracy is a condition of membership of the Commonwealth. Although the Millennium Development goals are mute about democracy because they had to reflect a consensus of all UN members, democratic and non-democratic, those who work in development attach increasing importance to democracy in driving development.

Such a broad understanding of development requires a broad understanding of learning. Learning is the common wealth of humankind and our task is both to increase that wealth and, as far as possible, to ensure that it is the common wealth of humankind rather than the private preserve of favoured individuals or institutions.

Freedom from poverty and hunger requires learning in the millions of villages in the world. Freedom from avoidable disease requires people to learn some simple things about hygiene. If everyone washed their hands five times a day the health of the world would be transformed. Above all we need learning for adaptability.

Much of this learning is pretty basic. Its foundation is literacy but with adults we can often lay that foundation better if it is literacy for livelihoods rather than literacy for literature. Today we define literacy

less as the three 'Rs' of reading, writing and arithmetic and more as the three 'Hs' of head, hands and heart.

But simply reciting these mnemonics shows how silly it is to try to divorce literacy for livelihoods from literacy for literature. We cannot take the approach of Charles Dickens' editor to this dichotomy. You will recall that Dickens' editor opened the manuscript of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and read the first sentence, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. He wrote back, 'Mr Dickens, would you please make up your mind?'

We do not have to choose between literacy for livelihoods and literacy for literature. People do not live by bread alone. Women in Bangladesh, for instance, are first attracted to literacy because it helps them earn a livelihood and through that raises their status within their families and communities. But many will then want to progress beyond literacy for livelihood and use literacy to exercise political freedoms and to nourish their personal growth.

Literacy for Literature

I dare to affirm that nothing contributes so much to personal growth as the reading and study of literature. This has been demonstrated brilliantly in literature so I do not have to bore you by arguing the case like an international bureaucrat. I simply refer you to that splendid playwright, Willy Russell, and his play *Educating Rita*. Many of you will have seen the play or the film version with Julie Walters and Michael Caine. If you haven't you must.

The play had to take some understandable artistic liberties in dramatising the Open University's teaching system by concentrating on its interactive elements: the tutorials and the summer schools. However, from my experience of eleven years as vice-chancellor of the Open University, I can assert that the play and the film are absolutely accurate in their portrayal of the effect that studying literature had on Rita. I met tens of thousands of adults like Rita.

The Open University has a student body of over 100,000 and well over 10,000 of them graduate each year. They like to bring their families, which often mean their children and grandchildren, to see them receive their degrees. In response the OU organises some 25 convocation ceremonies a year, all over the UK and further afield.

I particularly remember the first time we held a ceremony in Dublin, because it was held in the very same hall at Trinity College that was used for filming that memorable scene in *Educating Rita* in which Michael Caine falls off the stage, roaring drunk, in the middle of a lecture. The hall actually has a very narrow stage and I can assure you that we took particular care not to fall off it during the degree ceremony.

In my eleven years as vice-chancellor I officiated at some 150 such ceremonies and talked individually to over 50,000 graduates as they came across the stage. I often asked, 'how has OU study changed you?' Time and again the answers came back: 'greater confidence', 'I'm a different person', 'it's changed my

life'.

I asked others, 'what was your favourite course?' To my surprise almost every course the OU offered, even those that their authors would rather have forgotten, was mentioned from time to time.

But the literature courses had by far the largest fan clubs. Some graduates would get misty-eyed merely by recalling their course on the Victorian Novel or their study of The Enlightenment.

Indeed, the popularity of some courses became a real problem. My OU colleagues, as self-respecting academics, considered that any course could only remain current for a limited number of years. After that it should be withdrawn, either to be rewritten in the light of newer scholarship or to be replaced by a new course on another topic.

I remember the uproar when, following this principle, we retired a course called Rome: The Augustan Age to replace it by a course on the Greeks.irate letters poured into the University arguing that since the Romans had not done anything new recently it was outrageous to withdraw the course.

But that row was as nothing to the eruption when we took off a Shakespeare course. Again the sarcastic letters to the vice-chancellor, 'Shakespeare hasn't written any new plays recently, so how can the course be out of date?' And this was in the UK.

Knowing that Shakespeare is more widely read in India than in the UK I shudder to think of the riots there would be if the Indira Gandhi National Open University, with its 1.5 million students, were to withdraw a course on Shakespeare!

The demand for literature was insatiable. A course led by Professor Dennis Walder on Post-Colonial Literatures in English, which embraces much Commonwealth literature, continues to enjoy enormous success in its second incarnation.

This is not the place to open up the many issues raised in *Educating Rita*, like the balance between applying the discipline of literacy criticism and reacting to literature spontaneously. Rita came to the Open University because she wanted to 'discover herself' but later after Frank, her tutor, had warned her that a hungry mind is not a guarantee of success, she buckled down to the academic study of literature. At that point Frank, himself disillusioned by the study of literature, worried that she was suppressing or abandoning her personal uniqueness.

Rita had come to literature to find a better song to sing in her life. Frank warns her that having studied literature she sings a different song, but not necessarily a better song.

Conclusion

But these are second-order issues. The first imperative is to expand the reading and study of literature. We have a wonderful opportunity. There are nearly 2 billion people in the Commonwealth, one third of the

world's population. Of those half are at or below university age, some one billion people.

No sample of countries has such a vibrant and interesting literature as the Commonwealth. How do we help the people of the Commonwealth, young and old, to make this extraordinary literature part of their lives? My purpose has been to alert you to the potential of open and distance learning for extending the reach of Commonwealth literatures.

I do not refer only to the world's open universities, although their student numbers are still growing at a terrific pace in South Asia in particular. I refer also to the new technologies that are also part of COL's mandate. As I was preparing these remarks my wife was trying to find the texts of 24 poems that my mother got my daughter to learn at the end of her high school years.

We have a pretty comprehensive library at home but my wife was unable to find a poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti with the first line, 'I have been here before'. It took me much less than a minute in Google to find that it is a sonnet entitled Sudden Light and only a minute more to find a version that I could print. When she made her second request, for a poem by Kipling starting, 'A fool there was and he made his prayer', I found and printed The Vampire in less than a minute!

In the coming decade information and communications technology will nourish the intellectual resources of the developing countries of the Commonwealth like spring rain. The Commonwealth of Learning is there to help the Association of Commonwealth Studies to take advantage of this technological revolution so that we can extend the reach of literacy, literature and learning to all Commonwealth citizens.

I leave you with a reflection of Northrop Frye's that nicely encapsulates the nexus between technology and literature. He wrote:

The book is the most efficient technological instrument for learning that has ever been devised by the human mind. It stays around and always says the same thing no matter how often you consult it. And while the act of reading is linear, just as watching a TV programme is, the book itself is not linear. It is an object and it becomes the focus of a community as more and more people read it and discuss it with one another.

I thank you for your attention and I wish you success in expanding the community of those who love Commonwealth literature.