

The Commonwealth of Learning: Past, Present and Future



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After-lunch remarks*

*Sir John Daniel
Commonwealth of Learning*

Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak to you. I have greatly enjoyed my association with the RCS during my time at COL and we have been delighted to offer you some use of our offices at 1055 West Hastings, where David Petitpierre has been a reassuring sounding board and wise counsellor for my colleagues and me.

I am now within a few days of the end of my eight-year tenure as President of COL and appreciate this opportunity to reflect with you on COL's work in the Commonwealth.

I begin by correcting an item in your recent newsletter, which implies that when I leave COL I will leave Vancouver. That is not the case. I came to Canada in 1969 and became a citizen in 1975. For 21 years I lived successively in Montreal, Quebec City, Edmonton, Montreal, Sudbury and Kingston. Then I spent 14 years in Europe, at the Open University in the UK and UNESCO in Paris. Coming to COL in 2004 was a return to Canada. After experiencing the deep snows of Quebec City and the biting cold of Edmonton I felt I had earned the right to live in a temperate part of the country, although I confess that during my time at COL I have enjoyed the many opportunities to escape the rain of Vancouver for visits to warm and sunny Commonwealth destinations.

So I will remain a resident of Vancouver, although my next job is a substantial multi-year, part-time assignment in China and I am in the process of buying a small *pied à terre* in Paris. I shall continue to travel the world, not least in another task that I shall undertake on a *pro bono* basis from next year, which is to chair the International Board of the United World Colleges. The UWC are a network of a dozen schools around the world that includes the Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific here in BC.

COL: The key questions

Today I am sure that you expect me to talk about COL and I shall give a somewhat personal spin to my account of the last eight years as president of the organisation.

Most of you know something about COL but let me run you quickly through the basics by asking the key questions: why, when, where, who, how and so what.

COL: Why and When?

Why and when was COL created? Two processes flowed together 25 years ago in 1987 and I was involved in both. In that year Prime Minister Mulroney hosted both the Commonwealth Heads of Government in Vancouver and the *Sommet de la Francophonie* in Quebec City. He wanted Canada to propose projects based on educational technology to each group of his fellow heads of government. I was president of Laurentian University in Sudbury at the time and joined a small group convened by the federal Department of Communications to suggest how Canada might offer its expertise in satellite technology to beam courses around the Commonwealth.

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth Secretariat in London was concerned about the precipitate decline in the number of students from poorer Commonwealth countries going abroad to study following the large increases in tuition fees in the UK and other rich countries during the 1980s. I went to two meetings the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility, which commissioned a group chaired by Lord Asa Briggs to study the matter. Its report, entitled *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*, also came to the Heads of Government when they met in Vancouver in 1987.

The result was a meeting at which the Heads were very alert to the potential of educational technology and the implications of what was already being called a communications revolution. They decided to create a body, which they called the *Commonwealth of Learning*, to implement some of these ideas. It was not all plain sailing. Margaret Thatcher, who probably found Sonny Ramphal, then Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, much too proactive for her taste, opposed the creation of another Commonwealth intergovernmental body. However, Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, was convinced of the need. In addition to his natural charm and persuasiveness he put \$ 1 million on the table in hard currency and COL was established.

By a happy coincidence, on my flight back to Vancouver from Europe last Friday a retired RCMP officer, Jean-Yves Pineau, was in the seat next to me. He had been in charge of the security detail for Rajiv Gandhi at that 1987 meeting. They had planned to send Thatcher and Gandhi to the retreat in the Okanagan in the same small plane, with the other heads travelling in larger groups. However, Thatcher flatly refused to travel with Gandhi and they went in separate planes.

When they got there Gandhi wanted to go walking in the woods. His Indian security people freaked out but Pineau assured them it was OK and so Gandhi went walking fancy free in the woods both then and the next morning, saying he had never had such a good time at an international meeting.

COL was thus established at the Vancouver CHOGM, although the heads of government did not have a clear idea of what it would do. In 1988 I was pressed into service again to chair a planning committee, which essentially had to choose between two options on the table.

One could have been called a *University of the Commonwealth* that would beam courses by satellite to other countries. The other option was to help countries use educational technology for themselves. My planning committee was made up mostly of people from development agencies like CIDA and it plumped firmly for the second option. Following the classic analogy, COL would teach people to fish, rather than giving fish to them, so that they would have a lasting capability to expand and improve education.

That is what COL has been doing ever since. I note too that it did not follow that COL would be located here just because the CHOGM had been held in Vancouver. However, when there was a ‘beauty contest’ to decide where to put it, Canada and BC put in a strong bid and won the day. So here COL has been since 1989.

In the mid-nineties COL created a small offshoot in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, which is doing great work today.

COL: Where?

COL has paid staff in Vancouver and New Delhi but the question ‘COL – Where?’ has a much fuller answer than that. I learned during my time as head of education at UNESCO that member states like to feel the presence of intergovernmental organisations on the ground in their countries. So in the last eight years we have put great emphasis on what we call ‘country focus’. This has been brilliantly implemented by our Vice-President, Asha Kanwar, who takes over from me as President next Friday. She was appointed to the position after a global search that attracted over a hundred candidates.

She has reinforced our country focus in two ways, first by developing separate plans for our work in each individual country for each three year period – and then producing separate reports for each country at the end of the planning period. We have also asked each Minister of Education to appoint someone as focal point for COL for their country and we keep in close touch with these people and try to make their work with COL an enjoyable part of their professional identity.

The third way to reinforce the focus on countries is by going to visit them. Ministers like to see us at international meetings, but when we visit their countries and their offices it has an altogether more powerful impact. This is a challenge for a small organisation but we rise to it in a systematic way. We don’t just visit countries for the sake of visiting – there must be a programme purpose – but we do try to ensure that someone from COL visits each of the 54 Commonwealth countries at least once during each three-year cycle. At the same time we have a rule that not more than 14% of our programme budget can be spent on travel and we are, in fact, well below that thanks to Asha Kanwar’s careful management.

It’s particularly important that COL’s president be seen in the countries and I have managed to visit all except five of the 54 Commonwealth members. I have been to all 13 Caribbean countries and all 8 Asian countries. Of the 21 African countries I have been to all except Cameroon and Rwanda. Of the 10 Pacific countries I have missed only Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu.

Given that COL is based in Vancouver, which is not near other Commonwealth countries, this means plenty of travel. Since joining COL in 2004 I have taken 825 flights and spent 4,800 hours in the air, which amounts to over six months of my life. I haven’t bothered to calculate how many days equivalent I have spent in passport and security queues!

This investment of effort in raising our country focus has been worthwhile. COL is widely perceived as a very effective organisation. COL is supported mainly by voluntary contributions from Commonwealth governments. When I arrived at COL just over 20 countries were giving us support. Today over 40 countries make contributions. I am particularly pleased that Australia, which ceased funding COL before I arrived, announced at the CHOGM in Perth last November that it would resume its support.

COL: Who?

I conclude that the answer to *COL: Where?* is that COL has a pretty good presence across the Commonwealth, which is all the more surprising when I answer the next question, *COL: Who?* We have just 35 people here in Vancouver, a number that has remained steady for years, and 7 at CEMCA, our unit in India. Of this total of some 40 staff members, one quarter are what we call senior international professionals. They are recruited Commonwealth wide and can stay at COL for up to nine years before moving on. This principle of rotation, which is modelled on that of the Commonwealth Secretariat, enables COL constantly to adjust its professional staff profile to the evolving needs of the programme.

It also gives us a superb team, several of whom are the world experts in their fields of work. We also rely, as I implied earlier, on a great network of partners around the world. I mentioned our focal points. We also have groups of honorary COL advisors and COL research chairs and hundreds of colleagues that work with us in institutions around the Commonwealth.

But what do they all do? This brings me to *COL: How?*

COL: How?

This is not the place for a description of our programme of work. Suffice it to say that our purpose is *Learning for Development* and we help countries and institutions to use technology and new approaches to expand and improve learning at all levels, formal and informal. As regards formal learning the four international professionals in our Education Sector focus respectively on Open Schooling, Teacher Education, Higher Education and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Likewise in informal learning the four colleagues in our Livelihoods and Health Sector work respectively on Skills Development – notably for the informal economy, Learning for Farming, Healthy Communities, and the development of eLearning.

Those are the topics. They are focused on some of the great development challenges of our time such as: educating all children and youth, making rural communities more prosperous, and reducing maternal and infant mortality.

Most international and national development agencies also focus on these issues. What distinguishes COL is the style of our approach. We are not a donor agency. We do not give people money and tell them to implement ideas for improving their lives that we have dreamed up at COL. Instead we start at the grassroots – the village communities and the educational institutions – and help them implement their ideas for doing things better. This works.

COL: So What?

I end with my last question *COL: So What?* I leave office convinced that COL is making a contribution to expanding learning in support of development that is disproportionate to our small size. What are the secrets of our success?

First, as I just noted, we are not a development agency that gives money and instructions to poor people. We believe that individuals and communities have much of the knowledge they need for their development. We try to release, channel and support that know-how.

Second, we have excellent and versatile international professional staff backed up by wonderfully dedicated local employees in Vancouver.

Third, COL staff focus on distilling local experience of what does and doesn't work into what we call models. We test and refine these models for years, so that we know exactly what conditions need to be present for the model to work in a new country.

Fourth, we believe that development takes time. Many development agencies abandon projects before they have had any chance to make an impact. COL goes for the long haul, monitoring and adjusting its work as experience accumulates.

Let me end with some concrete examples.

We have worked on our Lifelong Learning for Farmers model for over a decade. Today it is recognised by the World Bank as a successful and sustainable approach to rural development. More importantly, the increase in prosperity in rural communities is dramatic and represents many multiples of the input of effort by COL.

For years we have been rather lonely advocates of open schooling. There are 400 million children between the ages of 12 and 17 who are not in secondary school and open schooling is an important means of serving many of them. Quite suddenly countries are listening to us and the number of open schools is multiplying across the world.

Finally, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is an idea that was hatched by the Ministers of Education of the 32 small states of the Commonwealth 12 years ago. Only in the last few years has this collaborative network begun to yield real results in improving and expanding tertiary education in these small countries. Meanwhile other ideas for helping the small states do this have been announced with fanfare only to disappear without trace.

Conclusion

I shall stop there. As you can tell I am both passionate about COL's work and proud of our achievements. My years at COL have brought together in a most fulfilling way the three themes of my career: distance education; institutional leadership; and international development. It has been a privilege to serve COL and the Commonwealth. I thank the RCS for its steady support for our work and I thank you for listening to me today.