

Closing Remarks



Seventh Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning Closing Ceremony, 6 December 2013 International Conference Centre, Abuja, Nigeria

*by The Honourable Burchell Whiteman, O.J.
Chair, COL Board of Governors*

Transcript

Director of Ceremonies
Distinguished Chairman Professor Tolle Mbwette
Representative of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria
Vice Chancellor Professor Vincent Tenebe
My President and CEO Professor Asha Kanwar
Professor Peter Okebukola
Professor Okoronkwo, Chair & Members LOC
Brigadier-General Atere
Representative of the Senate
Distinguished Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen, All

In some societies, 7 is regarded as the perfect number. Nigeria seems to have factored that belief in offering to partner with the Commonwealth of Learning in staging the 7th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning which comes to a successful end today. Thanks to you all.

On behalf of COL, I can confidently say that our local partners, the National Open University of Nigeria and the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria have been very good to work with and have contributed very significantly to the organisational success of PCF7. You have done more than that. You have lifted the spirits of the participants and especially those who are visitors to this pulsating and exciting country in what the world agrees is the rising continent on Planet Earth.

From start to finish we have been impressed by the hospitality of our hosts and the professionalism of the organisers.

We must commend the Foreign Ministry for the efficiency of its protocol officers (and to be personal for a moment, I hope I am not impeding her advancement within the service if I claim that in a country blessed with many beautiful women I must have been specially privileged to have been assigned one of the most attractive and professional of them – reflecting the best of the caring Nigerian spirit.)

The Forum/Conference in my view more than lived up to expectations. I have been to only four of the seven PCFs and therefore am not able to speak from personal experience about them all. Nor am I prepared to rank them. Memory can play tricks on us all. But I am sure none of us assembled here this evening will deny that there were many high points in their own experience during the past four days.

It would be invidious to single out particular presentations. But who will forget NOUN Vice Chancellor's injunction last Monday to tell the world that ODL is the present and the future for education and development. Or the assertion by the Honourable Margaret Mensah-Williams that if you educate a man you educate an individual, while if you educate a woman, you educate the nation. I will particularly recall as well for personal reasons the reference made by Professor Rory McGreal to the distinction between information and knowledge. You will recall that he pointed out that in the piece of equipment which you might purchase – I think he referred to a spring – the real value is not the metal but the human knowledge which has fashioned the item.

It reminded me in part – no offence meant – that there is in a sense nothing new under the sun, and in another sense, that we must see ourselves, thinkers and educators, as important points on the continuum of expanding human knowledge. Very many more years ago than I care to remember, my father – who was himself a teacher – shared a story from his experience that I have never forgotten. A repairman had charged him £1 and 6 pence for doing a particular job (£1 = \$5. 6d a fortieth of a £). When he asked the person why the charge could not have been set and rounded off simply at £1, the reply was “Oh, the 6 pence was for doing what I did. The £ was for knowing what to do.” That workman was seized of the value of his intellectual power; perhaps even of his intellectual property – a concept defined in those terms very much later in my lifetime.

Ladies and gentlemen, all of us here share an interest in ODL and an interest in human development. We have been making those connections during the past four days and in the pre-conference workshops organised by COL with a range of stakeholders. We have been reminded of the power of the human mind. We have also been urged to sharpen our understanding of what we mean by Development and it is my hope that we have all been seized of the centrality of the Development objective in all that we do ... indeed in all that we have learnt in this past week. This is certainly at the heart of the mission of COL.

So my word of encouragement to you as we prepare to go our separate ways, is to remember that inasmuch as we were all drawn together here, we remain connected not only by our common interest, or by the available technology but by our belief that through our individual and collective endeavours we can and will help, as Jenny Glennie said yesterday, to shape a better world.

Learning for Development encompasses many elements which enhance the building of capability which President Asha Kanwar referred to at the opening plenary. She cited the philosophy of Amartya Sen. Professor Sen was quoted again in the middle of the week by Professor Alan Tait in the Asa Briggs lecture. And since the best stories must have a beginning, a middle and an end, let me refer to the good Professor one more time at this closing plenary by recalling his belief in the value of recognising the multiple identities which are an exciting component of human personality.

He encourages us to find the particular identity or identities in the other person to which we can best relate and thereby strengthen interpersonal and inter-cultural relationships rather than focus on the differences which keep us apart.

May I in this context, therefore, in a world suffering from inequality, distrust, intolerance and other ills which militate against individual fulfilment and societal possibilities, suggest that we would do well to use effectively all the tools at our disposal to increase the freedom of our citizens to be and to do their best. ODL embraces diversity, appreciation of social and cultural context, interaction, innovation, creativity, sharing and self-generated learning. All of these elements, optimally used, support a movement towards strengthening human capability as well as the nurturing of Respect and Understanding which are essential for the sustaining of both individual and societal freedom and development.

We can – indeed we must – remain committed to making our contribution to human development, each of us, whether it be in our small corner or on the major stages of our nation, the Commonwealth and the world. To the extent that we succeed, we can feel satisfied that in our different communities we are expanding individual learning, human knowledge, human creativity, human freedom and hopefully, societal justice. As we succeed – in the words of the late Jamaican Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies and Caribbean scholar, Rex Nettleford, known to many persons on this continent – we can claim that our people are able to occupy the same space living confidently together rather than existing side by side.

Amartya Sen would see that situation as evidence of development.

May the spirit of PCF7 remain with us as we go. And as we have shared generously in talking the talk, may we be inspired and encouraged to walk the walk. God bless us all.