

# *Demystifying the 'M' words*

---



*Second International M-Libraries Conference,  
Vancouver, 24 June 2009*

*Demystifying the 'M' words*

*Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning*

## Transcript

Colleagues:

It is a pleasure to be here with you at UBC today. I live here in Vancouver, yet I confess to my shame that this is only about the sixth time that I have been on the UBC campus since moving here from Paris five years ago. I seem to pass through Hong Kong international airport, which I did yesterday, more often than I come here. This is an example of the peculiar lives we lead today.

I was coming home from the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Kuala Lumpur and made a stopover in Sri Lanka on the way back. That explains why I could not be with you earlier. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you at the end of your meeting rather than the beginning.

UBC is a perfect place to hold a conference if the weather is nice. I still have fond recollections of a conference held on this campus in 1982 for which I was programme chair. That organisation began the conference as the International Council for Correspondence Education and finished it as the International Council for Distance Education. The conference was a turning point for the way in which the international community in the field of distance learning perceived itself.

It was the tipping point when correspondence teaching evolved into multi-media distance learning and large public open universities, rather than the commercial correspondence schools, became the agenda setters. Since then, of course, multi-media distance learning has added an array of new tools: first computer conferencing, then online learning and now the mobile technologies that are your focus at this conference.

Another significant milestone in the development of distance education also occurred in Vancouver in the 1980s. The Commonwealth Heads of Government meet every two years and in 1987 they convened for their 10th Conference here in Vancouver. The role of technology in education was an important item on the agenda. A communications revolution was under way and Heads of Government believed that the media of the day: TV, radio and computing, were far too important to be monopolised by the worlds of

entertainment and business.

Furthermore, during the 1980s there had been a significant decline in the number of students from the poorer Commonwealth countries going to study in the richer ones. This decline was caused primarily by steep increases in tuition fees in the UK and Canada. In the end the decline reversed and today millions of people study abroad. However, when the ministers met in 1987 this issue was on their minds and they decided that if students could not be mobile then we should make the courses and programmes mobile.

In short, governments want to foster educational technology and distance learning. They believed that a small agency was needed to help the developing countries of the Commonwealth adopt new technologies in education and they created the Commonwealth of Learning, which I have had the privilege of leading since 2004.

Our strap line, and the title of our Three-Year Plan that the Ministers approved in Kuala Lumpur last week, is Learning for Development. Our mission in a nutshell, is to help Commonwealth governments, institutions and individuals take advantage of the revolution of educational technology. I shall talk about that revolution in a minute.

But to complete the story of COL's creation I note that after the Heads of Government Meeting in 1987 Canada and British Columbia put in a strong bid to host the new organisation. We have been here ever since and we are the only Commonwealth intergovernmental body that is not located in the UK.

We are a small organisation with a Commonwealth-wide board that just met in Kuala Lumpur alongside the Ministers' conference. The total staff, here in Vancouver and at our Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi, numbers 40. We extend our reach by having Focal Points in all 53 Commonwealth countries and we are funded mainly by voluntary contributions from governments. Having the contributions made on a voluntary basis keeps us focused on providing useful services to all countries.

The six major donor countries are Canada, India, New Zealand, Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. But another 35 governments also made contributions in the last triennium, making up more than two-thirds of Member States.

So that is the organisation I lead and why I am here. I suspect that another reason I am here with you today is that I was Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University in the 1990s when Nicky Whitsed was beginning the process of giving us a mLibrary to serve our 200,000 students and I am very proud of what she has accomplished.

After that long introduction I ought to give you an overview of what I am going to talk about. My title is *Demystifying the 'M' words* and I shall start by explaining why I believe educational technology is revolutionary.

This will lead me to try to demystify the particularly powerful manifestation of educational technology

that is open and distance learning, or ODL. From there I will make a brief excursion back to COL to show how we put educational technology and ODL at the service of development in the Commonwealth. I shall end by making some comments on Learning, giving those remarks a particular spin towards developing countries. I am sure that you must have said almost everything there is to be said about mLearning here at your conference but a closing speaker is allowed to reinforce some messages.

First then, why is educational technology revolutionary? Let's go back to basics.

As educators we have a threefold challenge. First, we want to maximise *access* to education, training and learning opportunities. That challenge is even greater when the economy is bad because people seek more education and training to improve their value in the job market.

Second, we want to make the *quality* of learning as high as we can.

Third, we want to do this at the lowest possible *cost* so that our education budgets stretch as far as possible. That too is a special challenge right now.

Think of these three aims as vectors making up a triangle: Access, Quality, and Cost. This highlights the challenge, because with traditional teaching methods this is an iron triangle – it is inflexible.

Whenever you concentrate on any one of these three aims: wider access, better quality or lower cost, you will slip backwards on the others. Increase access by making classes bigger and parents will complain about quality. Introduce more learning materials – which are usually in short supply – and costs will go up. Cut the costs of the system and people will accuse you of limiting access and damaging quality.

The constraints of this iron triangle have handicapped education throughout history. They explain why so many people believe that you cannot have education of quality unless you make access to it exclusive.

But we live in revolutionary times. Technology allows you to increase access, improve quality, and cut costs *all at the same time*.

Let me give the example of the UK Open University of which I was Vice-Chancellor from 1990 to 2001. At the time I left the OU to go to UNESCO we had 200,000 students. That is more than the 155,000 students in all the universities of Sri Lanka where I was yesterday.

But it is possible to have size and quality. Before the UK stopped assessing the quality of teaching by discipline the Open University was ranked number five out of 100 UK universities for the quality of its teaching programmes (The request to stop the teaching assessment programme came from the elite universities, who didn't like the results!). Oxford University, where I did my undergraduate studies, was ranked number six. I add that under my successor, Professor Brenda Gourley, the OU came top three years in a row of a massive survey of student satisfaction in all UK universities. Furthermore, of course, the UKOU costs substantially less per student than Oxford. You can have wide access, high quality and lower costs – all at the same time.

By technology I mean the technological principles of economy of scale, specialisation, division of labour and machines – but the first three principles are more fundamental than electronic devices with flashing lights. Your mLibraries are a key new element in this revolution. They enhance access, they lower costs and they transform the quality of the learning environment for students who are not on a campus.

Distance learning in general is a particularly successful manifestation of that revolution, so let me say a word about that for the second part of these remarks and approach it from the direction of quality.

Distance education is the wave of the future. But we all know that it drags behind it a legacy of past prejudice that makes the public doubt its legitimacy.

My first point is that it is actually easier to demonstrate quality in distance education than in face-to-face instruction. I do not say that it is easier to achieve quality but I do assert that if you have achieved quality it is easier to prove it to other people. That is because in distance education you have to make things explicit.

I hope that I do not offend the technology enthusiasts here when I repeat that technology in distance education – if you want to be successful – is not primarily about bits and bytes and bandwidth. They will come and go. More important are the fundamental technological principles of economy of scale, division of labour and specialisation.

The essence of successful distance learning is to divide the education or training process into its constituent parts, specialise in doing each one of them as well as you possibly can, and then put it all back together again in a way that achieves economies of scale. You are all doing a wonderful job of specialising on the provision of documentation and information to students and faculty and integrating your solutions back into the whole system.

You can divide the process of distance learning in various ways, but in the end it comes back to distinguishing three elements of the system. Think of it as a three-legged stool.

The first leg is materials. Whether the format is print, audio, video or the web, materials are at the heart of the process. The key point is that these are visible and public. You cannot always drop them on your toe but you can show them to others. Quality assurance assessors can make judgements about them much more readily than they can make judgements about classroom teaching.

The second element is student support. Materials are fine, but most students occasionally require someone to mediate between them and the materials if they are to learn effectively. But here again, this is a process that can be examined and assessed by looking at the way that tutors help the students by commenting on their assignments, either on paper or electronically. Distance education, since it operates at scale, must have systematic processes for student support and these can be reviewed externally.

The third leg of the stool is logistics. Successful distance education is in large part an organisational

challenge: the right materials, the right processes and the right people all have to be in the right place at the right time. If they are not, then any external review process will know immediately, because the students will be up in arms. ICTs are helping massively in making the logistics of distance learning cheaper and more effective at the same time. Your own work bridges all three of these components.

So much for open and distance learning – how does this play out in practice? Let me give the example of COL. Our plan is called *Learning for Development* and we define development operationally as a combination of the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All, and Commonwealth values.

We work through eight initiatives in two sectors: in the Education Sector the aim is to strengthen, improve and extend formal education systems. In the Livelihoods and Health Sector media and technology are used to expand informal learning.

The first initiative in the *Education Sector* is *Open Schooling* at the secondary level. Success in getting to the goal of Universal Primary Education is creating a surge of tens of millions of youngsters looking for secondary education.

You cannot achieve universal secondary education by conventional methods if it costs more than twice as much as primary. In Africa it is three to four times as expensive, so many countries will not be able to meet the increased demand. Open Schooling, which is much less expensive if done well, is part of the answer.

COL believes that the answer is not just a separate national open school. It can be a catalyst for improving all secondary schools with good learning materials and a mechanism for introducing computers into the schools in an effective manner. Frances Ferreira, who came to COL after a successful period as Director of the Namibian College of Open Learning, leads that work.

The second initiative is *Teacher Education*. Attaining Universal Primary Education, not to mention expanding secondary education, will require millions more teachers worldwide – and this is not just a developing country problem. Conventional teacher education methods cannot cope, yet training teachers through distance learning, both in-service and pre-service has a long and successful history. In charge is Dr. Abdurrahman Umar, who was formerly Academic Director of the Nigerian Teachers' Institute, the world's largest distance learning institution for teachers.

Third, we support *Higher Education*, with a particular focus on quality assurance in distance learning and the use of ICTs. A number of African countries are adding to the number of successful open universities around the Commonwealth and we are here to help with that – as well as campus universities that want to add distance learning, which is a bigger challenge. Dr. Willie Clarke-Okah, a Nigerian-Canadian formerly with Canadian CIDA, leads that work. VUSSC

Fourth, Ministers have asked COL to facilitate the *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*, an idea they conceived at their conference in Halifax in 2000. The VUSSC not a new

university but a collaborative network through which Small States work together to prepare eLearning materials in skills related areas as Open Educational Resources. This is groundbreaking work.

Less than 10 years ago MIT launched the Open Educational Resources movement by sharing its faculty's lecture notes on the web. The UK Open University followed up by sharing its self-learning materials. The VUSSC is creating a third generation of Open Educational Resources by developing courses through international collaboration. My colleagues Paul West from South Africa and John Lesperance from Seychelles are doing a great job working with the Small States to help them leapfrog to the forefront of the use of ICTs in teaching.

All 32 Small States are on board and as well as a portal of courses they have developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework so that the eLearning courses can be used Commonwealth wide. This is particularly important since some small states are a special prey for bogus institutions called degree mills. Please support the international campaign to fight degree mills on your territories because they do great damage to legitimate postsecondary education.

The *Livelihoods and Health* Sector also has four initiatives:

First, we help Ministries and institutions use open and distance learning in *Skills Development*. This work has been led by Joshua Mallet from Ghana. A new specialist is coming from Botswana to take over that role in September.

Second, in the last three years we have refined our model for improving rural prosperity called Lifelong Learning for Farmers, or L3 Farmers. Our *Learning for Farming* initiative is already being extended from India, where it has already made hundred of women farmers more prosperous, to Kenya, Jamaica and Papua New Guinea. Leading there is Dr Kodhandaraman Balasubramanian, a very experienced development specialist from India.

Third, COL helps you use community media – a much neglected resource – to improve the health of individuals and communities through effective health messages and education by the community and for the community. This approach has proved its success. It is now ready to be rolled out at scale. My Canadian colleague Ian Pringle heads that work.

Finally, we get many requests for help in *Integrating eLearning* from all Commonwealth countries. In the last three years we have trained thousands of teachers to prepare lessons in eLearning formats. That work was guided by Wayne Mackintosh from South Africa and New Zealand. Another South African will join COL in September to lead that area.

Furthermore, COL's Vancouver team is greatly assisted by our unit in New Delhi, the Commonwealth Media Centre for Asia. Under the leadership of its Director, Ramamurthy Sreedher it works in areas of the programme I have just outlined and does groundbreaking work in the development new technologies in Asia.

Let me conclude with a few remarks about mLearning in developing countries. Even though I have not

been at your conference this is front of mind because COL is about to publish a little book on mLearning with special reference to Africa and Europe. I was writing a preface for it on the long flights home yesterday.

Essentially there is good news and bad news. The good news is that mobile telephony will be the world's first ubiquitous communications platform and it is being put in place faster than anyone expected. Its major path of growth is now in the global South where the mobile is not just a phone but a global address, a transaction device, and an identity marker for vast numbers of poor people.

It has been spontaneously adopted by billions of people and embedded deep in social consciousness. African peasants paint their mobile phone number over their front doors. Indian slum dwellers buy SIM cards to use on friends' handsets. Chinese students spend three months allowance to buy a handset they can surf the web with.

Only a decade ago the statement 'half the world's people have never made a phone call' was a staple of speeches on international development, although it seems impossible to discover who first coined the phrase and on what evidence! Humankind has since taken to mobile phones with an enthusiasm never shown for any previous communications technology. Far more people own mobile phones than have television sets, computers or credit cards.

The bad news is that although mobile phones are ubiquitous in the developing world the high cost of usage requires that educators must use them sparingly until rates come down.

According to the ICT Development Index 2009, the percentage of Gross National Income (GNI) per capita for 25 outgoing calls in predetermined ratios and 30 SMS messages per month varies from 0.1% for top ranked Singapore, Denmark and Hong Kong to 60.1% for bottom ranked Togo. In Sub-Saharan Africa, mobile costs are more than 20% of the average annual GNI per capita. In contrast, in the developed world, costs are less than 2% of this figure.

This continuation of the digital divide by the back door is even more pernicious for broadband internet. In the USA a monthly subscription costs 0.4 % of GNI per capita compared to over 5,000% in Burkina Faso. The cost of accessing data via the internet on mobile phones in developing countries is usually prohibitive.

Educators find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand mobile phones are a highly valued personal technology. As survey found a third of UK owners would not give up their mobile for a million pounds, young adults see it as a 'critical social lifeline', and most 16-24 year olds would rather give up alcohol, chocolate, sex, tea or coffee than live without it for a month! It is clearly attractive for educational institutions to use such a valued personal device to communicate with students 24/7 and to embed learning in their lives.

Sadly, however, cost is not the only obstacle to such use in the developing world. Screen size is a problem for communication of text or images and battery life can be short. This posed a dilemma for some of the

projects described in the COL book. To explore the learning potential of mobiles they provided students with up-market devices, although this negated the aim of achieving sustainable learning processes using the devices that students actually own.

The book makes the important point that mLearning means the use of mobile devices in learning, not that the student is mobile while learning. Believe it or not an experiment showed that subjects who tried to learn from an iPod while walking a path that required them to pay attention to their footing did not recall the lesson as well as those who were stationary!

So far the sure fire winners in mLearning in developing countries are SMS for administrative purposes. Reminding students of deadlines, giving words of encouragement, and providing bite size learning snippets have a beneficial impact on motivation and make it more likely that they will complete and pass the course.

As the power and sophistication of mobile devices increases and the cost of using them goes down, they will take their place as an important part of the toolkit of distance learning and learning generally. Your important work on developing the technology and pedagogy of mLibraries is an important foundation for that future.

I wish you well.

Thank you