

The Role of Technology and Education in a Development Context / La technologie, l'éducation et le développement



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Introduction

Je vous remercie de l'invitation de prendre la parole devant vous ce matin. C'est ma première allocution devant un congrès canadien depuis mon retour au pays cet été.

Après avoir habité au Canada pendant 21 ans, au Québec, en Alberta et en Ontario, je suis parti en Europe en 1990, d'abord comme président de la Open University britannique, et ensuite comme Sous-directeur général pour l'éducation à l'UNESCO. Au début juin je suis entré en fonction comme président du Commonwealth of Learning, que j'appellerai COL, la seule organisation internationale et intergouvernementale à avoir été créée au Canada. C'est aussi la seule organisation intergouvernementale du Commonwealth qui n'a pas son siège au Royaume Uni. Nous sommes fier d'avoir nos quartiers généraux au Canada à Vancouver.

The Commonwealth of Learning is an international intergovernmental development agency with a mission focused on the application of technology to education and training for purposes of development. I've called this short breakfast address: The role of technology and education in a development context. I shall take those words in the reverse order beginning with development.

What do I mean by development? Let me keep it simple. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen defines development simply as the enhancement of freedom. A nation develops by the enhancement of the freedoms that its people enjoy. He makes the further point that freedom is not only the aim of development, but also the means by which it is reached. That is because people, acting as free agents, are the most effective drivers of development.

What freedoms are we talking about? World leaders, meeting at the United Nations in 2000, set eight Millennium Development Goals that aim to transform the condition of humankind in the 21st century. These goals are now guiding the policies of governments and the priorities of development agencies.

Or, pour atteindre chacun de ces buts pour le développement, qu'il s'agit de la pauvreté, la santé ou l'environnement, il faut que des centaines de millions d'êtres humains apprennent des choses nouvelles. Les méthodes traditionnelles d'éducation et de formation ne sont pas à la hauteur de la tâche, compte tenu de sa taille et de son étendue.

Dans presque tous les autres domaines de la vie humaine la technologie a déjà créé des révolutions. Le défi est de mettre à profit la technologie pour permettre à nos concitoyens et nos concitoyennes d'obtenir les connaissances et les habiletés qui peuvent les mener vers une vie meilleure. En éducation la technologie, et plus particulièrement la technologie de la formation à distance, a deux vertus majeures : d'abord elle peut atteindre les populations marginalisées; ensuite elle permet d'opérer à grande échelle avec une qualité consistante.

The Millennium Development Goals

To identify some of these learning challenges I shall take the Millennium Development Goals one by one and indicate with examples where massive learning is most urgently needed and how it might be achieved. In so doing I am describing the challenging agenda that the Commonwealth of Learning and others are trying to help the world address.

La pauvreté et la faim

Le premier but millénaire est d'éliminer la pauvreté abjecte et la faim, plus précisément de réduire par cinquante pour cent la proportion des gens qui vivent avec moins d'un dollar par jour et ceux qui souffrent de la faim. Quels sont les obstacles majeurs qu'il faut surmonter pour réaliser cet objectif? A COL nous croyons que pour combattre la faim et créer un environnement viable et vivable il faut fournir le pouvoir du savoir à des millions de fermiers dans les pays pauvres et, de façon plus générale, permettre aux populations rurales d'exercer davantage d'autonomie dans leurs vies.

There is a real divide here. Many organisations conduct research on agriculture and try to share the results. The most difficult bridge to cross is the last mile to the individual farmer. This is not just a matter of packaging information in an attractive way, such as through a radio soap opera, and pushing it at the farmers. Communication operates in two directions and the first step is to help farmers and smallholders

define their own needs. Step two is to enable agricultural extension workers, through dialogue, to match these needs to real possibilities. Technology can help to scale up this process.

In this way the Commonwealth of Learning is working with the Consortium Group on International Agricultural Research to find new ways of deploying ICT for sharing the valuable information and knowledge within the group. Two weeks ago I was in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu where we are launching a programme called lifelong learning for farmers, which has been designed after learning the lessons of previous attempts to use ICTs in the villages of the developing world. We believe that by mobilising the farmers, getting the banks involved, and using ICTs to provide locally relevant knowledge - by locally I mean a radius of 15 kilometres - we can make a real difference

I am not pretending that education is the sole answer to the dire problems of agriculture in the developing world. What we need most of all are changes in the outrageously discriminatory terms of trade in agriculture and the removal of the subsidies that eat up far more of the budgets of some rich countries than they give in aid. My point is simply that, if and when the rich world sees the light, we need ways of bridging the knowledge divide so that poor farmers can rapidly take advantage of the change.

L'éducation primaire universelle

Le deuxième but millénaire est de réaliser l'éducation primaire universelle d'ici 2015, afin qu'avant cette date, tous les garçons et toutes les filles complèteront une éducation de base de qualité. Le premier ministre, Paul Martin, en a parlé de façon éloquente et convaincante hier soir.

Parmi tous les buts de développement c'est le plus fondamental car c'est la clé de la liberté. Or, nous ne prétendons pas que la technologie peut aider directement dans l'éducation primaire des enfants, car à ce niveau ce qui compte, c'est d'apprendre à vivre en société par le contact avec les enseignants et les autres enfants. Mais la technologie peut beaucoup faire pour éliminer le goulot d'étranglement principal qui freine la réalisation de l'éducation primaire universelle, soit la formation et le recyclage de dizaines de millions d'enseignants.

In my own parish, the Commonwealth, there are 20 million teachers. Many of them need further training to be effective. Millions of new teachers must be recruited and trained as countries seek to expand education with a teaching force that is shrinking through retirement, migration and AIDS. At UNESCO we calculated that the world will need to recruit and train between ten and thirty million new teachers in the next decade - and this is not just a problem for developing countries. Open and distance learning has already proven its effectiveness for training teachers in many countries.

The divide we have to bridge is to equip existing teacher training institutions and individual teacher educators to deploy these methods and to network themselves into professional communities. In this context one of our projects at COL is the formulation of pan-Commonwealth quality assurance indicators for teacher education. A Pan-Commonwealth team met to continue this work in Bangalore last week.

Gender

The third Millennium Development Goal addresses gender disparities, the first aim being to eliminate disparities between boys and girls in primary and secondary school by next year. The second, more demanding, goal is to achieve gender equality, meaning equality of outcomes, by 2015. In this case the divide that COL and others are working to bridge is the gender gap in the use of ICTs. We now have a good fix on the barriers that women face in using ICTs and have worked with others to make this a prominent issue in the World Summit on the Information Society.

In this area, as in many other areas of development, one of the challenges is a knowledge divide. Using its advanced expertise in knowledge management, COL maintains a virtual library of resources and documents on gender equity that has been developed in collaboration with the Forum of African Women Educationalists. You can find it at www.colfinder.org/dev.

Santé

Nous trouvons ensuite trois buts millénaires qui s'adressent à la santé. D'abord de couper par les deux tiers la mortalité des enfants, ensuite de couper par les trois quarts la proportion des mères qui meurent en accouchant un enfant, et enfin d'arrêter et de renverser la propagation des maladies tels le paludisme et le VIH/SIDA.

De toute évidence la réalisation de tels buts dépend en partie de l'amélioration des services de santé. Mais il est tout aussi important d'apprendre aux gens, surtout aux mères, comment éviter les maladies et conserver la santé des enfants. Pour cela il faut leur fournir une information compréhensible, non seulement parce qu'elle est dans leur langue, mais aussi parce qu'elle reflète leur culture - même si elle met au défi certaines des habitudes de cette culture.

The best way to bridge that divide is to equip and train people to produce the information themselves. That is what the Commonwealth of Learning is doing through its Media Empowerment programme carried out in partnership with the World Health Organisation. As well as training local WHO representatives to expand the impact of their work by using the techniques of distance education, COL has, for example, equipped and trained some of the members of the Valley Trust, an NGO in Kwazulu Natal Province of South Africa, to reach much greater numbers with health information and training, notably about the problem of HIV/AIDS stigma.

Similarly, mobile units with projectors and generators use radio and video to deliver information about malaria to the villages of Sri Lanka. On a wider scale COL is producing open source radio content with messages of importance to poor people about filtering domestic water and growing food in the cramped conditions of urban poverty. These will be available in various languages.

Environment

Millennium Goal Seven addresses the question of environmental sustainability directly. Here COL is helping institutions in India to develop a whole range of specialised courses in ODL format. These address directly some of the crucial issues for environmental sustainability, such as municipal water and waste management and solid waste management. These programmes will be made available to other developing countries and versioned for a number of purposes.

Un partenariat global

Enfin, le huitième but est la création d'un partenariat global qui a comme objet d'améliorer la gouvernance, de faire bénéficier tout le monde des TIC, et de porter une attention particulière aux besoins des petits états - qui constituent une bonne proportion des pays du Commonwealth et qui ont, pour la plupart, une base économique étroite.

Here again, COL's aim is to use technology to take learning to scale, whether it be the training of the hundreds of thousands of people now being asked to play a role in local democratic councils in India, or the difficult challenge of equipping disaffected male school dropouts in the Caribbean with usable life skills and occupational skills.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude. I hope that this short account of the work of an international intergovernmental agency located here in Canada has expanded your appreciation of international education. COL starts from the premise that the use of human reason, and the knowledge that flows from it, is the key to enabling all people to enjoy healthy and decent lives. As a world leader in the new field of knowledge management COL has a special mission to help people access knowledge that they can use.

Development depends on the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge by everyone. Technology can greatly facilitate these processes and help billions of poor people achieve better lives.