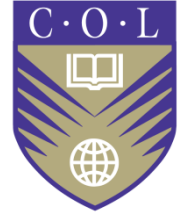


Remarks



*Remarks at the 2001 Convocation, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar
Open University, on the occasion of the receipt of an
Honorary Doctorate (D.Litt)*

Hyderabad, India, 25 November 2001

*by Dr. H. Ian Macdonald
Chairman, The Commonwealth of Learning*

Transcript

Mr. Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The honour which you have conferred on me today is greatly appreciated but also undeserved - at least in contrast to those who have worked so hard for the degrees which have been awarded this afternoon. At any time, the completion of a course of university studies demands dedication, determination and devotion. To do so by the distance mode also requires a certain degree of self-sacrifice, and I want to salute my fellow graduates on their accomplishments which we celebrate together on this happy occasion. May I also pay tribute to the distinction and growing reputation of this University with which I am proud to be associated as an honorary doctor. India has been a pioneer in the field of distance education and open learning, and your University, as the first such institution of its kind in India, is among the leaders to which we, in the Commonwealth of Learning, look for inspiration.

Your founder Vice-Chancellor, the late Ram Reddy, was also among the driving forces in the establishment of the Commonwealth of Learning - one of our first Vice-Presidents and already a distinguished Board Member when I became Chairman. On July 2 of this year, I was privileged to deliver the G. Ram Reddy Memorial Lecture in New Delhi. At the conclusion of my presentation, one of the professors present challenged me on an issue that I have pondered for years. I have always argued that education is a prerequisite not only for personal fulfilment but also for peace and harmony in the world. Education leads to a broadening of human understanding which should, in turn, contribute to greater tolerance, wider compassion, and an enhanced quality of life for mankind. Why, then, I was asked has this not happened? Indeed, science and technology has produced weapons of mass destruction as well as improvements in agricultural productivity, modern medical research has brought threats of biological terror as well as improvements in public health, while the limited access to education has widened the gaps in the quality of life between individuals as well as between nations. And now, the very activity in which we share a common interest - distance education - is employing modern technology and tools that could well result in what has been described as the digital divide.

Has our education failed us? Have we nourished false hopes? Does the so-called knowledge society contain the seeds of its own destruction whereby it will ultimately crumble under its own weight? On the contrary, I would argue that it is we who have failed our educational system. We have fallen short in providing the leadership to harness the benefits of education for the purpose of achieving a better world, and the accompanying globalization has, until very recently, had every appearance of widening the gaps and increasing tensions on a global scale. In a sense, then, we have not given education the opportunity to deliver its high promise, and its capacity to provide for a better world.

In the first place, so much remains to be done in widening access. As we proceed into the new millennium, over one billion people are lacking the literacy necessary to sign their name or to read a book. Among them are over 140 million children who do not have access to primary education; a large proportion of those denied education are girls and women. Of the children with access to primary education, and as many of you know at first-hand, a large percentage of those who find themselves in the poorest countries of the world will be in crowded classrooms that are in a very bad state of repair and some will be in situations where there may not be any classrooms at all. Many will be taught by untrained or poorly trained teachers, located in ill-equipped schools with no learning materials, laboratories, libraries or connections to the outside world. Moreover, a good proportion of these children will not complete their primary school education. I need not remind this audience that most of these un- or under-provided learners are living in Commonwealth member states located in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Not surprisingly, these countries also suffer educational deprivation at other levels on the educational ladder.

Now, these young people, along with the billion adults who never received nor benefitted from education when they were young, will find themselves attempting to function in a global environment where the following requirements prevail:

- long-term job success necessitates a focus on continuous learning regardless of profession, geographic location or age;
- developing a strong human resource base is essential for economic and social development;
- training and the upgrading of skills and knowledge are necessary to improve the productive capacity of the labour force;
- relevant education and training have been accepted as potential solutions to address key issues such as environmental degradation, burgeoning population, and domestic violence; and,
- the impact of technology and increased levels of education on governance issues is being recognized, assessed and appreciated.

It is under these circumstances that the design and delivery of education is being reconsidered by nations both rich and poor. A consensus is beginning to emerge that opportunities for and provisions of life-long learning will require a reformation in the ways in which the educational environment is constructed, organized, structured, governed and financed. There is also an increasing acknowledgment of a shift in

instructional philosophy where the instructor or teacher is no longer the sole source of knowledge but, instead, acts as a facilitator, supporting student learning. In other words, your university model is becoming the exemplar to the world, and you are the best proponents of how education must be redesigned and delivered.

In the process, we now see distance education being incorporated into mainstream education and training efforts; it is reshaping the new educational landscape, including to whom and how education is delivered. New educational designs are being developed as rapid increases in technology continue to collapse spatial boundaries, and Commonwealth countries continue to lead the world in the imaginative ways in which they have applied distance and open learning. However, that capability is neither distributed equally among all Commonwealth countries nor in all sectors of education in those countries where open and distance learning has found success in one form or another. To overcome that disparity is our immediate challenge, and a challenge that I invite you to address.

The Commonwealth of Learning can take pride in the fact that, over a period of twelve years of work in and for the Commonwealth, it has not only brought attention to the opportunities presented by open and distance learning but also trained people, built partnerships, developed models and provided expanding capabilities among nations of the Commonwealth in the application of open and distance learning. Therefore, in honouring me today, I believe you are really acknowledging that significant contribution to the enhancement and enlargement of educational opportunities.

However, nations alone cannot accomplish all that is required. Indeed, what is a nation in terms of the geo-political construct of the world today? That takes us again to the topic of globalization and its unquestioned value in the minds of its delivery agents, the multinational corporations of the world. However, as I have suggested, education is about human resource development, and the betterment of people as well as the enhancement of economic opportunity; thus it must always be perceived and assessed in the context of human values. As the economist Kenneth Boulding has suggested: "Human values are the product of an evolutionary process; they have no more equilibrium than anything else... We are always moving into a changing future in which we hope that things will go from bad to better instead of from bad to worse. That is all the quality of life means, going from bad to better instead of bad to worse." Our task is not only to enlarge the gross national product, but also to ensure that relief of poverty, improved health services, and accessibility to basic education for those 140 million of the world's children of whom I have spoken become priorities for action.

I want you to know that I, for one, do not believe that Western economic values are necessarily the most appropriate for the rest of the world. Indeed, they are not necessarily always the best for the West. We must be cautious about whose interest globalization is designed to serve; certainly it is not always the interest of the people of the world. As Nelson Mandela remarked recently: "Is globalization only to benefit the powerful and the speculators? Does it offer nothing to men, woman and children who are ravaged by poverty?" And well he might ask, for 51 of the largest economies in the world are corporations, while the 300 largest corporations account for 25 per cent of the world's productive assets, and the combined revenue of General Motors and Ford, the two largest automobile corporations, exceed the combined gross domestic product for all of sub-Saharan Africa.

For the past 50 years, missionaries from the Western world have been suggesting to the developing world "how to do it" and have been preoccupied with studying the conditions in those countries. During the next 50 years, might it not be beneficial - or at least fair - to reverse the trend and have the developing world examine the West more closely to see if that is what it really wants? In particular, I am mindful of the continuing attitudinal wave of reform sweeping the Western world, driven by what some call neo-liberals, and others neo-conservatives, but what I believe are really neo-mercantilists. It is best summed up by the proposition that governments can do no right! But good government is central to development, for who else does provide for the well-being of the people? That is a lesson that is now being driven home every day in a world of uncertainty and turbulence.

As far as the Commonwealth is concerned, there is an acknowledged need to sensitize stakeholders to the variety of new learning technologies applicable to the delivery of quality education. There is also increasing demand for the use of open and distance learning methodologies to address a number of capacity building issues. These include the extension of literacy and numeracy skills among millions of adults through the use of radio, television and telematics, helping rural women to develop entrepreneurial skills, assisting agricultural extension workers to improve their capacity to educate farm workers, training legislators in legislative drafting, increasing the speed of in service training of un- or under-trained teachers, and delivering continuous professional development programmes for health workers, managers and administrators.

The past five years has seen a phenomenal increase in the application of new technologies to the learning environment. As I have suggested, this development is removing the distinction between conventional and distance learning. However, it is also eroding political and geographical barriers to the movement of knowledge. While many view this as a good thing others fear a new form of imperialism underlying these developments. This imperialism has all the potential to undermine a nation's intellectual and cultural assets in the longer term and we must be forever vigilant about that unwelcome by-product. Although it may be difficult to arrest those developments, a lot can be done to increase the national capability to exploit the new technologies, to increase local competitiveness, and to enhance local capacities to create and deliver learning and cultural products to the people.

To achieve this, skills must be developed to use the technologies in the learning environment, content has to be produced in sufficient quantity and quality, information technology connectivity has to be improved, appliances have to be made available at affordable costs, appropriate uses for the technologies have to be identified, and policy frameworks need to be established to support these ventures. The Commonwealth experience in all of these areas can be put to use for the Commonwealth at large; I am proud to say that the Commonwealth of Learning is well placed to do this.

It is most likely that, in the next quarter of a century, a few key issues that will preoccupy the minds of educational planners and administrators will also determine the style and state of education in the Commonwealth as indeed in the world at large. These factors will include, among other things, expansion, equity, access, costs, globalization, competition, quality, efficiencies, effectiveness and technology. While there may be debate about the relative important of these various factors depending on

the particular sector of education, the location of where the education is delivered and the prejudices of those participating in the debate, there can no longer be a debate about the importance of learning technologies and their impact on the delivery of education and training. Among the many reasons for ascribing this importance to technology, the following are most prominent:

Death of distance: the belief that distance is a factor in human communication is dying. There is hope that the cost of communication will not be determined by distance even in the most regulated of environments. Reaching out to students through the electronic highway will be determined more by willingness of the education providers to utilize the newer technologies than by fear of inaccessibility because of communication costs.

Cost of appliances, which are so necessary for participation in educational transactions reliant on the ICTs, will continue to drop even as the computing capacities of such appliances increase. The cost of the Networking computers of the future is expected to decrease to the level of present day televisions making it possible for many more householders to own appliances. Where households are too poor to have the appliance, the emergence of tele-learning centres can provide an intermediate solution.

Location does not matter: providers of educational services can be located anywhere on earth and can reach the user of the educational service wherever they may be as long as there is a basic communication infrastructure. Even today, Indian students already have access to, say, courses from North America without having to be in North America. Similarly, courses from India can and should travel across the globe.

The size of the organization providing the educational service is not relevant; what matters is the quality of the service. Small and specialized organizations can offer their products to large groups and be globally competitive.

Content customization: sophisticated pedagogy can facilitate individuals to customize their learning needs. Learning can become either a multi-channel or a mono-channel experience. The final authority on customization will be the expected learning outcomes of the subject and the learning preference of the student.

People as the ultimate scarce resource: the really difficult challenge for institutions will be to recruit people with the necessary skills to perform the tasks required, as well as to train and retrain those already in service to work in the new environment.

Emergence of globally used language: the emergence of English as a dominant second language of science, technology, business and international relations, as well as education and training, will mean the availability of globally useable knowledge products. In turn, there will be an increase in the choice of educational and training courses.

Communities of culture can be developed. The opportunity to make available content in other languages, apart from English, to a larger audience will become feasible. Declining cost and ease of use of

communication tools will mean the availability of a vehicle to disseminate other cultures and traditions.

Commonwealth countries have themselves been responding to the possibilities of using distance and open learning in an increasing range of sectors. This means that, in the past, the nature of COL's work differed markedly from one sector of activity to another. In the university and teacher education sectors, for example, where distance education approaches were already in use, there were existing bodies of experience and knowledge that COL could draw on when developing its own responses. However, in fields like technical and vocational education and training, the situation was quite different. Until recently, there was a widely held belief that trade and other forms of vocational training could not be taught effectively through open learning. COL's task in such circumstances was to search for and bring together available experience in the field and, on the basis of lessons learned, devise programmes and initiatives aimed at spreading the application of open learning to Tech/Voc education. In higher and tertiary education, the position was much the same with, perhaps, more emphasis on continuing and professional education. As we look ahead, as far as sectoral focus is concerned, COL may wish to continue its focus on teacher education. Tech/Voc education, continuing professional education and add pre-tertiary non-formal, basic and secondary education with special attention given to marginalized and out-of-school youth and adults.

Meanwhile, while funding and enthusiasm for technology is crucial, education will continue to be the most vital factor in the Internet age. As John Chambers, CEO of Cisco systems, has suggested: "In the long term, education will be the key differentiator for all economies around the world." And, of course, I recognize that much of this technology will be slow to penetrate many parts of the world. In the interim, we must employ whatever techniques fit the local situation.

In whatever way we look at it, education and training is at the heart of any serious development of citizens, for economic development, participatory citizenship, protection of rights, safety of families, conflict resolution, poverty alleviation, wellness and well being of the individual. The call for more education is clear and Commonwealth Heads of Government, at their most recent meeting in Durban, echoed that sentiment. For many who are engaged in the business of delivering education there is recognition that:

- Learning in the future will become the essential part of everyday human activity.
- Access to learning in the future will need to become as near universal as possible.
- Learning providers of the future will need to respond flexibly to learner needs.
- Learning suppliers of the future will need to adapt their ways to meet the changing demands of their clients and to maximize the potential of new delivery techniques.
- Governments of the future will need to play an active role in supporting the learning infrastructure, but should not attempt to control the learning agenda.
- Learning organizations of the future will need to be collaborative enterprises.

In all of these tasks, we must ensure an over-riding objective. Education must not be an end in itself. Rather, we, as educators and as university graduates must be constantly aware of our mission to prove the questioner, to whom I referred at the beginning, wrong. Education must become the source of a more peaceful, tolerant and humane world if the globe itself, let alone globalization, is to survive. I have no doubt that it will and that you, the graduates of today, will be a major contributor to that process of survival and improvement.