

Open Learning and Human Development: the IEC story: mission accomplished...or is it?

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Abstract

The proposed workshop will start with a presentation by me of an outline document about IEC's history, achievements and experience, very much in line with the PCF's theme, and in advance I will invite IEC associates from various countries and regions to make short presentations/critiques about their experience of working with IEC. The themes for the analysis of IEC's achievements will be: reaching out to the educationally deprived; sharing experience and resources; professional development; and what have we learned? An important sub-theme would be 'unfinished business' and how such business as IEC concerned itself with can be carried forward in the future. I hope there would be a possibility to draw some significant conclusions about the development of ODL from this review of IEC's experience.

NB This will be a special event outside the main Forum programme

Full Text

1. Historical, philosophical and political contexts

During the nineteen sixties, the world underwent several drastic changes. In Europe, countries, such as Britain and France had recovered economically from the second world war. Socially and politically, however, their societies and the societies of their colonies, which had in many cases fought in the war with them, had changed during and after the war in ways that made both the class system of pre-war Europe and its imperial relationships unsustainable.

The social and educational inequalities within these countries were no longer acceptable to their electorates and, as the economies improved, the demand for increased and improved tertiary education to open up new career opportunities to those previously excluded became undeniable. New universities were created and more were called for. Michael Young, a social reformer who had strong links with the post-war Labour government and the Labour Party now in opposition, did not feel that this expansion was enough or fast enough. He called for new approaches to that expansion to cater for the huge new demand about to be created by post-war population explosion, known as the baby boom, as well as for those former children who were now working adults. Among other changes, he called for the creation of an 'Open University'. He drew attention to the potential of the broadcasting media, as well as the under-rated and as yet unreformed correspondence courses, to provide such learning opportunities on a part-time basis, linking in with existing part-time face-to-face adult education classes and using wherever possible existing educational facilities. In order to prove this potential he set up the National Extension College (NEC) as a pilot project for such a university.

In the former colonial countries, especially in Africa, the sixties was the decade of independence. It was the decade of calls for universal primary education, for huge expansion of secondary schools and the decade in which many national universities were founded where there had been none. But in spite of such educational expansion, often stretching national treasuries to and beyond their limits, the demand for education, both for children and for the adults who had grown up before such expansion took place, was insatiable. Education was rightly seen by the people and their governments as a primary

fruit of political independence and any failure to provide it could, and would lead to serious disillusionment and frustration.

During the sixties, therefore, many newly-independent countries began to turn to alternative methods of educational provision. Experiments with radio education, television in schools and the somewhat more mundane correspondence education were introduced by governments, often supported by international aid agencies. Many of these experiments drew on the experience of countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and the Soviet Union but also new experiments in Britain and France. The new NEC received visitors from developing countries seeking advice and possibly the right to use its materials.

It was into this world that the International Extension College was born in 1971, eight years after the foundation of the NEC and almost coincident with the British Open University opening its non-existent doors to its first intake of students.

The IEC was also set up by Michael Young, as a non-profit-making educational non-government organisation, registered under the Charities Commission law for England and Wales. Its conception was funded through a very small grant from the Elmgrant Trust of Dartington and its first two years of existence were made possible by small annual grants each of about £20000 from the Ford Foundation. These were the only core-funding grants the IEC ever received in its 35 year life, that is grants towards setting up and running the organisation as compared to monies raised for it to carry out certain specified activities. From the outset, therefore, it had to concern itself with raising the necessary finance to enable it to carry out the activities it saw to be necessary or desirable. It did this by identifying projects in developing countries to which three-way teaching was seen locally as being relevant, sometimes by stimulating local interest in the use of these methods in those projects, and then working with local governments and institutions to raise the funds to make them possible.

What was the IEC and what were its guiding principles? It 'exists to make knowledge available about distance teaching and its relevance, especially to the third world' as was stated in its first five year report. Its preference was always for working with people on the ground, in whichever country invited it, to help to set up experimental approaches to making more education available to more people than were being reached by traditional means and for education at the lower end of the academic scale rather than tertiary education. It inherited from its founder a primary concern for, as Hilary Perraton has said, 'the pretty unfashionable idea of equity in and even through education'. It was not always able to concentrate all its energies on putting such principles into practice: the continuous need to find work which payed the bills often interfered. IEC was never a large organisation. At its largest it probably employed no more than fifteen fulltime staff. And whenever it was tempted to expand, funding realities quickly cut it down to size.

As the following historical summary of its work will show, however, these principles remained at the forefront of its thinking till its doors closed earlier this year

2. The IEC experience: a historical summary

The first job of the new body was to find out what was happening in this new field of education in developing countries. In the process its members also set out to stimulate new and renewed interest in the gathering experience of three-way teaching and its potential to help to meet some of the expanding educational demand which such countries were experiencing. These activities led to two important conclusions. First, there was a significant and growing body of experience of three-way teaching in Africa which needed documenting. Secondly there was considerable interest in seeking help to expand this experience both through the setting up of new institutions and the development of new programmes in existing bodies and the IEC, new though it was, was welcomed as a partner in both.

Within two years of its foundation the IEC was asked by the governments of Mauritius, Botswana and Lesotho to help them to set up new distance teaching colleges. This led to the establishment of the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) in 1972, the Botswana

Extension College (BEC) in 1973, and in 1974, the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (LDTC). Finding and seconding experienced staff to these three colleges, recruiting and training, on-the-job, local staff to take over as soon as possible from expatriate staff, planning experimental programmes and developing materials for them, raising initial funding and providing back-up services to them, absorbed most of IEC's time and resources during those early years. It was a two-way exchange: in the process, the IEC itself learned and developed new skills.

Sharing information about distance education was a guiding principle in IEC's foundation. Its first annual report said:

'We are more convinced now than we were when we started that there is something to be gained from a regular and thorough exchange between institutions which are providing similar types of education.'

At that time there was a very limited amount of documented information to be exchanged and IEC saw it as a vital function to collect such information as existed, to create it through research and reports where it did not and to create means of publishing and exchanging such information as it collected or created. This led to the establishment, initially on a very informal basis, of the IEC Resource Centre. This continued to grow throughout IEC's life, creating an unique collection of published works, unpublished reports, proposals and papers and samples of learning materials, a large proportion of which, having been assessed for continuing relevance and value, has eventually been bequeathed to the Kyambogo University's Institute of Distance Education in Uganda and Nottingham University's adult education library in the UK.

It also led to the decision to self-publish a series of 'Broadsheets' over a period of 15 years including 13 titles. In 1986 it was decided that there was a wide range of other publications about distance learning and therefore that the IEC's publishing role in this respect had been completed. The series was brought to an end. In 1980 a book by four of IEC's early staff members called 'Distance teaching for the third world: the lion and the clockwork mouse' was published which was an attempt to bring together what they thought could be learned from IEC's experience so far. IEC's own publications also included a series of training materials, starting with a correspondence course on correspondence course writing first published in 1973 and culminating in the materials produced for the MA/Postgraduate Diploma in Distance Education produced as an external degree of the University of London and its successor the online MA. Its publications can be divided into two categories. The first were those it published itself. They included the Broadsheets and training materials and books which described and analysed work in which it had been involved. Secondly, IEC continued to seek to publish, through commercial channels, the results of research it carried out either on its own initiative or at the request of other international agencies. A list of such publications can be found in the longer version of this paper which will be available at the Forum IEC event. When IEC started, very few publications on distance education or open learning were forthcoming; as IEC closes down, such publications are legion. IEC's efforts have perhaps helped to nurture that growth, with special reference to its application to the educationally deprived sections of the international community.

One of IEC's major concerns, from a very early stage of its existence, has been with the professional development of staff working in distance and open learning. As Janet Jenkins, who played a major role in that development, has commented:

'The really interesting thing is the legacy - the number of IEC ex-students/associates all over the world - including people like Asha Kanwar COL VP as one of the trainees on the courses we did at IGNOU. There [are] a lot of people who have been on IEC-supported training courses all over the place or done the distance taught courses.'

The philosophy behind such a concern is described by Tony Wrightson who first worked for IEC as the lead long-term consultant to the Northern Uganda Integrated Teacher Education Project (NITEP).

'IEC has traditionally, and effectively, worked alongside local institutions and stakeholders, in a mentoring, and supportive, way. We have been 'big' on local capacity-

building. Not only have we helped stakeholders explore ODL methodologies, we have also provided local practitioners with opportunities for re-training and mindset changes so that they are able to sustain and 'grow' these new training delivery methods for the benefit of their respective educationally deprived populations.'

Such training programmes have taken various forms: short onsite training workshops in institutions that have asked for them and special short courses run in Cambridge for groups of people from one country, or even one institution, training manuals and printed self-study courses covering specific ODL skills, the London University Institute of Education/IEC Short Courses not leading to any formal qualification, which ran each year from 1977 till 2000, and the MA programmes which, in their various forms, have been running for the last 20 years. It would be interesting indeed to be able to count the number of ODL practitioners throughout the world who have participated in these programmes and to assess their impact on ODL development through the last 35 years.

IEC's involvement with the creation of new institutions and of new programmes for existing institutions has continued in different contexts throughout its life. In the process it has helped to put in place more than 20 such programmes, most of which in some form or another, survive today. These included new or revamped programmes in existing universities such as the University of Lagos, the Open University of Pakistan and the University of Namibia, refugee education programmes for exiles from Namibia, South Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea in Zambia, Tanzania, Sudan and Somalia, new national programmes and institutions in South Africa and Namibia as these two countries achieved their freedom such as SAIDE, and NAMCOL, two Integrated Teacher Education Programmes in Uganda (MITEP and NITEP) and a succession of adult basic/non-formal education programmes such as the radio members-education project at the Zambian Co-operative College, the Health, Sanitation and Water (HESAWA) project for the Ministry of Health in Tanzania, the Adult Basic Education Project at Fort Hare University in South Africa, and the Women in the Fishing Industry (WIFIP) on Lake Victoria in Kenya. A list of such programmes is also available in the longer version of this paper

The IEC no longer exists. Throughout its existence IEC has faced a continuous struggle to raise the funds to allow it to do what it saw as its job. Many have been the times when it has faced looming financial crises and survived by the skin of its teeth. In recent years the climate and practice of international educational funding have changed dramatically. In the '70s and '80s, for example, the British government's Overseas Development Administration, as DFID was then called, if it identified a project to which it thought distance teaching might be relevant in a country to which it was offering aid, might well turn directly to the IEC to provide such consultancy work as was required. Today such projects will usually be part of a much larger education sector support programme requested by and delegated to the government concerned. Consortia bids to undertake the whole programme will be invited and assessed on a competitive basis. In that climate the IEC is a very small fish indeed...and, as has been proved, part of an endangered species. Perhaps IEC has been unable to respond to this changing funding environment and to find ways of working closely enough with other larger partners. Perhaps it was unwilling to compromise with its long-held principles and to diversify its activities into more popular and lucrative kinds of education. Perhaps most of what it set out to achieve has been achieved to the extent that a small non-government organisation was capable of achieving it.

The purpose of this paper is to begin a process of describing and assessing the successes of the development of ODL as IEC has been involved in it. It is to judge the extent to which the original mission of the IEC has been accomplished and therefore its closing down to be celebrated. Its other purposes are to identify what we can learn from IEC's experiences, both about ODL and about the roles in it of NGOs and to highlight the unfinished business to which IEC set itself and which now must be accomplished by others...and who or what those others are.

To some extent these concerns will be raised, discussed and hopefully answered at least in part in the chapters which will follow if they can be constructed from discussions which take place at the PCF4 or from contributions made before or after that event. The

questions added to this paper are seen as a starting point for some of these discussions. They are reflected in a final comment from Dr. Jan Visser with which this chapter ends:

'The good thing of IEC is that it was a product of in particular the 1970s and 1980s - vigorously in tune with its time... it's a feature of evolutionary processes that times and circumstances change. It is therefore also a good thing that organizations worth their salt are able to flourish and that they are prepared to die. That's again a very positive aspect of the history of IEC. I've seen too many organizations that became so big, powerful and rich that too much was at stake to let them die. That usually results in a struggle for survival that has little to do with serving the mission for which the organization was created. An organization that gracefully decides that it's time to go creates fantastic opportunities for those whom it inspired to reincarnate ideas differently and be a constructive presence during a new and different epoch, hopefully with the same attitude to be there for a purpose, and not clinging on to life any longer than would be justified by that purpose.'

Questions for discussion

2. Reaching out to the educationally deprived:

Is the evidence of methodological success in this kind of education sufficient to make the claims for its expansion?

- If so, why have such projects and programmes not been replicated or taken to scale or become part of the mainstream of adult education in developing countries?
- Is the failure a result of a failure of political will to bring about widescale adult education or is it a lack of funds and different educational priorities?
- Has there been and is there now adequate research and testing of such methods as a way of convincing politicians and educational administrators of their potential?
- What agencies, both national and international, need to take the initiative in advancing this use of ODL?
- Should all these questions be applied also to the education of refugees?

2. Sharing experience

- Why do institutions find it so difficult to work together to share or to produce joint materials but usually seem to prefer to re-invent or at the very least substantially adapt existing materials?
- What are the most appropriate formats to store and share experience in ODL?
- What are the most appropriate institutions to promote such sharing?
- How can such institutions be pro-active in promoting such sharing?
- How can the costs of sharing also be shared?

3. Professional development

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- Are specialist professional development programmes in ODL for ODL practitioners the most appropriate form of professional development for such practitioners, as compared to general educational upgrading?
- Is there continuing need for such professional development not leading to degrees?

- What is the best balance between in-house and external programmes?
- Which are the most appropriate institutions to provide such professional development for ODL practitioners from developing countries?
- What are the most appropriate and accessible means of delivering such professional development?
- Is it possible, appropriate and financially viable to provide such professional development on a collaborative regional or international basis?

4. What have we learned?

- How can the strengths of the new technologies be best harnessed to ODL , especially for the educationally under-privileged?
- To which of the new technologies do our potential learners have ready access at the time of offering a particular programme?
- How do we promote access to the new technologies as quickly as possible for our potential learners?
- How do we promote collaboration in and through the new technologies?
- would IEC have been more effective in its training and research activities if its links had been even closer, including the possibility of merger, with a university, and would it have survived longer?
- what might be appropriate relationships between local ODL NGOs and local or national universities?
- what might be appropriate relationships between local NGOs and international NGOs?
- can local NGOs working in ODL find the necessary funds to survive, and if so, how?

5. Unfinished business

There is still significant unfinished business. It is reasonable to identify that unfinished business and to try to identify how and by who such business should be carried forward. I list some concerns which I believe highlight some of that unfinished business:

- The effective and widescale use of ODL methodologies for adult basic and non-formal education is ODL's biggest failure to date, especially in developing countries.
- their use to ensure access to quality education for sections of national and international communities which are currently deprived of it ought to be a top ODL priority;

Four somewhat more mundane and ODL-specific issues are:

- the continuing need to provide effective in-service training/professional development opportunities for ODL staff in all institutions and all countries, however small

- in order to achieve this and to maximise on existing experience in ODL, the need to continue to look for effective structures of international and inter-institutional collaboration
- the continuing search for effective structures for the governance of ODL programmes especially those operating in the public education sector
- the growing impact of the new technologies and the need to be at the same time innovative and cautious in their application

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