

# *Mobile Technology: the Hype and the Hope*

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*Workshop on Applications of Mobile Phones for  
Development – M4D  
COL – National Institute of Bank Management*

*Pune, India  
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*Sir John Daniel  
Commonwealth of Learning*

Chair, Professor Asha Kanwar; Mr Allen Pereira, Director of the National Institute of Bank Management; Ms. Chetna Gala Sinha; Dr. Balaji; Distinguished participants.

I am delighted that my last speaking engagement in India before I demit office as president of COL should be at this one-day workshop on mobile telephony. I am most grateful to Dr. Venkataraman Balaji, COL's eminent Director of Technology and Knowledge Management, for taking up so quickly my suggestion that it would be interesting to bring together in India some of those who, like COL, believe that mobile technology has great potential for development but much of that potential is as yet unrealised.

Let me express our warm gratitude to Mr Allen Pereira for agreeing at very short notice, to host the meeting in this splendid facility. There is important symbolism in this venue because the involvement of the banks in the development projects that we shall be talking about is so crucial. Over my eight years at COL I have referred to our Lifelong Learning for Farmers project in many speeches and on each occasion I have stressed that the engagement of the banks is at least as important as the technology. Technology changes but banks are always with us

It is also a great pleasure to be on a platform again with Ms. Chetna Gala Sinha. I have vivid memories of my visit to the headquarters of the Manndeshi Bank in Mhawsad in 2010, where Dr. Balasubramanian and I were inspired by what we saw and heard. And her brilliant keynote address for the Social Justice theme at our Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Kochi a few days later still rings in our ears.

My final remark, by way of introduction, is to note that at this gathering you have both the present and the future leadership of COL in the persons of me and Professor Kanwar, as well our Director of Technology

Management, Dr. Balaji. This should give you the assurance that COL will continue to apply itself with conviction – and we hope intelligence – to the applications of mobile telephony for development.

I have entitled my remarks *Mobile Technology: The Hype and the Hope*. So let me start with the hype.

Exactly 40 years ago, having completed my doctorate in nuclear metallurgy and secured my first academic post, I enrolled in a part-time Master's course in Educational Technology. I did so in the belief that it would make me a better teacher. I don't know whether it did that, but it did completely change my life and career by sending me to the UK Open University, then just one year old, for a 3-month internship. I had the revelation of a revolution in higher education and when I returned to Canada I re-oriented my career and have spent most of it involved with educational technology and open and distance learning.

Educational technology is an important field, but it suffers from excessive hype. Each new development in communications is hailed as the harbinger of a revolution in education.

In the middle of the nineteenth century one Josiah Bumstead remarked that “the inventor or introducer of the blackboard deserves to be ranked among the best contributors to learning and science, if not among the greatest benefactors of mankind”. A hundred years later Hoban claimed that the motion picture is the most revolutionary instrument introduced into education since the printing press.

However, ten years later it was clear to Stoddard that television offered the greatest opportunity for the advancement of education since the introduction of printing by moveable type. But hard on the heels of that statement, Woelfel argued that programmed learning was the first major technological innovation since the invention of printing.

A decade later we were told that impact of computers on society, and hence on education, has been compared to that of moveable type and the printing press since Gutenberg. And finally, a conference at the beginning of this century assured us that Internet and Communications Technology are revolutionising the format and delivery of education.

I am sure that were I to have continued seeking similar quotes into the present century I would have found many more – and in recent times they would have referred to mobile technology, the topic of our workshop today.

You will have noticed that these quotes talk of revolution, innovation, impact and advancement – and that four of them refer back, not to the previous educational technological marvel but to the good old printing press.

I recall this history to encourage us not to get carried away by the hype that now claims mobile technology is the greatest gift to education and development since Gutenberg. Without question mobile technology presents us with tremendous opportunities for development. But to take advantage of these opportunities we must reflect on how best to use it. Today's workshop will give us some cogent examples of its use in India.

I am very proud of the initiative that COL has developed with partners in India over many years, called Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F). The collaborative model of L3F had already demonstrated its success at improving the livelihoods of the poorest people before we introduced mobile telephony. But

without question that our collaboration with the University of British Columbia to introduce mobile telephones linked to a learning management system has made the impact of L3F even greater. You will hear about that later from Mr Kasirajan.

So my first hypothesis is that mobile telephony will be most successful if it is used to extend a proven model for rural development rather than being treated simply as a potentially useful new technology.

My other hypothesis, which I need to think about further, is inspired by the quotes about earlier technologies that I showed a moment ago and by reading Larry Lessig's book *Remix*. Does the constant reference back to Gutenberg and printing mean that the more recent technologies are not as open to copying, mixing and matching in the way that printed text is?

COL is the first international intergovernmental agency to have a corporate policy that says it will, as far as possible, make all its output available as Open Educational Resources (OER).

We really believe in this and I am at present leading a project with UNESCO to foster governmental support for OER and the open licensing of educational material.

In a recent blog Dr. Balaji and I have argued that if it is to deliver its potential mobile telephony need to adopt a similarly open approach. We first observed that despite all the hype the exploitation of mobile communications as a support and enabler of development is still at an early stage. Fortunately some of the best of that early work is taking place in India and we shall hear about it today.

We argued that to make mobile communications effective as a support for development we need greater independence from specific devices and from specific services of telecom companies. Another concern is that a number of recent initiatives, in both the non-profit and for-profit sectors, focus on building specific "apps" for devices such as iPads, iPhones and similar smart phones.

In developing countries these are expensive to buy and own and are often tied to long term contracts with specific companies.

Another problem is the apparent lack of interest in the use of simple text and voice as key media in mobile communications for learning and development. Given the persistent illiteracy and lack of experience of classroom-based schooling among hundreds of millions of people in many parts of the world, new developments that ignore simple texting and voice messages will limit the options for many people to participate in the mobile learning paradigm.

We went on to cite the example of the World-Wide Web as a technology that really is a revolution and has affected people the world over. Its inventor, Sir Tim Berner-Lee affirms that the rapid growth of the web is primarily due to its open character. Entry barriers to the Web for developers were non-existent, which spurred the development of literally millions of web-based applications which have touched millions.

In a similar manner Sir Tim advocates the inter-leaving of the open standards of the web with 'simple' voice and text protocols of mobile telephony which are still open to developers. Synergising benefits in this way is a good way to make mobile learning for development a paradigm for very large numbers of people, especially those at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

Our LIVES mobile communication application developed by COL in partnership with the University of British Columbia, is an example of such synergy and there are a few other attempts in different parts of the world to effect this fusion.

We suggest that activists in learning for development, technology designers and development policy-makers should get together to progress this new paradigm. This is the motivation behind today's workshop on mobile learning for development.

This is the hope that we juxtapose with the hype.

I wish you a good day and thank you for your attention.