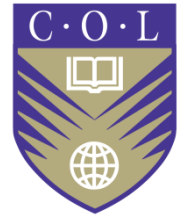


How Can Learning Contribute to Development?



University of Guyana, The Dennis Irvine Lecture, 27 February 2007

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Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Introduction

Thank you for the great honour of giving the Dennis Irvine Lecture. The first lecture in this series was given in 2001 by my predecessor as President of the Commonwealth of Learning, Dato' Professor Raj Dhanarajan. My presence here symbolises the strong links between the Commonwealth of Learning and the University of Guyana, links that were expressed so well in the life of Dr. Dennis Irvine.

This is the first of these lectures in honour of Dennis Irvine since his untimely death two years ago, so let me take a moment to recall the highlights of his illustrious career that had such an impact on both our organisations.

Dr. Dennis Irvine

Dennis had a most distinguished academic trajectory. After earning a first class honours degree in Chemistry from the Leeds University and a PhD from Cambridge, he began his career at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria where he was first a lecturer and then Professor of Chemistry. He was Vice-Chancellor of your University of Guyana for 13 years and I know that his legacy here still lives on. Later he was UNESCO's Science Adviser to the Caribbean and Education Consultant to the Jamaican Government in the 1980s.

He then served on COL's staff as Director of Caribbean Programmes and of Materials Acquisition and Development from COL's inception in July 1989 until July 1994. On his retirement, he returned to Jamaica but continued to assist COL as Co-ordinator of COL's Programmes in the Caribbean from 1994-96 and later as Regional Adviser to COL's President until June 2000.

Dennis also served as a consultant to many national and international agencies, including UNESCO, UNDP, UNEP, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) and the Government of Jamaica. In 2002 he was named an Honorary Fellow of COL and in 2005 he was elected founding President of the Caribbean Regional Association for Distance and Open Learning (CARADOL).

Dennis Irvine was a great citizen of the Caribbean and I am delighted to see that the University Council of Jamaica has also recently instituted a Dennis Irvine Lecture. He was also an esteemed citizen of the Commonwealth and we remember him at the Commonwealth of Learning for his wisdom, dedication and commitment. He was a kind and understanding colleague who was a great comfort to COL staff during some of the difficult days of our early years. It is a singular honour for me to give this lecture in his memory.

Structure of this Lecture

Six years ago, when my predecessor and friend Professor Raj Dhanarajan gave this lecture he chose as his topic *Combating Poverty through Adult Education*. I shall be returning to some of the themes that Raj explored and have taken as my title: *How Can Learning Contribute to Development?* I shall begin by dwelling on the notion of development. We use the word liberally every day, but what do we mean by it? How do we break this broad concept down into some goals that we can pursue in a systematic way?

Looking at such goals I shall argue that achieving them - and I mean achieving all of the development goals and not just those directly related to education - depends fundamentally on mass learning. This conclusion presents a problem, because current methods of teaching and learning in face-to-face groups cannot address the scale of the challenge. What has happened in other areas of life when old methods cannot respond to contemporary demands? The answer is technology.

Whether it is in transport, food production, power generation, communications or consumer goods, technology has created revolutions that have provided mass access to goods and services of high quality and relatively low cost. Many of you are carrying a good symbol of that technological revolution in your handbags or pockets this evening - a cell phone. You have others in your homes and your work places.

Can we create a similar revolution by applying technology to learning and so respond to the challenges of development? The evidence suggests that we can. The Commonwealth of Learning has been engaged in that revolution for nearly twenty years. I shall share some of that experience and tell you how we propose to continue that work in the Commonwealth and in Guyana in the coming years.

What is Development?

That is the menu I offer you this evening. Let me now go back to the beginning and explore with you what we mean by this word development. If we want to understand how learning can contribute to development we must agree on what we mean by the word. You must all have thought deeply about this question over the years since independence.

I believe that we need look no further than the title of Amartya Sen's inspiring book *Development as Freedom* for guidance. He says that development simply means expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Development and human rights are two sides of the same coin. According to Sen, the expansion of freedom is both the primary purpose and the principal means of development. We measure the progress of development by the advancement of the freedoms that people can enjoy.

He also points out that freedom is also what makes development happen. It is primarily through the free agency of people that development is achieved. Free people devote more energy to the development of their families, their communities and their countries than those who are not free.

What kind of freedoms are we talking about? We can distinguish between freedom from and freedom to.

The first freedom from is freedom from hunger. You cannot concentrate on much else if you worry constantly where your next meal is coming from. Hunger is a direct manifestation of poverty. Taking people out of abject poverty helps to free them from hunger and gives them other freedoms as well, notably some freedom from being pushed around by others and from having most of life's decisions made for them.

The second freedom from is freedom from disease. It is hard for people to fulfil their potential if they are constantly sick. It is hard to develop a community if its members are constantly sick.

The next freedom is the freedom to live with a minimum of dirt, smoke and germs. There seems to be a paradox here. In rich parts of the world individual people consume more than their share of the earth's resources but live in nice clean environments with fresh water in the taps, clean air to breathe, and no piles of garbage to trip over. In developing countries individuals make fewer demands on resources but often have to live besides heaps of garbage, breathe foul air and make do with dirty water.

I'm sure that you can think of other 'freedoms from', but there are also 'freedoms to'. The freedom to be treated as an equal to other members of society, especially the freedom for men and women to be treated as equals. There is the freedom to be educated; the freedom to choose who governs you; the freedom to express yourself; and the freedom to practice your religion.

No doubt you can think of more "freedoms to" as well, but this list of "freedoms from" and "freedoms to" begins to define what we mean by "development". The more people can enjoy these freedoms the more developed they are - and the more they will contribute to the further development of their families, their communities and their nations.

The challenge is to express these freedoms as concrete aims that we can work towards. At the Commonwealth of Learning we do this by bringing together three frameworks of goals. First, there are the Millennium Development Goals, which set targets for progress towards freedom from hunger and poverty, freedom from disease, freedom from pollution, the freedom to be equal and the freedom to be educated. Defining the freedom to be educated was taken further in the Dakar Goals of Education for All, or EFA. There are six goals for EFA, which cover all levels of education from early childhood to adult learning and skills training.

Finally, a number of the other 'freedoms to' are embraced in the key goals espoused by the Commonwealth: the freedom to live in peace, the freedom of democracy, the freedom of equality before the law, and the freedoms that flow from good governance. COL defines its work by combining these three frameworks.

Learning and Development

So far, so good! Development means greater freedom and greater freedom leads to more development. But what is the role of learning in development? I am sure we can all see a link between education and freedom - indeed according to Amartya Sen "education is the royal road to freedom: the royal road to that fundamental freedom of the human spirit that underpins other more practical freedoms".

So I don't need to convince you that achieving the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals for education requires a massive increase in learning - not just for children but for teachers and all those who work to expand schooling. I'll come back to what COL is doing about that in a minute.

But reaching the other goals also depends on more and better learning. Take the first Millennium Development Goal, which is the reduction of poverty and hunger. Fighting hunger and sustaining a liveable environment means empowering millions of farmers and smallholders and giving rural people more control over their lives. Learning new ways of doing things is the key to better livelihoods. I shall describe COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers model, which has proved to be a good way of increasing prosperity in rural areas of India and is being adapted to other countries.

Similarly for the MDGs related to health. Clearly, better health services and an increase in the number of nurses and doctors are helpful in achieving these goals. But people can do a great deal themselves to avoid disease and keep their families healthy. The challenge is to facilitate such learning by providing information that people can relate to. This is the aim of COL's Media Empowerment programme that is being implemented here in Guyana with the Guyana Planned Parenthood Association and the Pan-American Health Organisation. I shall say a word about that too and my colleague David Walker will be working here in Guyana on this programme this week.

But if helping more people to learn is crucial to development there is a problem. There are hundreds of millions of smallholders and farmers in developing countries. The existing systems of agricultural extension, which rely on face-to-face contact to transfer knowledge, simply cannot be scaled up to cope with the numbers. When we talk of sharing health information we are talking about billions of people. How can we reach them?

Technology and Learning

The answer is by applying technology to scale up learning. In other areas of human life technology has given more people access to services and products. Cell phones are a good example. Not long ago getting access to a phone in Guyana was expensive and the quality was poor. Today, thanks to cell phones, many people have access to a quality service at a reasonable price. It has revolutionised the way that ordinary people communicate. The same can be done for learning and COL is there to help countries and institutions take part in the revolution of learning technology.

Learning technology is not just a promise for the future. It is here already. 20 years ago, when the Commonwealth Heads of Government held their biennial meeting in Canada, they could see the potential

of learning technologies and decided to establish the Commonwealth of Learning to help countries exploit this potential. Were they right about this potential? Has it justified their expectations?

In preparing our current plan for 2006-09 COL looked back over the use of learning technologies over these 20 years in four areas and asked what had been achieved. We found a tremendous impact of technology-mediated learning, especially distance learning in higher education; teacher training; alternative or open schooling; and fighting poverty.

Higher Education

A good example of this growth is the multiplication of open universities in the Commonwealth. From ten in 1988 the figure has grown to 23 and today they enrol some 4 million students between them. But open universities are only part of the story. Over these 20 years there has been a massive increase in the number of campus universities functioning in 'dual mode', that is to say teaching at a distance as well as in classrooms. The University of Guyana is an example.

The picture in the three other areas is equally persuasive.

Teacher Development

Teacher education at a distance is now a vibrant activity. The numbers being trained are impressive: hundreds of thousands in Africa and over one million in India. COL has contributed substantially to this trend by helping to increase capacity for distance learning in countries as diverse as The Gambia, India, Lesotho, Nigeria and Sri Lanka.

Recently it worked with Zambia to formulate a strategy for using open and distance learning (ODL) and ICTs in both pre- and in-service teacher development. Teacher education administrators from all countries of the Commonwealth have received support through an annual COL-sponsored workshop series in Singapore. Some of COL's most recent work has focused on raising standards by developing Commonwealth quality assurance guidelines with partners in Asia and Africa.

Open Schooling

As countries strive towards achieving universal primary education, many more youngsters are finishing primary school. Sadly, most of them have little chance of getting into secondary school. There are simply not enough secondary schools or the trained teachers to staff them. Ministries of education are therefore turning to alternative means of secondary schooling. Open schooling uses high-quality self-instructional materials coupled with networks of local centres staffed with capable facilitators trained to support the learners.

Recent successes in Asia and Africa show that open schooling is a feasible alternative to classroom education. It increases access to schooling in a timely, efficient and cost-effective manner and is especially good for reaching girls, women and other disadvantaged groups that have difficulty accessing conventional schooling on a full-time basis. For example, there are now some 1.5 million children enrolled in the open schooling system in school-level and technical/vocational training courses in India alone. COL has worked with India's National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) to update its production processes for quality learning materials and to extend awareness of the potential of open

schooling in India. As a result, NIOS is now working with state governments to establish 14 state open schools across India.

Non-Formal Learning

Finally, the basic development agenda of improving health and reducing poverty and hunger calls for learning on a massive scale, with the focus on improving livelihoods and fostering a healthy population. While the content of learning in these areas is necessarily very locality specific, economies of scale have been achieved by sharing similar models for technology use and learner support.

Improving livelihoods in rural areas is central to world poverty reduction. These livelihoods are mostly farming-dependent, and agricultural extension is still largely based on face-to-face communication and demonstration. However, since the Green Revolution of the 1960s, communications technology has also been applied to agricultural extension.

Radio remains the most important medium for communicating with the rural populations of developing countries. This is particularly true in Africa where there were already 65 million radio receivers a decade ago. More recently video has become an important medium for agricultural education, the basic principle being to empower agricultural extension officers by teaching them camera and video production skills for use at the local level. This supports government policies of crop diversification among small-plot farmers in response to changing patterns of trade.

New tools for poverty reduction are also now available. ICT kiosks are spreading into the villages of India, although evaluation of the early experiences showed that they had been introduced without the adequate involvement of local people. To correct this omission, COL developed its Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3 Farmers) programme. I'll come back to that in a minute. Meanwhile those are just four examples of the growing role of distance learning - broadly defined - in development.

So how is COL going to build on these successes in the years ahead? Technology is changing and development challenges are changing. How can COL best help Guyana and the other countries of the Commonwealth?

COL's Three-Year-Plan

I shall give you the highlights of COL's Three-Year Plan for 2006-09. Its preparation reflected massive consultation around the Commonwealth. We also commissioned environmental scans in all regions. Dennis Irvine, whose memory we honour today, coordinated the scan that we did in the Caribbean in 2005.

I noted earlier that COL defines development as the combination of the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equality and good governance. This led us to divide our activities into three sectors: Education; Learning for Livelihoods; and Human Environment.

In our activities and initiatives we aim for one or more of four outcomes.

First, the longer COL exists, the more we observe that successful use of technology for learning depends on laying down a foundation of policy.

Second, much of COL's work is capacity building to help systems that involve technology-mediated learning to work better.

Third, we try to analyse our areas of work in terms of models. This helps us understand why something works and the ingredients of its success. It also helps in transferring the programme to a different country.

Finally, although we do not develop materials ourselves, we help institutions to produce them. COL then tries to get them used across the Commonwealth.

Those are the outputs and outcomes we aim for in each of our initiatives. In the Plan, which you can find on the web, these outputs, outcomes and impacts have been boiled down into performance indicators, the whole making a Corporate Logic Model on the pull-out centrefold of the Plan.

To keep it simple we have five initiatives in each of the three programme sectors.

Education

In Education we offer help in Quality Assurance; Teacher Development; Open or Alternative Schooling; Higher Education; and eLearning for Education Sector development. These are the areas to which governments attached most importance in our consultations with them.

I have already mentioned the brisk growth in the use of ODL for teacher development and open schooling for secondary education and we can come back to that in discussion. But let me focus now on COL's two other sectors where the contribution of learning to development may be less obvious.

Learning for Livelihoods

In the sector of Learning for Livelihoods we also have five initiatives. First, there is Learning and Skills for Livelihoods, where the aim is to find ways of translating learning as directly as possible into improved livelihoods. Second, there is our Rural and Peri-Urban Community Development Initiative, which is our successful programme for improving the prosperity of farmers. Let me use that one as an example. We are extremely proud of the success of our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme - L3 Farmers. It takes dead aim at the Poverty MDG. It began in India and is now being transferred to Sri Lanka and Africa.

The model, like most of our models, is simple but effective. We start at the grassroots and get the farmers to define their vision of a better future and the questions that it raises. We then get the information providers to work together to answer those questions, using commercial ICT kiosks as an information channel. We get banks and businesses involved by holding out the prospect of a more prosperous village.

In one village in Tamil Nadu, for example, the farmers decided that better dairying was the way to a more prosperous future. Their first question was how to tell a good milk cow from a poor one. The information providers came up with a checklist which some of the village women, who had learned some web programming skills, put into an instructional sequence on the ICT kiosk. This generated other learning

needs, such as testing the quality of the milk, because the bank got a dairy company in the local town to guarantee regular purchases of good quality milk. The banks then started loaning money.

Two years on the results are good. Loans of \$200,000 dollars have been made with a repayment rate of more than 100% because some are repaid early. Hundreds more loans are in preparation. The farmers, 60% of whom are women, are more prosperous and more empowered and, best of all, the model is spreading spontaneously from village to village without COL's involvement. We shall launch it in Sri Lanka very soon and discussions are going on in several African countries.

Coming back to the Learning and Livelihoods Sector there is an initiative in National and International Community Development refers particularly to working with the international organisations in the agriculture sector to extend our poverty reduction programme.

Then there is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, in which Guyana is involved. I shall come back to that at the end.

The final initiative in Learning and Livelihoods is Transnational Programmes. These are courses and materials whose use we facilitate around the Commonwealth. The best example is the Commonwealth Executive MBA and MPA programmes, developed in South Asia but now being adopted in Africa, the South Pacific and possibly here in the Caribbean.

Human Environment

The final sector, which we shall develop further in the coming years, is Human Environment. The five initiatives are Gender and Development; Health, Welfare and Community Development; Environmental Education; Good Governance and the Educational Use of Mass Media and ICTs. To illustrate this area let me take our work in Health, Welfare and Community Development - which is also being done in here in Guyana.

Let me describe another simple model that we call Media Empowerment, which is a contribution to tackling the three Health MDGs. It began in Africa but is now being adopted in Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean.

The model is to equip effective local NGOs, usually identified for us by the World Health Organisation, with a complete set of video recording and editing equipment, which costs less than \$20,000, and to train them intensively in its use. They then shoot and edit videos on health matters, usually HIV, or AIDS stigma, or malaria, or soon diabetes. These videos communicate very effectively because they are made by the people for the people. To reach the audience the NGO uses what we call village cinema: they go a to village at night, hang up a sheet between two trees, and project the video using a projector powered by a generator on the back of a pick-up truck.

In The Gambia they estimate some 60% of the total population have seen these videos and the Government says they have arrested the increase in HIV transmission and have increased substantially the numbers using insecticide treated bed nets. It's effective and inexpensive. COL refreshes the equipment from time to time but otherwise this is development without donors.

This programme is the brainchild of my colleague David Walker, seen here at a school in The Gambia, who has done a brilliant job implementing this model in a dozen Commonwealth countries in all regions. In Guyana, COL partners with the Pan American Health Organisation and the Guyana Responsible Parenthood Association (GRPA). The activity with the GRPA is in its early stages but a video about HIV/AIDS and family health will be delivered to all regions of the country as in the Gambian example.

Let me end by going back to an important initiative that I listed under Learning for Livelihoods, namely the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth was conceived by the Ministers of Education when they met in 2000. COL helped them work up a proposal which they approved when they met again in 2003 and we have been coordinating the implementation of the VUSSC, as it is called, for the last three years. It is now gathering momentum. Guyana is a signed up member of the VUSSC but has not been very active so far. I hope that will change.

So far we have secured funds for the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth from two sources, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of the USA and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC). The CFTC has allocated £1 million over four years as part of its policy of supporting human resource development in the Commonwealth.

A major use of these funds has been to hold planning and course development meetings as shown on this schedule. Although much of the work of course development will take place online and at a distance, we believed that to get the project going, people needed to meet. These course development meetings are nicknamed 'boot camps' because they include basic training in online working.

One thing we had to get right is the subjects on which courses and programmes will focus. This list was the result of correspondence with small states' governments back in 2004 and the planning meetings in Singapore in 2005 and 2006. As you can see the VUSSC is focussing on skills and livelihood-related courses.

A very important milestone in the development of the Virtual University was the first course development boot camp held in Mauritius in August last year. Participants were introduced to the ICT components of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, open source software, Wikis, and ePortfolios. All this material is being prepared as open content with a Creative Commons-BY-SA licence.

The participants in the boot camp created content on Tourism and Hospitality and on Small Business Management - three times as much material as we expected in the time available. This course development work is continuing as participants contribute online from their offices at home. Next month work on courses on professional development for teachers will get under way at a boot camp in Singapore with 24 states participating. Participants in these boot camps picked up skills fast and are now providing buddy-training to their colleagues back in their countries. This illustrates what a useful tool the VUSSC will be in bridging the digital divide in the small states.

COL's role is to coordinate the initiative; to put our expertise in educational technology at the disposal of the participants; to assist in building local capacity; and to obtain funds for the programme.

But you should understand what COL is not. COL is not a degree-awarding body. COL is not the Virtual University. Awards made as a result of VUUSC study will be made by institutions in the countries and we are working with them and the South African Qualifications Authority to facilitate arrangements for credit transfer and recognition of qualifications. I hope that the University of Guyana will take part.

I emphasise that this is not COL's project; it is a programme that originated with Ministers of Education back in 2000. Ministries of Education have a crucial role in developing policy so that the VUUSC fits national priorities; in liaising with other ministries where courses are of interest to them; in allocating people to the work; and generally in supporting and monitoring the implementation of the programme. The beneficial impact of the VUUSC will depend very directly on the extent to which Ministers get their people engaged and have them take responsibility for it.

The VUUSC must develop in close collaboration with local institutions, which will have the responsibility for linking into the international teams developing the courses and then adapting and delivering them in appropriate ways in each country.

We are increasingly confident that the VUUSC will a real difference and we detect rapidly rising enthusiasm for in the participating countries as more people and institutions get involved.

Conclusion

I shall end there. I hope I have convinced you of the crucial role of learning in development and of the major role that technology can play in expanding and improving learning.

I trust that I have also give you the flavour of what COL means by Learning for Development and how we shall be promoting learning for development in the years ahead.

All this would, I believe have been very pleasing to Dennis Irvine who did so much to develop both the University of Guyana and the Commonwealth of Learning. It has been a privilege to speak to you in his memory.