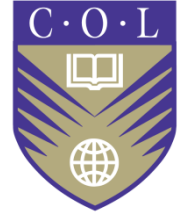


Can Mobiles support Learning for Development? A Gendered Perspective



Opening Remarks

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*Professor Asha Kanwar
Commonwealth of Learning*

Professor Arun Nigavekar; Dr Alan Perreira ; Chetna Sinha; Sir John Daniel, Dr Balaji, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a privilege to be asked to give the opening remarks at such a high-powered gathering of policy makers and practitioners who have assembled here to consider the innovative uses of mobile devices to promote development in India. This resonates very well with what my organisation, the Commonwealth of Learning, stands for: ‘learning for development’ (L4D). By ‘learning’ we refer to the entire spectrum of learning—in all its forms, formal, informal and non-formal and at all levels which include secondary as well as postsecondary education. In short, learning for us at COL means lifelong learning or what Prof Nigavekar used to call ‘learning from the cradle to cremation’. The ‘development’ agenda refers to the achievement of the internationally agreed goals such as the MDGs and the EFA goals. This encompasses all forms of development—individual, societal and national. COL is dedicated to the promotion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and the use of appropriate technologies to enhance access to quality learning opportunities that lead to development.

One of the most popular technology platforms in the developing world today is the mobile phone. It is affordable, accessible and available. In India alone there are over 800 million mobile phones. Basic mobiles are being used in different ways to enable teaching and learning. In Pakistan, UNESCO gave mobiles to teacher trainees so that they could continue to communicate regularly with their trainers and peers even after returning to their remote rural locations. These interactions helped the trainees to stay motivated and to seek the advice of the network for dealing with challenging situations. As 98% of all

teacher trainees possessed mobile phones, the University of Pretoria used the device to reach them with administrative and academic messages. These included reminders relating to registrations, fees due, quizzes using SMS's and audio lectures. This has resulted in higher motivation among learners and lower dropout rates. In a study carried out on 513 Class 10 learners in South Africa studying maths using their handsets, it was found that there was a 14% increase in competency. In Bangladesh, women entrepreneurs have used mobile phones not just to sell agricultural produce at competitive prices after finding out the market rates but have also generated income by renting their instruments.

While all these developments demonstrate the positive impact that mobiles seem to have, access to mobiles is not as universal as it would appear. In fact, there is clear evidence of a 'mobile phone gender gap' as 21 % women are less likely to own a phone than men. The mobile gap becomes more profound for women at the base of the economic pyramid or those who live on less than \$2 a day. The *Women and Mobile* report (Cherie Blair Foundation for Women 2010) found that even so the women who used mobiles felt safer, more independent and could increase their financial stability. Clearly, there is a role of mobiles in development (M4D).

A recent study by mWomen, AusAID and USAID (*Striving and Surviving—Exploring the Lives of Women at the Base of the Pyramid*, 2012), surveyed 2500 women in resource-poor communities in Uganda, Egypt, India and Papua New Guinea. The study found that 73% women expressed an interest in entrepreneurship to supplement the family income so that their children would have better educational opportunities. 84% women wanted better healthcare information but only 39% were interested in general healthcare information through their mobiles. 77% used mobiles for making phone calls but only 37% used SMS's. 74% women felt their husbands wouldn't allow them to use mobiles as it might encourage inappropriate contact with other men. Finally, of the women surveyed, 38% lived outside the power grid and had no easy access to electricity.

What lessons do we need to draw from these findings? The most important among a series of measures should be to establish special platforms that information seekers can access free of cost to secure reliable and accurate information on a variety of issues that concern peoples' lives: health, food and farming, micro-credit and banking facilities, and not the least, marketing of a variety of products and services that local communities are routinely engaged in producing all the year round. These 'information hubs' can provide specialised information, advice and guidance to people in a number of fields and establish major networks for developing entrepreneurship, production and distribution methods for different kinds of products and more importantly, for fostering learner communities at the village, district and regional levels.

We also need to address the question of developing relevant and user-friendly content for skills development using mobiles. For instance, need-based and targeted health-related information can be designed and developed for dissemination to specific constituencies. The study mentioned above suggests that voice messages would reach larger numbers of women than SMSs. In advocating the use of mobiles for effective learning, it is the whole family that should be the focus, and not just women so that men too can appreciate the value of mobiles for women and the entire family. Alternative mobile charging solutions will be key to ensuring universal access even in the remotest communities located outside the power grids.

It will not be easy for any single agency to address all the issues related to the effective use of mobiles. There are several economic, social and cultural issues. However, in and through partnerships, we can achieve better impact. This is a gathering of academics, policy makers, practitioners and private providers. A synergy that draws upon the strengths of each partner will result in the creative convergence of M4D and L4D to meet the future aspirations of all the women who are doubly disadvantaged—on the basis of their class and gender. COL is committed to promoting the use of appropriate technologies and will play its part in taking this agenda forward.

Thank you for listening to me.