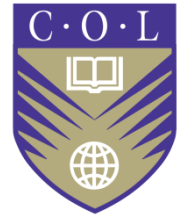


Learning for Development



Fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning

*Ocho Rios, Jamaica
31 October 2006*

Theme:

*Achieving Development Goals: Innovation, Learning,
Collaboration and Foundations*

Remarks at the Opening Ceremony

Presented By

Sir John Daniel

President, Commonwealth of Learning

Honourable Ministers, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates.

I am delighted to add my welcome to that of my friend and colleague, Professor Stewart Marshall, with whom I have the honour of co-chairing this 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. Under Professor Marshall's leadership our Caribbean colleagues have done an outstanding job in laying the groundwork for this conference.

It is now up to all of you to make this Forum a true success. We much appreciate the presence of the Honourable Robert Pickersgill, Jamaica's Minister who deputises for the Prime Minister when she is out of the country. I welcome also the participation of Ministers from other Caribbean and Commonwealth states. We thank you and the many other Ministers from around the Commonwealth who have written warm letters of support.

Our previous Pan-Commonwealth Forums on Open Learning have been held in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Today, before we even begin this 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum in the Caribbean, I am delighted to announce that in 2008 these conferences will complete their first tour of all the Commonwealth regions.

2008 will mark the 150th anniversary, or sesquicentennial, of the establishment of the External Studies Programme of the University of London, a seminal moment in the development of distance learning and cross-border education. To celebrate this historic event the University of London will host PCF5 in the heart of London in July 2008.

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, Sir Graeme Davies, will arrive tomorrow and his colleagues are here already to tell you about their plans for PCF5. The University of London will host the reception before the Awards Banquet on Thursday evening. I welcome them and I thank them. We look forward to another splendid gathering like this in 20 months' time. Please give the University of London a round of applause.

My task in the next few minutes is to set the scene for this conference. Although today is the opening ceremony, hundreds of colleagues around the globe have already been taking part in PCF4 for several months through four online conferences.

Our forum theme is *Achieving Development Goals: Innovation, Learning, Collaboration and Foundations* and each virtual discussion focused on one of the four quadrants of that challenge.

It is a pleasure to thank the four lead coordinators of these online gatherings: Olabisi Kuboni for Innovation; Som Naidu for Learning; Balasubramanian Kodhandaraman for Collaboration and Jocelyn Calvert for Foundations. Moderating a global virtual discussion is almost a 24-hour-a-day task while it lasts, so please join me in showing your appreciation for them!

I shall draw on the conclusions of these virtual conferences in posing some questions for you to answer during our real conference here over the next few days.

Three principles underpin the work of the Commonwealth of Learning and the programme for this Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.

First, development is job number one for the 21st century. Development means helping people to greater freedom. That includes freedoms **from**, as in freedom from hunger; and freedoms **to**, as in freedom to express your opinions. In operational terms, for the Commonwealth of Learning, development means achieving the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All, and the Commonwealth aspirations of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

Second, learning is the key to development. This is true not only for the goals that target education

directly, but also for reducing poverty and hunger, improving health, promoting gender equity and nurturing a better environment.

Third, the learning challenge is so enormous that traditional approaches are not up to the task. We need new approaches for expanding learning that can be used at scale to deliver good quality at low cost.

What did our virtual conferences have to say about these three principles?

Learning is the key to development - but learning for whom? One online discussion concluded that in development the learner is the whole community. Most of us are used to courses that lead to exams for individuals. But in order to develop, communities seek knowledge that helps them navigate in real life. And because many poor people in rural areas are unfamiliar with traditional education systems they are open to learning in different ways. Classrooms are not their benchmark for learning.

Developing communities have common purposes that their members can only achieve together and each community has its own identity. Learning for development must start from the community's common purpose and identity. The old habit of a benefactor teaching a beneficiary will not foster learning for development. Helping communities to learn requires a genuine spirit of collaboration.

This emphasis on community requires even open and distance learning institutions to change focus. We often begin by asking: "what do we want the individual to learn?", but that is the wrong question. The right question is not even "what do we want the community to learn?" but rather "how can we help the community articulate its own purposes for learning and then support it in achieving them?"

Here is a big challenge. Are our ODL institutions psychologically equipped for reaching informal groups and addressing development issues? Collaborative efforts between institutions are one way of becoming better attuned to the learning dynamics of developing communities. Use of ICTs can be both the cause and the effect of collaboration.

For example, in COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme in India, local universities work as a consortium to give joint answers, via ICT kiosks, to the questions posed by each farming community. Previously each institution did its own thing with little regard for the real preoccupations of the village communities.

What is the model of development to which learning seeks to contribute? This is not an abstract question. How will learning translate into development? If farmers learn to be more productive how do they get funds to exploit their new knowledge? Commercial banks are crucial partners in our Lifelong Learning for Farmers programme. They are a key element of the model. Building models for development through

learning is not just an intellectual exercise. Models help us predict whether a learning programme that works in one country will work in another. Are the essential elements of the model present?

The online discussion extended the emphasis on social and community learning well beyond rural development. All open and distance learning now places increasing emphasis on active learning - on the construction of knowledge by the student. There is more attention to the context of learning and the culture in which it occurs.

Context is a like a Russian doll. We find the learners in their own contexts. We create a context for each learner. Our institutions create a context for their staff which can be empowering and productive or dysfunctional and frustrating. Government policies create context for our institutions - which can be either of those things too. And, increasingly, globalisation creates a context for governments which some find more difficult than others.

One spin-off of globalisation is the growth of cross-border education, especially but by no means exclusively, in higher education. This is a special opportunity for distance-teaching institutions because it seems that our courses cross borders easily. COL and UNESCO have created this simple guide to help you.

In reality, cross-border education is a serious challenge for distance education because when we operate abroad it is easy to let our standards slip - both our standards of quality and our standards of integrity. To help you there UNESCO has produced some guidelines for good practice that will be presented at a session this afternoon.

The more we engage with development the greater the scope that will be required of ODL and the wider the variety of people that it will attempt to serve.

As technologies evolve we can create new contexts for the learner. As education becomes more international we face both threats and opportunities. Awareness of contexts must be our watchword.

Questions of technology were never far from the surface in all the virtual conferences. Practitioners of open and distance learning have always brought a healthy scepticism to the marvels of new technology and that is especially true when learning is for development. Fortunately the short cycle between initial infatuation and early disillusionment with eLearning has helped to make our discourse on technology more sophisticated. eLearning is not a magic medium to solve all learning problems, but it is a useful addition to our technological toolkit. eLearning has also made us focus harder on two important questions.

First, *what do we mean by interaction?* I will not try to answer that, because interaction is a very slippery term. I simply urge you to use the word interaction with clarity at this conference. I can interact with a book in my head when I read it; I can interact with my laptop, whether on the network or off; I can interact with laboratory equipment; I can interact with my tutor on the phone; I can interact with a group - online or face to face; and so on. What kinds of interaction are there, how do they help learners, and how do different technologies exploit them?

A second question is very important if we are serious about learning for development. *How does eLearning affect the economics of open and distance learning?* Using the mass media gave ODL economies of scale, which was very important for increasing access. eLearning does not yield economies of scale, at least as most people currently use it. But does eLearning have to take us back to the cottage-industry approach to teaching and learning?

ODL broke free from that straitjacket a long time ago. Must we remain free if our aim is learning for development? I leave that question with you too.

One reason that people have become less excitable about eLearning is that a new magic medium has appeared: mobile learning. We have all noticed that mobile phones are now more common than laptops, most especially in developing countries. It follows, therefore, that mobile phones will stimulate the next revolution in ODL or does it?

Because of its timing, and the people who are here, this Forum is uniquely equipped to take forward the debate about mLearning. Our virtual conference noted significant usage of mobile phones in ODL in Australia, Nigeria and South Africa - mainly for student support and mass SMS messaging. What works and what doesn't?

We are also seeing teaching by podcasting. How is this going to develop?

One development that can only be good for ODL is the galloping increase in connectivity.

In the next four years the numbers of Internet users in India will double from 35 to 70 million. That will still be less than 10% of the population but a few more doublings will make a huge difference. How will this affect how people learn?

Another innovation may help to give people much greater choice of what they learn. I refer to open educational resources or OERs. This pooling and sharing of learning materials in electronic formats is not merely, indeed not mainly, a technological development. OERs represent a new drive to create a global

intellectual commons on which all who wish to learn can graze. It brings to teaching and learning the spirit of sharing that has always inspired academic research.

I express our warm thanks to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which has sponsored many delegates here in the expectation that this Forum will be a catalyst for the creation and use of open educational resources.

The Hewlett Foundation has supported three important phases in the development of OERs. The first occurred in 2002 when MIT started making the lecture notes of its faculty freely available. The second and third phases are occurring right here at this meeting.

Tomorrow the UK Open University will formally launch its OpenLearn project and on Thursday there will be a session on the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth which involves 25 countries in the collaborative development of OERs.

These phases build on each other. MIT uses OERs to share curriculum information. The UKOU, through self-instructional materials and social software, uses OERs to share learning. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth uses OERs as a vehicle for sharing teaching and learning.

These are very exciting developments which have the potential to both cut the cost and increase the quality of the learning materials that we can make available to students.

I have done scant justice to the richness of the virtual conferences and there are more questions that I could leave you with but I shall stop there with a final plea. I began by talking about communities of learning. We are a community of practice in open and distance learning.

There is much evidence that the sharing of ideas and innovations occurs most readily within communities of practice. Please take full advantage of this 4th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning to develop and extend our community of practice so that, collectively, we make a great contribution to achieving the development goals.

Once again I thank our Caribbean partners for creating a wonderful context for our work - and also our play. Have a great conference!