

ICT and Related Issues Impacting on ODL

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Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to meet with you just after your elections. The world looks on to see this wonderful example of democracy in Africa.

The Commonwealth

Ghana is one of 53 countries comprising the Commonwealth that stretches from the Caribbean, to Africa, Europe, Asia and the Pacific. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education, knowledge resources and technologies.

COL works with Ministries of Education and national institutions to establish policy and build skills in open and distance and technology mediated learning (ODL). The focus was initially on radio and TV, and has now moved to include computers and the Internet without losing the recognition of the value of radio and TV. Print is still the most universally usable technology that has the ability to reach the greatest number of people. So let us talk about ICTs and their relationship with open and distance learning.

Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants

Do you remember the first time you watched TV? Or the first time you typed on a computer? Do you remember the feeling of holding your first cell phone and making a call while walking down a street? If you do, you are what are now called, a “digital immigrant”. That means many of the technologies now available were not available when you were young, and you have been learning to use them as an adult.

Think now, about the young people you know. How many of them have used cell phones since they first learned to speak, or can teach you how to use your video recorder or computer? They use MP3 players not radios and aspire to own new cellular phones as they are released into the market. This is the generation now called “digital natives”. Many people in this age range cannot remember a time without these high technology “toys”.

Digital natives often have their own personal presence on the Internet by maintaining a FaceBook or MySpace page. They post pictures and notes of where

they are, whom they speak with and what they are doing. They share constantly with a circle of friends, and sometimes with friends they have never even met.

Adults, on the other hand, complain about the fast pace of life, caused by technology, and the lack of privacy on the Internet. Privacy is something with which the digital native is seldom concerned.

Who is *your* “typical learner”? Do your learners have cell phones and can they conduct a conversation by text messages, sometimes without looking at the keypads? Do they have FaceBook pages that you have never even seen? Let’s think about how an education system can adapt to engaging learners who have moved to the new eWorld, in many cases leaving both the education system and educators behind.

Just how prepared are you for this eWorld? Is your institution taking conscious steps toward implementing and managing the use of new and emerging technologies where appropriate? We need to help institutions and lecturers in particular, to gain the skills that are so necessary in this online age and to be able to engage with learners at their level.

A Range of Technologies at our Disposal

Let us remind ourselves of a few of the technologies we have had at our disposal for a while and a few of the new ones we can begin to use to engage learners.

When COL was established, radio and TV were the hot technologies and they are still very important to reaching larger numbers of people at once. These used to be one-way technologies, supported only by broadcasters, to a passive audience. That was before the rapid rise of cell phone technology. We can now introduce a two-way communication channel by letting listeners send text messages to the radio or TV studio from their cell phones. This is now common practice by major TV stations like BBC World and CNN, and also by educational institutions in countries like Namibia and South Africa. There is no longer a reason for learners in many rural areas to be excluded from participating in discussion groups because of their location. As long as they have access to a radio and a cell phone, they can listen into a group discussion and interact via text message. This will not answer the needs in the most remote of areas, but it does help to stretch the boundaries of learner support.

There was a time when installing videoconference equipment cost tens of thousands of dollars, and maintaining it caused units to become disused. The technical support challenges were as difficult to surmount as were the cost of renting ISDN lines to make connections. Some venues were reputed to have cost up to \$100,000! A basic videoconference connection now can be made after the purchase of a \$160 webcam that has pan and zoom capability and a room microphone that costs around \$120. The connection no longer depends on multiple ISDN lines, it now requires a working Internet connection.

But we know that a lecturer making a lengthy presentation by videoconference is one of the least appealing uses of this technology. If a text-to-voice programme can read text, why would we need a lecturer to read it over-and-over every semester? Why not video record the lecturer and distribute the video with the text they use by CD, a website and even YouTube? The skills of the lecturer can then be put to better use discussing the topic with learners, answering questions and posing questions for debate.

The digital native multitasks at levels the immigrants previously thought not feasible for effective work. It is not uncommon for the youth to listen to an MP3 music player, and type an assignment on a computer, while monitoring a programme on TV. How can a single lecturer expect to keep the attention of a person who normally does three things at once? We need to rethink ODL in the light of the changing demands of learners. Podcasts and YouTube videos have become a feature in the new era of US Government politics. Will they become a feature in our institutions?

These technologies are low cost and many aspects of their use are free. If there is a focus needed for managers of education, it is to ensure that learners have access to computers and the Internet. Ubiquitous Internet on campuses, shopping centres, airports and hotels is rapidly becoming the norm. We speak about Africa and making “leapfrog” changes; this is one of those times to show it. Make sure that campuses get free wifi wherever learners might be able to access their computers and hand-held devices. And ensure that there are ample facilities for learners who have not yet had the opportunity to buy their own computer or hand-held device.

Thanks to the innovation of the “One Laptop Per Child” project, the computer manufacturers have stepped in with low cost devices. Whereas computers were in the \$2,000 to \$3,000 price range, you can easily buy good computers at around \$400 today. With bulk purchases, companies like Acer and HP might be able to provide computers at even lower prices. Is it feasible for institutions to structure this kind of computer into the study package as an optional extra? And can we provide all the prescribed books on the computer so that learners do not need to carry printed books and can make notes in their eBooks?

Access to the Internet with its seemingly limitless resources of free encyclopaedias, learning resources and eBooks is critical to advancing education. If there is a national educational need to receive energy and support, it is getting access to the Internet, to learners. Almost all that is important to the digital native and the learned, digital immigrant depends on having regular access to the Internet.

Another area of rapid change is computer gaming. That is computer games, not gambling! Before discarding this without consideration; consider that the investment in these businesses runs into billions of dollars. Players *learn* from the time they start up their games, they are assessed at regular intervals and either progress to the next level, or fail and drop back to lower levels. Gamers compete against each other across the Internet and form social networks with people they

will only ever meet over Internet lines. Digital natives are renowned for their tenacity at learning and competing. All this is done without lecturers! If you are thinking this is all just kids stuff and easy to do, I challenge you to try it! The learning curve, and the tests of skill, will surprise most people who are not gamers. This is another indicator of where some educational programmes are likely to go in the years ahead.

Second life and Twinity are examples of three-dimensional realities that educational institutions are beginning to use to connect learners located in different areas. In these online environments, learners can meet, talk and share resources. People represent themselves online by adopting a three-dimensional character called an “avatar” that can walk, fly and even teleport between locations. The other avatars you see in these worlds are the three-dimensional representations of real people who you meet, talk with, and with whom you share your online world. Publishers have run book releases, institutions carry out discussion groups and simulations, businesses run shops and sell both virtual goods and real-world physical goods. These worlds are yet another alternative way for people to meet and converse.

Blogging has become a major pastime for many in the 2000s. Whereas in the 90s, one might have written a newsletter or story and circulated it by email or print, these were quickly turned into “life journals” in the 2000s. Thankfully, a trend has started now, to improve the quality of blogs, to make them more worthwhile reading! Relating to blogs, is the practice of “blogging conferences”. This is the practice of writing notes about speakers, questions and discussion while the conference is ongoing. These comments are then published live while the conference goes on. There is no quality check on any of this and there can definitely be no control over what bloggers say. Institutions and conference organisers would be well advised to nominate “official bloggers”, people who have the ability to make conference notes of good quality, and to publish these on the conference website while the conference takes place. Without participating actively in the world of bloggers, the only message that reaches the world is the unfiltered one by bloggers.

Open Educational Resources

In developing sustainability models for OERs, it is important that learning content being developed in faraway parts of the world may be of use to you, as well as your content being usable by others. They should be adaptable, integrated and localised “here” - wherever “here” may be. Remember that wherever “here” is, it is always on the far side of the world compared to someone else and that means in countries that have different languages, cultures and norms. Learning materials will become OERs when they are shared in two directions and not just one; there cannot just be donor countries for OERs in some parts of the world, with consumer countries in other parts of the world. You need to be both consumers and producers of knowledge.

Are you already using the free online library of eBooks available to anyone in Africa? I established this in 1999 and it continues to be hosted by the University of South Africa. It has over 10,000 eBooks, access is free of charge, provided you have access to the Internet (www.africaeducation.org/adl).

I see five universities have access to free journals via the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Ghana. Amongst other resources, this International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) provides access to 250 journals. Again, this requires good Internet access.

There are collections of free learning content at well known sites like OpenLearn of the UK Open University, MIT in the USA and Connexions, at Rice University in the US. COL runs a search facility for free learning content on its website (www.col.org/lor).

The use and sharing of open educational resources is dependent on the use of what is becoming known as “open licenses”. These are most usually legal contracts, or licenses provided free of charge by Creative Commons, a non-profit organisation, based in the US. There are specific country versions of the licenses in 51 countries. Personally, I prefer to use the so-called “unported” license, which is not specific to any jurisdiction as we work with so many countries.

The copyright hurdle

We all represent minorities in the world context and any rules we try to impose do not necessarily suit the rest of the world’s population. The world is diverse and appears to be becoming more diverse. Globalisation does not just mean exporting some cultural norms from one country to others, it also means keeping and sharing our cultures and norms, including those from the biggest to the smallest countries of the world. We need to accept and enjoy diversity.

COL is working on “respect and understanding” and OERs need also, to respect other people’s choices. This needs to carry through to the sharing of Open Educational Resources – keeping them flexible and open and not tying them down to any one particular ideology of copyright licensing or computer format.

So OERs have great value if they are not hobbled by lists of restrictions. On the lighter side, OERs sometimes remind me of a friend who once said to me: “Be reasonable, do it my way!”

The “Legal World”

The legal world, while sometimes slow to respond, does respond when it is needed. Criminal activities recently conducted through social networking sites are an indicator that the wheels of the legal justice system are responding to websites that incite crimes, suicide and promote thuggery. You can take action now to ensure that your institutions do not support what would be seen as criminal or anti-social behaviour in the “1st life” (the physical world). Only a few people would think this behaviour acceptable in the “2nd life” (the online world) when it would be patently unacceptable in the physical world.

These are indicators that acceptable use policies for the use of the Internet on campus are needed; that learners need to be guided on how to assess the information they find on the Internet, and how to take care they are not taken

advantage of by criminals with whom they share the Internet. Without these, you can expect users to make their own rules that use up precious bandwidth and expose themselves to dangers.

Quality of programmes

COL is working to support the enhancement of quality in ODL. The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth is engaged in the establishment of a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). This framework will assist small countries to develop national systems that are more interoperable across the world, making it more feasible for qualified people from small states to have their qualifications recognised in other countries. Larger countries will be invited to seek interoperability with the TQF. Courses and programmes in small states that have acquired the necessary national and regional credentials will be registered on the VUSSC-TQF website along with the information needed to enable potential learners to judge the programme worthy of their time and money.

Another trend to watch is the improvement in quality of contributory websites like wikis and blogs. We have gone from edited newsletters in the 90s to anything goes blogs of the early 2000s and now there seems to be a trend back toward improved quality as I mentioned earlier. Blogs, wikis and websites should not be an excuse for publishing materials we would never want to see in print. I expect to see the wild-west culture of the Internet having to come to terms with sharing the planet with law abiding and decent people!

Degree Mills and Bogus Institutions

For a while, some rather dubious companies found they could setup institutions in developing countries and offer “qualifications”. Sometimes it only takes the payment of a fee to receive a certificate and other times, the courses for which learners pay good money end up being worthless. These institutions are not recognised in either their host countries, nor in the countries in which the founders live – they are bogus, and governments need to identify them and shut them down. They just give education a bad name. Learners need to take care of what they use on the Internet and ensure that the sources of their information are credible. These are all part of the new life skills needed in the eWorld.

The registry of accredited institutions that UNESCO is establishing will help learners identify the bogus institutions and avoid them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I say again, just how prepared are you for this eWorld? Is your institution taking conscious steps toward implementing and managing the use of new and emerging technologies? We need to help institutions and lecturers in particular, to gain the skills that are so necessary in this online age.

Thank you for spending this time with me.