

# *Catching Up With eLearning: Implications for Education and Social Policy*

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*Catching Up With E-Learning: Implications for  
Education and Social Policy by H. Ian Macdonald,  
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## **Transcript**

The Commonwealth of Learning, the only official Commonwealth agency located outside London, has been dedicated to increasing access to education since it began operating in 1989. With a mandate to assist with the delivery of education at all levels - primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and non-formal, and operating in all forms from conventional print, through radio, visual and electronic, the Commonwealth of Learning has delivered over 625 programmes throughout the 54 countries of the Commonwealth. In the process, we have learned one basic lesson: there is no magic formula in any methodology, and it is a long journey from concept to implementation, particularly in the case of E-Learning.

Although I have been asked to consider the E-Learning environment for universities in particular, my remarks today apply equally to all levels of education. In the process, I would like to consider:

- (a) the limitations of E-Learning in terms of pedagogy;
- (b) the problem of access to ensure that it serves to narrow the social divide between people and nations rather than widen it.

Great strides have been made over the past few years in enhancing the capacity for E-Learning and finding ways to broaden its exposure. The recent announcement by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that it would make most of its course material freely available to the public, through the Internet, is a major innovation. As a result, a university, where the annual tuition is about \$39,000, anticipates that not only individuals but universities all over the world will take advantage of its course lists, lecture notes, and even videotaped lectures.

Is this a prescription for self-destruction? Obviously not as far as MIT is concerned, and in that opinion

lies the key point about E-Learning, particularly for universities: the continuing importance of reciprocal and personal communication. To illustrate from my own experience, I teach two courses at York University in Canada. The first is basic **Public Policy and Public Management** for which there is a limited body of relevant knowledge. The principal content of the course is to be found in the sharing with the students of my own experiences, the sharing of the experiences of the students (all mature and mostly part-time) with one another and in the research projects conducted under my direct supervision.

The second course, **The Provincial and Municipal System of Government in Ontario (Canada)**, similarly has limited course material. At each session, I invite a Cabinet Minister, a Deputy Minister, senior officials and other practitioners to describe how the system of government in which they are involved actually works. In such a case, the human dimension in the class-room and the resulting dialogue is irreplaceable. However, such material as is available on the Internet provides a great stimulus for preparation and follow-up, and permits much more comprehensive participation by the students, on their own time and at their own convenience. And so, the challenge is to improve the quality and availability of material to fast-track life-long learning.

In Canada, the **Advisory Committee on Online Learning**, created in June 2000 and composed of Canadian University Presidents, college presidents and senior business executives, reported on its work in February of this year. They use the term Online learning and E-Learning inter-changeably to refer to distance learning and the provision of technology enhanced learning within a traditional classroom, lecture hall or laboratory. The work of the committee was guided by three over-riding considerations:

- fostering a culture of lifelong learning as an essential foundation to building a civil and prosperous society in Canada in a knowledge and innovation-based environment;
- harnessing the transformative power of new learning tools to make sure all Canadians can get improved access to the best possible education and lifelong learning opportunities; and
- ensuring that Canada's post-secondary institutions and learnware industry are in the best position possible to secure the benefits and avoid the pitfalls of the move to online learning.

From those objectives, the committee has proposed a framework for action, consistent with the belief that "online learning has the potential to ensure access to lifelong learning and contribute to equality of opportunity without sacrificing quality." Thus, the aim is to expand online learning so as to:

- enhance the quality of the post-secondary learning experience through institutional strategies, expanding the amount of high-quality online learning materials, and supporting learning research and learnware product development;
- improve the accessibility and flexibility of post-secondary learning opportunities; and
- create synergies and greater critical mass within post-secondary education in Canada.

Apart from access to new markets, international partnerships and reduced time to market, what are the financial implications for the universities? Employing research material from three in-depth studies and a cost-benefit research project at the University of British Columbia, funded federally by the Canadian

Telelearning Network of Centres of Excellence, Sylvia Bartolic-Zlomislic and Tony Bates of UBC warned last year in **Investing in Online Learning: Potential Benefits and Limitations** that: "Under the right conditions, online learning cannot only be cost-effective, but can actually bring in net profits for an educational institution. However, there is no easy money in this business. It has to be earned. This requires quite a different approach to the development and management of teaching. It requires financial systems and financial management that, frankly, few higher education institutions have in place or are even ready to contemplate." They go on to say: "Whether or not online learning can be considered successful and worth the investment will largely depend on the values and goals of the organisation...if the focus is on revenue generation or saving money, online learning may not be a good choice, as a large number of online programmes are not and cannot be cost recoverable. They may, though, be more cost-effective in terms of learning outcomes for the same dollar spent."

However, there is a much more fundamental consideration: the implications for access to education and the prospects for adding to the social good as opposed to exacerbating the social divide. As we proceed into the new millennium, over one billion people are lacking the literacy necessary to sign their name or to read a book. Among them are over 140 million children who do not have access to primary education; a large proportion of those denied education are girls and women. Of the children with access to primary education, a large percentage of those who find themselves in the poorest countries of the world will be in crowded classrooms that are in a very bad state of repair and some will be in situations where there may not be any classrooms at all. Many will be taught by untrained or poorly trained teachers, located in ill-equipped schools with no learning materials, laboratories, libraries or connections to the outside world. Moreover, a good proportion of these children will not complete their primary school education. Most of these un- or under-provided learners are living in states located in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These countries will also suffer educational deprivation at other levels on the educational ladder.

These young people, along with the billion other adults who never received nor benefitted from education when they were young, will find themselves attempting to function in a global environment where:

- long-term job success necessitates a focus on continuous learning regardless of profession, geographic location or age;
- developing a strong human resource base is essential for economic and social development;
- training and the upgrading of skills and knowledge are necessary to improve the productive capacity of the labour force;
- relevant education and training has been accepted as potential solutions to address key issues such as environmental degradation, burgeoning population, and domestic violence; and,
- the impact of technology and increased levels of education on governance issues is being recognized, assessed and appreciated.

It is under these circumstances that the design and delivery of education is being considered by nations rich and poor. A consensus is beginning to emerge that opportunities for and provision of life-long learning will require a reconsideration of the ways in which the educational environment is constructed,

organized, structured, governed and financed. There is also an increasing acknowledgment of a shift in instructional philosophy where the instructor or teacher is no longer the sole source of knowledge but, instead, acts as a facilitator, supporting student learning.

Distance education, therefore, is being incorporated into mainstream education and training efforts; it is reshaping the new educational landscape, including to whom and how education is delivered. Educational designs are being developed as rapid increases in technology continue to collapse spatial boundaries, and Commonwealth countries continue to lead the world in the imaginative ways in which they have applied distance and open learning. However, that capability is neither distributed equally among all countries nor in all sectors of education in those countries where open and distance learning has found success in one form or another.

The Commonwealth of Learning can take pride in the fact that, over a period of eleven years of work in and for the Commonwealth, it has not only brought attention to the opportunities presented by open and distance learning but also trained people, built partnerships, developed models and provided expanding capabilities among nations of the Commonwealth in the application of open and distance learning.

Unfortunately, much remains to be done especially since the arrival of the new technologies that are reshaping the ways in which the world operates. In order to be both sensitive and meaningful in the value it can add to Commonwealth education, COL, as part of the strategy for its second decade, wishes to be regionally sensitive, sectorally relevant and strategically opportunistic. Our view of the needs of the Commonwealth, and the service we can provide in response to those needs, has been shaped by the many consultations we have had over the last three years.

In all regions of the Commonwealth, there is an acknowledged need to sensitize stakeholders to the variety of new learning technologies applicable to the delivery of quality education. There is also increasing demand for the use of open and distance learning methodologies to address a number of capacity building issues. These include the extension of literacy and numeracy skills among millions of adults through the use of radio, television and telematics, helping rural women to develop entrepreneurial skills, assisting agricultural extension workers to improve their capacity to educate farm workers, the training of legislators in legislative drafting, increasing the speed of in service training of un- or under-trained teachers, and delivering continuous professional development programmes for health workers, managers and administrators.

The last five years has seen a phenomenal increase in the application of new technologies to the learning environment. This development is removing the distinction between conventional and distance learning. It is also eroding political and geographical barriers to the movement of knowledge. While many view this as a good thing others fear the possibility of a new form of imperialism underlying these developments. This imperialism has all the potential to undermine a nation's intellectual and cultural assets in the longer term. Although we must always be mindful of risks, a lot can be done to increase the national capability to exploit the new technologies, to increase local competitiveness, and to enhance local capacities to create and deliver learning and cultural products to the people.

To achieve this, skills must be developed to use the technologies in the learning environment, content has

to be produced in sufficient quantity and quality, information technology connectivity has to be improved, appliances have to be made available at affordable costs, appropriate uses for the technologies have to be identified, and policy frameworks need to be established to support these ventures. The Commonwealth experience in all of these areas can be put to use for the Commonwealth at large, and that is COL's principal mission now.

However, in so doing, our challenge is to ensure that access to the promise of online learning not be limited to only the few who are wealthy, live in information rich societies, and possess the skills, knowledge and support to use the tools, but also be provided to the many who lack those essentials, but whose needs are as great or greater. To that end, it is essential that we pursue the following six objectives:

**Developing policies that preserve our concerns for equity and equality of access:** At the governmental level these must, of necessity, touch on telecommunication policies and regulations, tariffs, telecommunication infrastructure, etc. At the institutional level, there is also a need for those who are aggressively pushing for the delivery of Online education to remind themselves that the purpose of education is ill served if the methods we adopt deny that education to a great majority of our people. Policies on education in almost every democratic state in the modern world are unambiguous about this ideal, but between the ideal and practice a gap often emerges especially amongst our autonomous institutions. There is an urgent need to reinforce the policy as was demonstrated by Don Thornhill, Chairman of the Higher Education Authority of Ireland in 1999. "Policies for equality are amongst the most important policies of a university. Education is one of the most effective instruments available for addressing inequality and . . . Higher education has a key role." In that statement, Thornhill was reinforcing the Equal Status Bill of the Republic which makes it the responsibility of an educational establishment not to discriminate in relation to:

- the admission or the terms or conditions of admission of a person as a student;
- the access of a student to any course, facility or benefit provided by the institution.

Consequently, there is a case to be made in relation to On-line courses, for creating policy guidelines that makes it necessary for providers of such services to make appropriate provisions (such as free supply of appliances, connections, etc.) to marginalised groups in order for them to share the benefit.

**Identifying the fitness of purpose of Online courses:** Current levels of academic preparedness, administrative and ICT infrastructure make it necessary to define a clear purpose for engaging in Online courses. Training programmes rather than academic courses may better fit this new form of delivery. Under present circumstance there is a group that may have reasonable access to the necessary ICT infrastructure to participate in Online education. These are people who are already in the workforce (globally, some 2 billion people) and need reskilling, continuing professional development, post-graduate training, updating of knowledge, etc. There is a strategic advantage in focusing on this group of people first, and as communication infrastructure as well as other services related to supporting the ICTs become more commonplace, to move on to academic programmes gradually.

**Investing in people even faster than investing in technology:** At the risk of stating the obvious, what good is a digital environment if the key players do not have the skills and interests to use its potential effectively? Being Internet savvy does not necessarily make a teacher an effective Online educator. Very few institutions are investing sufficient resources to train staff to teach Online.

**Use of other ICTs rather than limiting ourselves to the Internet.** Let me make a plea for the greater exploitation of other ICTs. The short-term benefit is the easy accessibility of such technologies as radio, video, print by large parts of our populations. The long-term benefits include carrying forward knowledge products so produced into the Internet environment.

**Planning for sustainability and success:** A good portion of the 50,000 or so courses that are currently available on the Internet in North America today may not be available next year. In fact, a number of Online course providers today may not be there next year. Remember the University of California's grand scheme!! I do not think a large part of the world is quite ready for non-sustainable educational ventures or adventurers. We need planning and sustainability, we need to ensure customer protection and we need to beware of "diploma mills". We cannot do any of these if public institutions themselves become the perpetrators, doing not much for education other than selling their brand name.

**Good practice:** We need to develop global not just North American standards of good practice - practices that will help continue the traditional values of and respect for education, pastoral care of students, respect for academic freedom and dignity, quality of the content and tuition, excellence in exit standards and, above all, ensure education that is available for all. The market is important and it is seductive, but its seduction should not be allowed to turn a social good into a social divide. It took some thirty years by those who were engaged in the promotion of distance education to gain respect, recognition and acceptance - sentiments that were lost during an earlier era as a result of bad practice by many who engaged in correspondence education. We do not want Online courses to suffer the same disrespect of earlier correspondence education.

With due attention to those imperatives, it should be possible to have the best of all possible worlds, with all of us as the beneficiaries.