

Connectivism – Canada, June 17, 2008

Source: http://connectivism.ca/blog/2008/06/elearning_africa.html

eLearning Africa

My understanding of education and learning technologies is largely confined to European, Canadian, Australian, and American contexts. While I have frequent informal interactions with individuals from other regions, my understanding of the unique challenges facing these areas is limited. In particular, I'm largely unfamiliar with African, Russian, Asian, Middle Eastern, and South American use of information communication technology for teaching and learning. These are all areas on my "must go to" list.

When the opportunity arose to attend [eLearning Africa 2008](#), I eagerly embrace it. The conference itself ran for three days, including various policy and government meetings before and after. Needless to say, after only three days, I've mainly learned how much I have to learn. What follows are a few reflections on the experience.

I arrived at late in the evening. My arranged ride did not materialize and astute local entrepreneurs quickly realized I was a dazed visitor. It took only a few minutes for them to have me loaded in a cab where I was happily charged tourist rates (in retrospect, as I've been advised by others, it's generally not a good idea to accept rides in unmarked cabs when in foreign countries). A cab ride, according to locals, should be about 4 cedis (their currency, roughly the equivalent of US dollars). My cab driver was nice enough to offer me "12 cedis, but I don't have change, so just give me 20". No problem. I pay that and more for most rides from the airport to the hotel. While I didn't begrudge the fare, the fact that it was "unfair" did chafe slightly (why does that sense of not wanting to feel cheated, though it's only a small amount, reign so strongly?).

Once I got to the hotel, I discovered my prepaid reservation didn't exist. I quickly realized that I needed different (not lower) expectations. All problems are solvable in Accra, I discovered. They just take patience. After about two hours, I was in a different hotel, a significant downgrade. I doubt the facility would have passed a 2 star rating in Canada or US. But, the people were the friendliest I have ever met. Any where. From cab drivers giving me advice on how not to get mugged, to hotel front desk staff, to interactions with people during the conference, I found graciousness largely non-existent in much of western culture.

Lesson one: patience with people is the hardest of all attributes to acquire

Police were in full presence at the conference centre, though surprisingly, no one had a gun. On the opening day, I was on a panel with a fairly diverse group (I was the token white guy, I think). The conference was slated to start at 9:00 am. But the panel included the Vice President of Ghana. So we waited. And waited. Around 10 am he arrived. The other panelists were escorted from the waiting area into the main conference room (I can't imagine being in the audience waiting over one hour). Then, the VP was escorted into the room, lead by a few drummers and flanked by a few security members and an individual I later discovered was mainly there so the VP didn't have to pull out his own chair. Once he entered, the doors had to be closed and no one else could enter. A few diplomats stuck in traffic were not granted the privilege of entering late. Why they were still stuck in traffic a full hour after the event was scheduled to begin is beyond my capacity to understand. The VP was very polite and generous, opening the conference with much acclaim as to the urgent need for Africa to embrace ICT in order to educate the continent to compete in the knowledge age. Each panel presentation started off with about 2 minutes of "professor chairman, your excellency, honorable ministers, distinguished guests and on and on". I only

managed to remember a few of the titles. I got the “his excellency” part. I’m guessing that was likely the most important.

Lesson two: Patience, formality, and respect are critical aspects of African culture

The theme and tone of the conference was mixed. Huge challenges. Profound optimism. We would be in a session and suddenly all the lights would go out. After a few seconds electricity would be restored. And in the next breath someone would talk the rhetoric of western education: learner-centred, knowledge construction, blogs and wikis, open source software, open educational resources, constructivism, etc. This was a bit disconcerting. Is the educational focus in Africa largely a duplication of the western system? Examples used were heavily from Europe and USA. Is it possible that Africa had a simultaneous emergence of concepts, ideas, and language with the west? I doubt it. There has been much information sharing – largely by development groups.

Lesson three: optimism and humanity seems strongest in some of the direst circumstances

Lesson four (well, ok, more of a speculation): Africa risks being an extension of the ideals of development agencies and governments who provide funding. In the long run, that’ll only lead to significant backlash.

Most astonishing, educators were doing some amazing things. Without huge grants and research dollars. In many cases, innovation was driven by enthusiasm, commitment, and love for one’s culture. Many of the leaders at the conference had been educated in the US, Europe, or Canada, and had returned through a desire to assist their family, country, or community. Innovation was seen through “mobile telecentres” – vans equipped with laptops, satellite internet access, and solar electricity panels. Or through the development of small solar panels the size of a sheet of paper used for recharging mobile devices. Or the use of SMS to inform farmers of market prices.

Lesson five: Innovation driven by commitment to core values and existing difficult conditions reveals the ingenuity and creativity of humanity.

Many aspects of the conference reflected what I have encountered at different conferences over the last few years: web 2.0, blogs, wikis, collaborative learning, and so on. Missing, however, was the discussion of millennial learners and game-based learning. Second Life wasn’t mentioned once. The vendors, however, were a “who’s who” of technology. Cisco. Google. Intel. HP. Microsoft. Oracle. And they were hiring. Google was the most aggressive of the group. They were promoting existing African offices and mentioning a half dozen to be opened soon. It was the same overlay of technology we see in developed countries.

Lesson six: We are exporting our solutions to problems we don’t fully understand. The in-conference conversation was dramatically different from the out-of-conference conversation. Much more so than what I generally encounter. And I don’t know if that’s good or bad. Or neither.

As my visit to Accra was quite short, I wasn’t able to explore the city as much as I would have wanted to. Some assumptions of life in Africa are quickly dashed. Others are enforced. Mobile phones, for example, are almost as prominent as they are in other parts of the world. My evening taxi rides to the hotel revealed numerous cell-phone card vendors set up on the side of streets. Phones are everywhere. I don’t know about the quality of mobile connectivity. My wireless access at the conference came in at a roaring 5.5 kbs (I spent the better portion of a day downloading a 30 mb file). The infrastructure and the mindset for connectivity is definitely mobile. I would be interested in studies that address what people are doing with mobile phones. Staying in touch with family/friends? Information access? Sharing images?

Morning cab rides revealed a city with a similar entrepreneurial spirit one would encounter in New York or London. The scale in Accra was a bit different. Vendors on the side of the road were selling soft drinks, clothing, and fruit. Large black cauldrons (not sure if there is a better word) full of steaming broth/stew/something appeared to be strategically placed in one block intervals. Vehicular traffic was accented by numerous individuals (amazingly balancing baskets of fruit and other food items on their head) selling a huge array of items. Clothing. Chips. Toilet paper. It was like driving through a supermarket. In Canada, I go to the grocery store to shop. In Accra, the grocery store appears to come to the customers.

A few highlights of the conference:

1. Getting a chance to chat with [John Connell](#) during the evening of the first evening of the conference. I've known John through his blog for years. We technically were at the same conference in Sydney a few years ago, but we didn't chat. Our conversation in Accra took place against a wonderful backdrop. The organizers had arranged for local musicians and dancers to perform. Stunning. John has posted [a few photos](#).

2. Chatting with the director of [Aluka](#) on an initiative to build a resource base of African artifacts and resources. Great to see these types of initiatives that seek not only to adopt good ideas from other regions, but also to export their own history and culture. I made a similar point during my [pre-conference interview](#).

3. Getting somewhat acquainted with the research being conducted on the status of ICT use across Africa. While there may be other organizations, [infoDev](#) was the one I found most valuable. In particular, their report on [Survey of ICT and Education in Africa..and Using Technology to Train Teachers](#). Numerous other reports and publications [are available](#).

4. Meeting with Rebecca Stromeyer of [ICWE](#). I've had the pleasure of meeting her several times. She has a passion and energy for learning and technology that is unmatched. And meeting Sally Reynolds again as well. She has a wonderfully pleasant demeanor. I bump into her every 15 minutes at the conference it seems!

Accra was truly fascinating, reflecting the best of human character and the weight of challenges facing humanity. While I often found myself wishing for some of the comforts of Canada (in particular, a nice cup of [Tim Hortons](#)), I never *felt alone*. I had more casual conversations and exchanged more smiles in Accra than I do on many trips.

Posted by George Siemens on June 17, 2008 3:27 PM