

Opening Address

Waiting

We are living in what is in many ways a very difficult and anguished period for adult basic education. A whole range of actors wait for something significant to happen, for something to start rolling, for the engine to start up. If the engine has not yet been built, certainly many of the parts are there and there are pages and pages of blueprints describing it in the finest detail. All the players have been waiting to go into action and yet somehow, in South Africa as a whole, the start of the war against illiteracy, the start of the construction of an ABE System does not seem to have happened. We are still waiting and waiting. What is the cause of this delay, this interregnum? Although all the things seem ready for a launch and a great leap forward, a start of a five-year kind of plan, it somehow has not taken off.

I think there are a number of key factors that have influenced this long period of transition. There are also a number of factors that meant that though there was a situation and base for a great leap forward, it had certain weaknesses - structural weaknesses. And there is also a kind of psychological or spiritual component, which is about the will to do things, which somehow has not been manifested.

Those of you who can recall the dark, distant past, actually as near as the late 1970s and the 1980s, will recall that what was going on in literacy was very small. It was intensely local rather than regional. It was embedded in non-governmental organisations, staffed by a strange breed of generally University trained or para-university would-be academics, who had intense emotional investment in literacy as in some ways it was their way of challenging what was a very awful apartheid system. There were other actors, some slightly bigger, such as Operation Upgrade but, generally speaking things were pitifully small. By the mid and late 1980s a number of industries had begun to see literacy and adult basic education as something worthwhile (particularly as trades unions began to flex their muscles and demand, amongst other things, adult basic education as something that the workforce deserved and needed). But, generally, the adult basic education movement was still very weak in its capacity to be a base for any significant launch into national action. Gearing that base up into something very significant has been, and remains, a difficult task.

There has, of course, been an immense change in the area of ABE policy development. I think that one can say of that period that more trees have probably been cut down for adult basic education policy documents than for almost any other section of policy development in South Africa. A very experienced international expert on adult education who visited South Africa recently - Alan Tuckett from the United Kingdom's National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education - stated that he was impressed and indeed overwhelmed by the amount of work that had gone into policy development in adult basic education in South Africa. He said that in all his experience in other countries, he had never seen such attention given to policy development - the papers, the conferences, the documents, the fine tuning of a grand plan for a South African adult basic education and training system. This policy development does in itself reflect the high degree of sophistication in the thinking about adult basic education in South Africa. This country has some very good adult education departments and some very fine minds in the NGO sector who contributed to policy development. But thinkers are not necessarily good politicians, lobbyists or implementers of plans.

What actually has happened in terms of implementation? Here we see great puzzlement among a whole range of actors. One of the reasons for what has happened and why we are still waiting, is the nature of the negotiated political settlement in South Africa. Processes were put into place which were, by their very nature, slow and built upon compromise. Government had to bear the cost of the old administration as well as the new one. It added up to too many bureaucrats sitting in government offices with very little to do to justify their keep and a lack of vacancies for truly new innovations. Thus, through this process, the implementation dynamic is threatened and not given the resources it needs. For example, we find that the policy proposals saw the national Department of Education having a team of at least 25 professional people helping to set up, at a national level, the support base for an ABE system. In reality there are presently about three people in the national department and the burden is too great. The national situation is echoed in many of the provinces where one has an implementation base too weak to make things happen.

For all these reasons, we are in a situation where we wait. The engine has perhaps been turned on and a couple of the policy makers are still on its footplates as it idles. Some of the old academics have returned to their critical ways and are uttering warning that there are no rails for the engine to run on. They will have ample opportunity in the next ten to fifteen years to criticise the system. The rest of you who have come to this seminar are presumably all waiting to climb aboard the ABE juggernaut and hope that you will be either on the main vehicle as it drives forward into the future, or maybe you can walk or cycle after it picking up the pieces that have fallen off as we move into what seems to be a quite formal system of ABE that is trying to hitch a ride onto an even bigger vehicle (the global economy)) and become globally competitive through the upgrading of our workforce.

We are all here and we want to know where we are going. We want to know whether this new vehicle (the ABE System)) is real and not an illusion - just one of those special effects we see in the films these days. We want to know if what seems to be a plan for an enormous ABE system which will eradicate illiteracy, educate our workforce and bring enlightenment to South Africa, will in fact work. We are all here and we want to know whether the handbrake is going to be released and whether we will go forward.

We have collected together today a battery of speakers who will inform us of what is going to happen and how it is going to happen. I do hope we find out that the long wait is over and that we can get into the business of providing high quality education and training for the vast mass of people in South Africa who, through no fault of their own, have not had the basic education which all South Africans deserve.

Closing Address.

Looking into a crystal ball, the implication for future provision

I know you are probably all on the edge of your seats because you want to go home. Thank you for your attendance. This Conference was about designing and implementing a system for ABE and of necessity requires a fair amount gazing into crystal balls for the fortune tellers of our field. But crystal balls are generally murky. It's very much, to use the Biblical expression, a matter of seeing through a glass darkly. But I think that this Seminar has certainly shed quite a lot of light (whether by means of candles or storm lanterns) on aspects of design and implementation.

In looking at the issue of design and designing a system a number of metaphors and images have been employed: the idea of a kind of an engine, maybe even a juggernaut, and of its fuel. Edward French referred to an ABE version of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Elda Lyster has reminded us about the driver of the engine - the people who drive this system who are in fact the system. I think that she has made a very important point. We are not really talking about a massive infrastructure for ABE, we are actually talking about the people who are this system.

Some of what we looked at during this Seminar is about the building, the construction of the this engine. We have had a brief look at policy, my own paper on research, the influence of World Economic trends and the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework and the South African Qualifications Authority.

We have also looked at some of the institutional bases for this ABE system and the role of the national Department of Education in Pretoria. We have seen both some of its capacity and some of its weaknesses. We have had information about the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and Culture and its Adult Education subdivision. We have also seen some of its strengths and weaknesses. We have heard an address from the National Literacy Corporation, which is an NGO subsystem within the bigger system, and NASA as a particular type of support agency at a certain structural level within this system.

We have heard about ABE materials and some of the problems of distribution. One of the things I draw to your attention is that NASA runs a distribution centre and we have estimated that the cost of distribution of materials is in fact double the original price of the books. So, by distributing those materials for publishers, we effectively subsidise by the same amount as the actual real cost. I think that whole question of the distribution of materials is an example of the limitations of the existing ABET system.

We heard about methodology - Elda Lyster and Rob have spoken about that. Again, Elda's warning needs to be heeded that we are talking about a very advanced methodology for ABE that, though it may be a good one, is also very difficult to implement. We are talking about in adult basic education and training as one of the most innovative things happening in education in South Africa today. It is perhaps understandable when we hit problems or stumbling blocks and come to some grief. We have taken on a very tough challenge.

So, a number of questions arise. Is this system (this engine) quietly humming, waiting for some assertive driver to switch on the ignition so we can start rolling? Or is there a whole set

of parts which still need to be assembled for this engine to be complete, or have only parts of the assembly been made? Are we waiting for local content to be developed? One has to say that the National Qualifications Framework is a local content operation. We shamelessly borrowed the whole idea from Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom and to some extent the United States of America. It is not our own invention. We borrowed the idea. The reason for today is that we are insisting on local content, which may remind you of certain things in earlier times with real car engines. Are we trying to start this system or engine in the wrong gear? After all, it does require quite an impetus to get things going. For forty years, the innovators in adult basic education were outside the system and they lived on ideas and blueprints. Those ideas and alternative systems developed a kind of virtual reality of their own. It is quite hard to ground them in the present and there is a lot of friction going on as ideas seek to find institutions in which they can be embodied. That is the reality - we are in a rough time for bringing new ideas and new systems to birth.

I think that Ed French made a very good point when he spoke about the flame in the storm lantern. The flame is what it's about and we must not lose sight of it. Clearly from the attendance here at this seminar and what has been said, that flame is still quite bright. It may be only candle size but it is alive, despite the complaints about the lack of fuel. Will the engine, quietly humming, run out of fuel before it actually even starts moving? The sadness about collapsing NGOs is also certainly there, but again one must not think that this has only happened this year or last year. The warning notes were sounded in 1992. One of our sponsors, the Joint Education Trust, needs to be congratulated in that it took a principled decision to support ABE during what they saw as a three-year period until the system was up and running. The problem is that the system is still not yet fully up and running. So there is another interregnum which has to be filled, and that is one of the sore points.

A lot of us, I think, are still feeling for some kind of slipstream that will pull us forward, perhaps after some gravy train chugging down to Pretoria, Cape Town or Johannesburg. Other are searching for jump cables to start the stalled vehicle. Who are we going to use to jump start from for certainly the Reconstruction and Development Programme seems to have run flat?

At this seminar we have also had criticisms that the (New) Emperor has very few clothes or no clothes at all. I think we have to say that the national Department of Education is looking rather threadbare because of its simple lack of capacity. I don't think that one must confuse scepticism, the ability to point out where the Emperors do not have clothes, with sinister motives. ABET is not a field for the cynical who basically believe that nothing will ever work and that fundamentally all people are rotters. Scepticism is not cynicism.

We just have to be clear sighted and at the same time hopeful. We need to be able to distinguish between nuts and pumpkins. Maybe some of our organisations do need to re-look at themselves and decide if they are nuts or pumpkins, because in many cases we do have one trying to be the other. Of course, nuts have to fall to the ground and a clear message is that we have got to be engaged at earth level.

Some of the questions posed to the publishers about field testing in rural areas are the sort of questions which suggest that ABET has to be intensely local, on the ground, working with people who **are** intensely local because they have been deprived of a broader education which might enable them to interact on a wider scale.

In conclusion I would like to make four 'predictions' about the future:

- Firstly, it does seem clear from the way things are going, from research findings, from the development of the NQF and so on, that the business sector is going to be an absolutely key actor in the development of ABE and further education field. The latter is important because in a rapidly changing industrial world the mere ability to read and write is not going to be enough in the future. But you cannot have further education until you have a good sound basic education. It is in the interests of business to see that this happens, as quickly and efficiently as possible. So I do believe that, whatever the incentives that are offered to business, that business will remain for the next couple of years as probably the place where most effective ABE takes place.
- Secondly, there will be a gradual and inevitable dominance of the Independent Examination Board as the key player in assessment in the Adult Basic Education field. I am sure that some people will baulk at this. There are other vested interests, but the reality of the situation is that they are there, they have delivered, there are literally thousands of learners in thousands of centres all over the country who are already in that particular subsystem. So, it is going to happen. Whatever organisation you represent, you are going to have to make some sort of agreement with the I.E.B. and relate to it in some way. I think that as long as the I.E.B. provides the thoughtful service that it has set out to provide, we have a very good base for the assessment subsystem within ABET. I think there are going to be other aspects of assessment that need to come in, but the I.E.B. has provided the base.

(One of the down sides to this is that because of business and because of the formality of certificated assessments, most of the real developments in the next few years will be in the urban and peri-urban areas. The rural people are still going to get a rough deal in terms of Adult Basic Education. That means there is still a market for those who will go out to rural areas, whether they are NGOs or rural development organisations. Just looking around, the relative absence of rural development participation here is something that has to be looked at.)

- The third prediction I would make is that funding will continue to be a difficulty in the voluntary sector. It will gradually ease up, but there will continue to be an NGO shake down and it is in the interests of the NGO sector to sort out who the nuts and pumpkins are.

(Going back to Elda Lyster's talk again, the need for a depth of support of management of administration is an absolute essential. This also applies to the State sector. They have got to develop in the ABET field the equivalent of Head Masters, Circuit Inspectors, etc. for the ABET field. Otherwise, the quality will not improve. I certainly do believe that NASA is an inspiring pilot which has worked and I agree with Shelley Seid's point about the need for some equivalent to NASA in other provinces. This is absolutely vital. Who exactly is going to fund this, I am not sure, but it is vital. You do need this level of support for a developing system.

- The fourth and last point I would make probably relates to what Blade Nzimande said, but it also relates to a lot of the things that have happened at this seminar. I don't know if we have made the real paradigm shift yet - the mental gear change to

understand that this is genuinely now **our** country, that we do have universal suffrage, we do have a new democracy, and that to get action you have to lobby and work politically - in the broad sense of the word. It is **our** problem. It is not the Department of Education in Pretoria's problem, or the KwaZulu Department of Education and Culture's, or Business South Africa's. It is our problem. I would predict that the positive developments in ABE over the next two years will happen when people do in fact accept - in the words of Bob Marley - 'none but ourselves will liberate our minds.' It is ultimately our problem. I think that the success of this Seminar is a hopeful sign that none but ourselves will start to see a new, unique, possibly quite quirky, but really creative system of ABET develop in this Province.