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Open and Distance Learning: What's in a Name?

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Introduction

It is a tremendous pleasure to be back at the Cambridge conference, which over its eleven manifestations has truly become an institution in the world of distance education. I congratulate Roger Mills and Alan Tait and all those who have developed and nurtured this event over the years. The Commonwealth of Learning is proud to have given the conference some modest support.

No series of conferences in our field has achieved the same longevity of people and focus. Because the field of open and distance learning has evolved rapidly over the lifetime of these conferences, this longevity has been particularly important. Ours is faddish area of education, partly because of its link with technology. These fads, whether passing fashions or real trends, make the programmes of other conferences on distance weave around between one theme and another.

This conference has maintained a steady focus on student support, or what I usually call the interactive component of distance learning, using the term interaction to mean real communication between real people. This focus has made the Cambridge Conference a steady fountain of good sense about distance education. A nice example of the fecund influence of the water from that fountain was last year's report of the Council on Higher Education in South Africa on *Enhancing the contribution of Distance Higher Education in South Africa* (2004). This excellent report, one of the most sensible documents written about distance education in recent years, pays a fulsome tribute to the seminar that its authors held in parallel with your 2003 Cambridge Conference. I shall come back to this South African report a little later.

Learning: our common wealth

My title today is simply *Open and Distance Learning: What's in a name?* My purpose is to explore some of the current trends in the field and to make a plea that we not allow the fashion for changing nomenclature to divert us from the important purpose that we should be pursuing. I can best summarise that purpose by playing on the name of my own institution. We should be inspired and guided by the ideal that learning is the common wealth of humankind.

Two jobs ago, I was vice-chancellor of the Open University here in the UK. In that post – as in most of my appointments before that – my core task was to make the opportunity for higher learning more widely available. Today it is undeniable that distance education has made a massive contribution to the expansion of higher education. For example, 20% of all tertiary-level students in India today are studying at a distance and the government wants to raise that to 40%. Meanwhile in South Africa a majority of all Africans enrolled in higher education are in distance learning courses.

From the OU I moved to UNESCO, where the core of my work was to drive forward the global campaign for Education for All, defined by the six objectives that were formulated at the Dakar Forum in 2000. There again, distance learning has a an enormous contribution to make, although I think it is fair to say that it has not yet scored the spectacular and prestigious successes in relation to schooling that the open universities have achieved in higher education.

Today, at the Commonwealth of Learning, I am looking through a lens with an even wider angle. We are still involved in higher education. We are very much engaged with Education for All. But our overall focus is learning for development and the Millennium Development Goals define our framework of action. For those of you who don't live and breath the MDGs let me remind you that there are eight of them. They set targets for progress in reducing poverty and hunger, in achieving universal primary education, in removing gender disparities, in improving

health and reducing infant and maternal mortality, in ensuring environmental sustainability and in creating a global partnership for development.

Here I simply point out that to achieve any of these goals will require a massive increase in human learning. In saying this I mean in no way depreciate the importance of developing better agricultural techniques, of making markets work better, of improving health services or of finding environmentally friendly ways of doing things. All these are vital, but the efficacy of their impact will in all cases depend on human beings learning new things.

My other simple statement is that conventional methods of instruction are simply not up to this massive challenge of learning. I saw this clearly as I spent most of last month travelling for COL in the eight Commonwealth countries of southern Africa. Africa alone needs to train five million new teachers just to achieve universal primary education. Only distance learning can begin to address that challenge. In the absence of a cure or a vaccination for HIV/AIDS the only hope of arresting the pandemic is for people to learn to avoid it. Conventional instructional methods cannot address that challenge either.

The route to world development must include improving life in the rural areas of the world and the livelihoods of the millions of small farmers and smallholders on which it is based. Conventional methods of providing advice to farmers through agricultural extension services are hardly scratching the surface of the challenge. The farmers need more opportunities to learn their way to better livelihoods.

I could go on, but you get the idea. The simple truth is that achieving a better world for humankind in this 21st century requires a massive increase in the use of open and distance learning.

What's in a name?

It is against that background that I want to comment on the state of health of distance education – both its ends and its means. What the world needs is a large community of distance educators who are clear about their purposes and skilled at exploiting a variety of technologies to achieve them.

Clarity of purpose is helped by clarity of terminology and vocabulary, hence my choice of title – *Open and Distance Learning: what's in a name*? While allowing that terminology must evolve to meet new realities, I find our field unusually perverse in the way that it is constantly inventing new terms for old realities and new terms for undefined realities.

Some of you know me quite well, so before going any further I should confess to my own role in tinkering with the terminology of ODL. First, I hope fairly innocently, I was the person who gave the world the term mega-university to designate a distance teaching university with over 100,000 students. I still think it is a useful term, although, inevitably, it is not always applied strictly. Some now use it to designate very large conventional universities; others apply it to all open universities. One of these days when I have time I must tidy up the entry in Wikipedia, that wonderful collective fount of human knowledge.

But second, I was a member of the little team that in 1982 put the proposal to the International Council for Correspondence Education that it change its name to the International Council for Distance Education. The proposal was accepted. A decade later, in another manifestation of impatience with terminology, the ICDE became the International Council for Open and Distance Education, but without changing its acronym ICDE.

Why did we make that proposal to change 'correspondence' to 'distance' and were we guilty of starting the epidemic of terminological diarrhoea that has infected the field ever since? I can answer the first question more firmly than the second.

Two reasons, one of accuracy and one of image, led us to propose the change of name. It was 1982. The UK Open University had already celebrated ten years of success and was being widely copied around the world. The creation of the OU had various aims. One was to modernise the means of communication used in learning and teaching at a distance by taking advantage of new media, particularly at that time the mass media of radio and television. The speech that the OU's first chancellor, Lord Crowther, made at the OU's opening ceremony in 1969 makes this point eloquently. By 1980 we were talking about multi-media distance

education. The term 'correspondence' with its implication of study based exclusively on written exchanges by mail, simply did not capture the reality.

However, the other motivation for changing the name was at least as important. Correspondence education had a poor image which had been painted brilliantly in Jessica Mitford's celebrated article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1970, entitled *Let us now appraise Famous Authors*. Too many correspondence schools skimped on service and follow-up with students and some made no bones about an economic model that relied for good profits on encouraging most students to pay their fees and then quickly drop out. Mitford's article generated a flurry of national legislation and international guidelines on correspondence education but the damage was done.

I think it fair to say that, reflecting the spirit of the sixties, the founders of the OU felt that the core problem of correspondence education was that it was primarily organised commercially by the private sector. They assumed that the development of public-sector distance teaching institutions, such as the OU, would bring greater ethical integrity to the field of distance learning; an integrity which would be manifest most clearly in providing excellent student support with the aim of maximising retention rather than drop-out.

So the term 'correspondence' had to go. I don't think that any of us were 100% happy with replacing it with the term 'distance', but it did have the advantages of being neutral as regards media of learning and of describing the core reality of the new wave of institutions, namely that teaching and learning took place at a distance. However, because of its connotations of coldness rather than closeness and because it implied austere independent study rather than intense interactive communication, the descriptor 'distance' was always going to be unstable.

Later it began to suffer from the same problems of accuracy and image as the term 'correspondence' had experienced earlier. When institutions that teach primarily in classrooms began to adopt some of tools of distance education on campus, then talking of distance learning was clearly inappropriate. It must also be said that despite the good reputation for quality and service quickly earned by the OU and other members of the new wave of public-sector distance teaching universities created from the 1970s onwards, the poor image of correspondence education carried over in some minds to distance education.

To this day, for example, the Arab world remains suspicious of distance education, which is simply not recognised in some of the Maghreb countries. This goes back to the region's experiences of egregiously unethical correspondence education many years ago, which re-badging the field as distance education has not changed, although I believe that the Arab Open University is making some progress in changing hearts and minds.

ODL and ICTs: a marriage made in heaven?

It is in this context, of course, that the marriage of the terms 'distance education' and 'open learning' has been somewhat helpful. Hilary Perraton has pointed out that the term 'distance education' captures the economic imperative of gaining benefits of scale, low cost and consistent quality, whereas 'open learning' evokes the political imperative of widening access. In this perspective the term 'open and distance learning' nicely encapsulates both the ends and means of the endeavour.

But that cannot please everyone either. For those who still equate educational quality with exclusivity of access – and there are more such people than liberals like us like to think – 'open' is not a good term, whilst 'distance' remains inappropriate for instruction that takes place mainly on campus.

This partly explains the profusion of new terms generated by the field in recent years. Without attempting to be exhaustive I collected the following terms in a matter of minutes: flexible learning, distributed learning, online learning, virtual learning, eLearning; resource-based learning, mLearning; iLearning, mixed mode, multi-media education, adjunct mode, technology-supplemented learning, technology-mediated learning, technology-integrated learning; technology-enhanced learning. I'm sure you can add to the list.

What this list illustrates clearly is the huge influence of so-called 'new technologies' or ICTs on open and distance learning in recent times. Of the fifteen terms I listed only five or so were invented to capture the use of ODL methodology in non-distance settings. All the others reflect attempts to define ODL in terms of technology. This is a genuine trend. I noticed in my recent

trip to eight countries in southern Africa that ministers of education and others wanted to talk about ICTs as much as about ODL. What are we to make of this?

The dotcom frenzy of 1999-2000 has had a more lasting effect on the discourse of distance education than on its practice. I well remember how the hype of that year, with its claims that all former methods of learning would be swept away and replaced by the computer screen, alarmed us at the OU. Fortunately Diana Laurillard calmed us by pointing out that if students liked our teaching methods yesterday they would probably still like them tomorrow.

In terms of COL's programme it was the dotcom frenzy that led directly to the proposal called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth that we are now beginning to implement. When the Commonwealth Ministers of Education met in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2000, those from small states decided that they needed a special mechanism in order to hold their own in the new world of the Internet. The Virtual University was the result.

It is a fair generalisation that we tend to overestimate the impact of new technologies in the short term while underestimating their longer term effects. It is clear today that no one should have been panicked into hasty measures by the dotcom frenzy. But it is also clear that eLearning is seeping steadily into all areas of education and becoming absorbed just as other new media have before.

In their study of the experience of eLearning in American post-secondary education Zemsky and Massy (2004a, 2004b) observed that eLearning has not fulfilled the grandiose promises of its promoters. They urged promoters of eLearning to talk less and do more, in particular to effect the fundamental changes in pedagogy without which eLearning will not achieve its potential.

This is a fundamental point which brings me back to the South African report that I praised earlier. The report notes the use of superlatives and hyperbole when institutions talk about their use of technology and criticises the rather glib assumptions being made about the impact of technology on teaching and learning. It flags the general lack of critical thinking about the use of ICTs and questions in particular the widespread assumption that technology, in and of itself, promotes constructivist learning.

Challenging convergence

The South African report also does us a service by examining critically the airy statements that we often hear about the convergence of distance and face-to-face teaching. While some campuses have introduced distance learning techniques and distance teaching institutions have long incorporated optional face-to-face sessions, this does not mean that all institutions are converging at the centre of an imaginary continuum running from pure distance learning to pure classroom teaching. In South Africa at least, the distinction between face-to-face teaching institutions and distance learning institutions remains clear.

It is vital that the distinction does remain clear. This is my final point. I referred earlier to Hilary Perraton's distinction between distance education as an economic imperative and open learning as a political imperative. The marriage of both these imperatives in open and distance learning is the key to a better future for humankind in the 21st century. That is because a better future requires a massive increase in learning by people everywhere so that the human spirit can rise to overcome the challenges of our complex and messy world.

Only ODL can give people the diversity of learning opportunities that they need. That is because of what I call the Iron Triangle, which some colleagues in India kindly call the Daniel Triangle. It is a triangle made up of the three vectors of access, cost and quality. I call it the iron triangle because it places a straitjacket on conventional teaching methods. What we want is to increase access, improve quality and cut cost – all at the same time. Yet with conventional methods of teaching and learning any attempt to change one of these variables for the better changes the others for the worse. For example, increasing class sizes to increase access will lead to accusations of loss of quality; providing more learning materials in support of the teacher will increase costs, and so on.

ODL is revolutionary because it does allow you, through division of labour, specialisation and economies of scale, to reconfigure the triangle. You can increase access, improve quality and cut costs, all at the same time. This has never happened before in education.

Note that it is the dynamic of ODL that is revolutionary, not technology per se. If we focus only on technology we can easily fall back into the iron triangle, increasing quality perhaps, but with less access and higher cost.

This is what we must remember when we ask, *Open and Distance Learning: What's in a name?* We can call ODL what we like. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. What we cannot do is to abandon the revolution in education that ODL has created by smashing the iron triangle and bringing the freedom of learning to the millions who want it. This series of Cambridge Conferences has been a major force in upholding the ODL revolution. I honour you all for that and thank you for the opportunity of speaking to you.

References

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