

The Cambridge International Conference on Open, Distance and e-Learning 2011

My first exposure to the substance of this conference was the excellent summary of papers provided by Alan, Anne and Roger. If I might invoke an old instructional design term, in relation to social justice they provided a set of advanced organizers for our learning. They proposed a set of four practical indicators of social justice in cross-border education. I immediately wanted to add a fifth, reflecting my own experience in Australia: we should only admit students to higher education who have a reasonable chance of successful participation. So, thanks to our organisers, I had been encouraged to start thinking about our conference themes before setting out to come to Cambridge.

But my role now is to reflect on what has happened here.

I think when considering what we have learned about the role of ODEL in relation to internationalization and social justice, the first thing we might take away from this conference is the understanding that our field is one characterized by certain ironies.

Open and Distance Education has, throughout its lifetime, been characterized by the necessary planning associated with course development and delivery. Stemming from the early days of print production, we were, as Otto Peters observed, an industrialized form of educational delivery whereby plans were necessary to bring component services together. It was necessary for reasons of practicality, let alone quality and service to our students, to plan to meet our purposes well in advance. Yet in our first keynote, President Alan Davis described the opportunistic nature of Empire State College's movement into international delivery - an undertaking underpinned by neither policy nor institutional determination. I say this as no particular criticism of Empire State, a college for which I have some admiration, but in full acknowledgement that it reflects the experience of my own former university, and I believe, too many others. It was, simply, the way these things happened.

What, we might ask, did we think we were doing? Was there ever such a recipe for error, for inadvertent injustice? Fortunately, recipient countries tended to be more alert to the potential dangers than we who were providers proved initially to be. And our practices have become more genuinely thoughtful and respectful of those with whom we seek to partner. Equally, as Leila Youssef and others demonstrated, recipient countries have developed a sophisticated understanding of the need for quality assurance. But there is an irony about those initial clumsy, unplanned forays into international distance delivery, and a fairly grim one at that.

A second irony is that ODEL has long since been a branch of education that wore its value position clearly on its sleeve. We have sought constantly to ensure that we are doing the right thing by our students, that our practices have been values-driven. The topic of this conference serves to illustrate the point - we have come together to

reflect upon whether our engagement in international delivery serves the end of social justice. Yet the inescapable fact, and one which has not been seriously canvassed here, although Thomas talked about commercialisation in his presentation and in the report from his home group, is that developed countries used distance education to establish international ventures for financial gain - for profit. For all that we have struggled to find alternative rationales, to implement practices that were informed by a commitment to do the right thing by recipient countries and their people, at base, cross border education developed for reasons that were unequivocally commercial.

But this is a complex issue and perhaps it is a further irony, as our colleagues from the Arab Open University have reminded us, that they sought such relationships because there was advantage for them in so doing. The expertise of the UK's OU, for example, was a commodity they were prepared to invest in, rather than wear the more onerous financial and time-consuming burden of developing it from their own national resources.

Another irony, and one which it is difficult not to feel bitter about, is that we are sitting here in the UK discussing whether we can contribute to social justice when the British Government has, beyond all comprehension, decided that there is no social good to be derived from education and that its benefits are purely private. Consequently, they have increased university fees on the basis of a mean-spirited ideology that asserts that when individuals benefit, they should not expect public support and pay their own way.

A final irony, of course, is that this is the last of the Cambridge Conferences - about which I want to say more later - and we are today winding up a professional development initiative after 28 years just at the point when so many of our colleagues are attending for the first time, desperate to learn more about the field in order to make contributions back in their own countries and wishing for a continuing participation in a process that for the organizers has come to a well-deserved conclusion. This has been one of the very few conferences internationally that has retained a proper focus on the broader issues of distance, open and e-learning, rather than becoming dominated by the concerns of the IT enthusiasts.

So, what else have we learned?

While our contribution to fostering social justice internationally is, as Paul Prinsloo has made clear, at best problematic, Professor Baijnath has shown us that with government commitment, it is possible for institutions to act proactively to foster social benefits through cross border initiatives. What is clear from this conference - and demonstrated in various papers - is that both providing and recipient countries can, at very least, work to minimise potential injustice and Helena in her keynote indicated how we might find that a more manageable way to approach the issue. Both individual presenters in parallel sessions and particularly our second keynote, by Dr Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, pointed to the abundant guidance that is available

both to institutions and nations regarding good practice in cross-border education. We cannot claim that we do not know what we should be doing.

In fact, we may have learned from our contributors that fostering social justice in the context of cross border education is principally the proper responsibility of recipient states. In other words, while provider institutions have an obligation to behave with propriety, I think that there is a de facto recognition in the papers presented here that recipient states can - and I would say should - determine for themselves what is in their own best interests and under what conditions external expertise should be sought and admitted within their borders for the purposes of national building and fostering social justice for their peoples. This would act as a corrective to the potential homogenisation of educational commodities that Professor Baijnath warned about. And we have been provided with clear examples of how recipient states are operating to protect their own interests.

This relates to another important lesson we should take from here. The success of cross border initiatives, and their potential contribution to social justice depend critically upon understanding the contexts within which ODEL programs will be delivered. This came up time and time again. So, too, did the importance of attending to, and being committed to quality delivery. In my view, responding in a spirit of benefaction to an informed understanding of the characteristics of context is a strong mechanism for avoiding inadvertent cultural imperialism. Further, such understanding is best sought from collaboration with our colleagues in developing countries rather than proceeding on the basis of our own assumptions about what is necessary, or so it seems to me.

In this regard, I personally learned from Pamela Ryan's insights on the ethical nature of connectedness, of sharing, and moving beyond self-interest. I will ponder her argument that we must learn to think in new ways about technologically mediated education as the management of inter-connectivity, and that in an era of social networking, collaboration has an essential relationship with ethical behavior.

Pamela's paper pointed us firmly to the future. Many other presenters reflected on the current impact of technology and taught us that while it is possible for states to leapfrog technological developments, such as South Africa's movement to mobile telephony, in other contexts the digital divide remains a reality, although as a paper from Sri Lanka suggests, perhaps less between developed nations and the cities in developing countries, and more powerfully between urban and rural areas in the latter. Helen's presentation this morning took us well into the opportunities and difficulties that e-learning affords in relation to cross-border social justice and reflected on our understanding of that term. She invited us to consider parity of participation as a base for communicating what we mean by social justice. Helena also took us more systematically into our reflections on the digital divide and managed to be both enthusiastic about e-learning and honest enough to concede that e-technologies don't always solve all our problems. She also reminded us that all good teaching practice requires us to reflect on what we are doing and that

sometimes our e-learning innovations have been taken up on what I have sometimes thought of as the "coming ready or not" principle.

From various presenters, but particularly the paper about solar powered floating schools in Bangladesh, we learned that an indomitable spirit and practical ingenuity can redress disadvantage in even the most difficult of circumstances. In that instance success involved linking the most simple of technologies with the power of e-learning resources and we should take from this that we should not ignore the options all around us in the mistaken belief that high-tech solutions are our only, or even best options.

I also enjoyed learning a couple of simple but very effective techniques from Alex Moseley and his colleagues about identifying people with similar interests that one might maintain continuing discussion with as we all head back to our respective workplaces. Their session served to underline that the strength of this conference rests heavily on the planned opportunities for people to engage with others and build professional networks.

We also learned, I think, that the jury is still out on the usefulness of Open Educational Resources, although the workshop by Helen Lentell and Jennifer O'Rourke certainly made us think in a more comprehensive manner about the way in which they might be considered for, and introduced to ODEL programs. Jennifer's related paper also made the important point that OERs developed from face to face contexts and are not predicated upon the values and assumptions that characterize distance education.

Finally, to go back to a matter I referred to earlier, we have all learned - or at least had our understandings confirmed - of the professional debt we owe to Alan, Anne and Roger (and also, in earlier times, Kate) for affording us a professional development experience over nearly three decades. The Cambridge Conference has for many of us been a highlight of our careers in ODL. It is hard to think that this is our last time here. To these warm and wonderful colleagues, I would simply like to say sincerely, "Thank you".

Bruce King