

Blending for Success in Open and Distance Education: Public/Private Partnerships; Human and Social Capital; Free and Copyrighted Content; Mixing the Media.



ASIAN ASSOCIATION OF OPEN UNIVERSITIES

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By Sir John Daniel

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back in Kuala Lumpur and an honour to be giving a keynote address to the annual conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities. How good it is that the AAOU conference is back in Malaysia again! I am proud to say that I was here in 1997 when the AAOU last met in Malaysia.

I am a long time admirer of the Asian Association of Open Universities. The AAOU is a professional focus for the most significant concentration of distance-teaching universities in the world. One of your strengths is the great variety of institutions represented here. Some of your institutions are very large, some are much smaller. Depending on your technological environments some of you offer online learning whereas others use the mass media. Some AAOU universities have already acquired a reputation for quality whilst others are working to achieve it. This diversity creates extremely rich interactions at AAOU conferences.

I am a long time admirer of the AAOU and it seems that the sentiment is reciprocated! For some years now you have acquired the habit of inviting me to give a keynote speech at your conference. I don't think I have missed many of the AAOU conferences since we were last here in Malaysia in 1997! When our colleagues here in Malaysia invited me to address you I hesitated before replying because I was afraid that the members of AAOU must be tiring of listening to me. However since you have renewed the invitation I must try to be worthy of your confidence.

After making so many speeches to AAOU conferences what can I say that is new? Indeed, should I attempt to say new things? Perhaps the reason that you invite me back is that each year I do try and address the theme of conference, and that is what I shall do now.

Your theme is *Empowering Asia through Partnerships in Open and Distance Education*. The explanation that accompanies it states that the time has come to take stock of the collective wisdom of Asian communities, and to leverage on the educational resources and experiences available in the region. It goes on to express the aspiration that the conference will forge meaningful partnerships that will serve to empower Asia, now and in the future.

I shall talk to you within that framework. I have entitled this address *Blending for Success in Open and Distance Education*. My subtitle identifies the areas in which I shall talk about blending namely: *Public/Private Partnerships; Human and Social Capital; Free and Copyrighted Content; Mixing the Media*.

Public/Private Partnerships

I begin with public/private partnerships - and what better place to talk about this than here in Malaysia for three reasons.

First, this country has led the way in blending the contributions of the public and private sectors in order to expand higher education rapidly. Second, our host institution, the Open University of Malaysia, is a unique blend of the public and the private. Third, Malaysia has one of the first, if not the first private open university: Wawasan Open University. Let me comment on these phenomena.

Expanding Private Higher Education

After a period when it had slipped down the agenda in many countries, the expansion of higher education is now a priority for most developing countries. Worldwide there is an increasing understanding that higher education is the strategic heart of education, not just because it trains the teachers, but also because it influences the whole educational curriculum and, more generally, by educating highly skilled people, determines how advanced a country will be.

Malaysia has ambitious targets for expanding access to higher education. In order to achieve developed world participation rates of 35% and more it is in the process increasing enrolments in higher education by more than 150% over a four-year period.

My point is that as elsewhere in Asia, notably Korea and Japan, private institutions, both for-profit and not-for-profit, will play an important part in this growth. Indeed, private, for-profit higher education is now the fastest growing component of higher education worldwide.

Even so many countries, notably in Africa, still find the notion of for-profit colleges and universities scary. They are growing fast anyway because, with participation rates well below 10% in much of Africa, there is a huge pent-up demand from parents and students. Those countries would do well to take a leaf out of Malaysia's book, because this country has set up structures within the Ministry of Education to ensure that both public and private institutions work together for the common good.

The OU of Malaysia: Public universities create a private university

That brings me to our hosts, the Open University of Malaysia. During the 1990s, when I was vice-chancellor of the UK Open University, I came to Malaysia regularly and was on the periphery of the planning of the Open University. What emerged in 2000 was a most original solution. The Open University Malaysia is incorporated as a private university under the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996. It is Malaysia's seventh private university.

However although it is a private university under METEOR, the Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations company, 11 public universities are shareholders of OUM. This structure gives the public universities a direct financial interest in the success of OUM and seems to be an excellent way of ensuring collaboration. This is a very creative public-private partnership.

Wawasan Open University - a private open university

My third example of interesting developments in Malaysia is the new Wawasan Open University, which is a private, not-for-profit university backed by a charity. The vice-chancellor is my predecessor as president of the Commonwealth of Learning, Tan Sri Dato' Professor Raj Dhanarajan, which shows that when you retire from COL you can't get away from distance learning.

A private open university is a most interesting development. Like the Open University of Malaysia, Wawasan Open University is using modern technology in creative ways. It has developed a learning portal for courses through WawasanLearn, using Moodle. It will initially focus on learning-content management to test out e-delivery platforms by supporting tutor-student forums, student chats and enquiries.

I am absolutely delighted that after this ceremony the Open University of Malaysia and Wawasan Open University will sign a Memorandum of Understanding, which I shall be privileged to witness. This is a wonderful example of the partnerships that are the theme of this conference.

Wawasan is also involved in an interesting private-public partnership that also involves the Commonwealth of Learning. Some years ago, under Raj's leadership, the four open universities of South Asia, namely the Bangladesh OU, IGNOU in India, AIOU in Pakistan and the OU of Sri Lanka, got together to develop a Commonwealth Executive MBA programme with a Master of Public Administration programme alongside. This has been offered successfully by the four institutions for

several years, but now other universities right across the Commonwealth are beginning to take an interest from Nigeria to Jamaica and from Papua New Guinea to Guyana. We are delighted to have Malaysia involved through Wawasan Open University.

Talking about private open universities I must mention one important development outside Asia. While it does not call itself an open university, the Whitney International University System, which has been created by Best Associates, a merchant bank in Texas, is attempting to re-write the script for private, for-profit education. Whitney is expanding rapidly, both by acquiring universities in other countries and creating joint ventures with existing universities, private and public. Having begun its expansion in South America it is now launching ventures in Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, India and Indonesia.

It uses distance learning that blends the remote-classroom and asynchronous approaches. Lectures from senior professors are carried to remote classrooms by satellite and these are underpinned by supporting professors who interact individually with relatively small groups of students online. The lectures give the symbolic and psychological impression of a 'normal' university, whereas the close individual support keeps students on task and progressing. Unlike conventional remote-classroom teaching this model should be scalable because of the network of supporting professors; an essential feature for achieving a low price point. That is the unusual feature of the Whitney International University System and, indeed, of all the educational initiatives of Best Associates. They set a very low price and aim to achieve very high volume - just like the open universities. You should watch this space!

My final comment on private-public partnerships arises from a conversation with Professor Brenda Gourley, my successor as vice-chancellor of the UK Open University, just ten days ago. She told me that the UKOU is now looking at each step in its value chain - each operation that it carries out - to see whether a private company might do it more cost-effectively.

This is part of the process of unbundling that is going on throughout the business world. It is relatively easy for open universities to unbundle their operations because they operate on the principles of division of labour and specialisation. You have already identified your institutional processes, from student recruitment to registration, to counselling, to despatching materials, to tutoring and so on.

The question is could external companies do any of these operations better and cheaper than you can by using your own staff within the institution? Professor Gourley told me about one nice example of private involvement that required guts. That was to bring in an organisation called Mystery Shoppers to check out the quality of the UKOU's services. Mystery Shoppers is an organisation that sends in trained people to pose as shoppers - or in this case potential students - to test the quality of an organisation's services.

The UKOU came out very well indeed from this investigation. The mystery shoppers had rarely experienced such a well-organised and customer oriented organisation. But then the UKOU is famous for the quality of its service to students. In each of the last three years the University has won the top ranking in the UK's national survey of student satisfaction, a survey that involves 150,000 students in all universities.

Are you confident that your open universities would be highly rated by mystery shoppers or in national surveys of student satisfaction? They are an important indicator of quality.

Human and Social Capital

Let me now move to the second theme in this address on blending for success in open and distance education, namely the blending of human and social capital. First, what do I mean by these terms?

Human capital refers to the unique capabilities and expertise of individuals. It means the stock of knowledge and skill, embodied in an individual as a result of education, training, and experience that makes them more productive. Developing human capital is clearly the central focus of the work of open universities. Students come to you, whether as young people or as individuals already active in the workforce, to improve their capabilities and expertise. Improving human capital is a big concern of governments, because unless a country has abundant natural resources, which can be a mixed blessing, it depends on the education and skills of its people to have a successful economy.

But today countries are also concerned about social capital. This refers to the way in which a community or society collaborates and cooperates (through such mechanisms as networks, shared trust, norms and values) to achieve mutual benefits. It is networks of relationships among persons, firms, and institutions in a society, together with the associated norms of behaviour, trust and cooperation that enable a society to function effectively.

Conventional wisdom has it that Asia is stronger in social capital than the more individualistic West. I leave you to decide whether you agree with that conventional wisdom. Social capital is tied up with what some call Asian values. Maybe for that reason Asian open universities feel they can take social capital for granted because it is such a natural part of the societies in which they function.

Nevertheless, it is probably worth asking whether your curricula and teaching methods are blending the creation of human and social capital in an optimal way.

Some years ago, when they introduced the Euro currency in Europe I noted that the various Euro notes were a nice metaphor for blending human and social capital. The notes represent different eras of European architecture from the Romans to the present day, but they all have a similar format. On one side of each note there is either a door or a window, which to me symbolises the window on the world that education provides to enable individuals to develop the skills and expertise that will bring them out of themselves. On the other side of each note is a bridge, symbolising the building of relationships that we call social capital.

The question about social capital is particularly worth asking in view of all the social software that is becoming available. Distance education institutions used to be accused to focusing on the individual in isolation. That has never been true of good distance education, but today various forms of social software make it possible to put students into networks and to have them work together on projects in new ways.

So far this mostly takes place within the courses developed and offered by the institution but the UKOU, ever the innovator, is planning to go beyond this and offer credentials for studies that groups of people conduct in a network on their own initiative, possibly using learning materials from the institution but branching out from them to create something unique. This social learning is another space to watch.

Free and Copyrighted Content

My third area for blending is course content. I refer to the blending of free and copyrighted material in putting together courses. But first I ought to back up a bit and talk about open educational resources.

Open Educational Resources

You all know that developing good distance learning courses is expensive because it requires intellectual effort by skilled people, preferably working as a team. The secret of cutting costs is not to skimp on the intellectual and pedagogical input to courses but to achieve economies of scale by having each course - or a version of it - reach many students. For this reason the notion of sharing and adapting courses between institutions has been on the distance learning agenda for many years, but with disappointing results in terms of courses actually shared. The Commonwealth Executive MBA programme that I mentioned earlier is the exception that proves the rule.

There are two reasons for the disappointing level of course sharing. First, even distance learning institutions suffer from the 'not-invented-here syndrome' that makes them reluctant to use material from elsewhere. Second, the adaptation of courses that are not in electronic formats is cumbersome and expensive.

Recent developments have altered this picture dramatically. We all now use search engines to locate material on the Web, which makes us less prone to the 'not-invented-here syndrome'. Second, the availability of materials in electronic formats has made sharing and adaptation easy. The result is the growing worldwide movement to create open educational resources.

The potential of open educational resources, or OERs, to make quality learning material available at low cost has attracted the support of donors that wish to increase access to education worldwide. I pay a special tribute to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation that has made particularly large and intelligent investments in the creation of OERs. I mention three of Hewlett's projects in particular because they highlight the evolution of OERs in relation to access.

In 2001 the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) caused a stir by making the course notes of its faculty available on the web for all to see. This launched the OER movement with all the prestige of MIT. The material on display is information on course curricula rather than self-learning materials but it is widely consulted as a benchmark by faculty and students around the world, not least here in Asia.

Exactly a year ago the UK Open University took this one stage further with its OpenLearn initiative. This makes self-learning materials, student support and collaboration tools available on the web. OpenLearn receives 60,000 visits a week and is intended to be of more direct value to students than the MIT material. The site also has a LabSpace where people can mix, match and adapt the materials.

If MIT's OpenCourseware shares information and the UKOU's OpenLearn shares learning, then the next step is to share teaching - or course development.

This is what COL and 30 country partners are now doing through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which COL is coordinating through my colleague Paul West. People from many

developing small states are already working collaboratively online to prepare learning materials on Tourism and Entrepreneurship, Teacher Education, Life Skills and Disaster Management. These international course teams are developing OERs on a Wiki called WikiEducator that COL created last year. The OERS they produce will be adapted appropriately as courses for each country.

So far, so good! In a few years we have progressed from sharing lecture notes to sharing learning materials to sharing course development. But there are still challenges ahead.

There is always the classic challenge of the last mile. Will all these nice OERs make it off WikiEducator or out of their electronic repositories and take the form of real courses that can be studied for credit by real people, even if they don't have access to technology?

That is the key question for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. We hope that by the end of this year we shall be able to answer it positively.

The best way to do this is for your institutions to contribute to the growing corpus of open educational resources. If you take a course that you already offer and make it available as an OER you have solved the last mile problem because the course is already in your programme. I think that makes it more likely that others will adopt it too.

My vision is that the open universities of the world would work together to create an Open Web of Common Content. If each institution devoted the equivalent of two academics to this work, which could overlap almost completely with work they were doing for their institution anyway, we would soon have a tremendous resource. The Commonwealth of Learning would be pleased to coordinate the effort, which you might begin as an AAOU project.

To achieve this we must not get too hung up on the definition of 'open' in open educational resources. Lest I not be misunderstood, COL believes in openness. To go on our WikiEducator, OERs must be fully open in the sense that anyone can use, adapt and profit from the material provided they acknowledge the source and put their new adaptation back into the system. But WikiEducator cannot be the only game in town. There will sometimes be trade-offs between complete openness, access to materials and high quality.

For example, the excellent UKOU materials on OpenLearn can be widely used and adapted, but they do carry a Non-Commercial restriction, which precludes their use for purposes of generating a profit. Such a restriction was a necessary condition for getting the UKOU to open up its materials in the first place and is perfectly reasonable considering the potential real use and adaptation of OERs by institutions and individuals.

In fact, the Non-Commercial restriction places no restriction on the using institution's ability recover all costs, be they registration fees and printing costs, and overheads and salaries. I understand that this is true for both not-for-profit and for-profit institutions. The restriction simply means that the particular material used, should not be used for generating bottom-line profits without first contacting the owners of the intellectual property and securing permission.

Some course developers may want to introduce third-party copyrighted material into their distance learning materials. This is a perfectly rational choice if the material is of classic importance or if the cost of copyright clearance for using it is less than recreating something similar. This is what the Open University of the United Kingdom was faced with and why they opted for using the "NC" restriction.

We believe in simplicity but we live in a complex world that cannot always be simplified as far as we might like. You might say that WikiEducator is really an oxymoron - a repository restricted exclusively to totally free materials. We also need repositories that can contain material that can be used with different levels of freedom, the challenge being to tag each one in such a way that users know what they are getting. This is where COL can help.

Through my colleague Paul West, The Commonwealth of Learning is investing considerable effort in helping countries understand the world of copyright, copyright exemptions and Creative Commons licenses in order to help them extend access to learning at the lowest possible cost. This evolving advice is summarised in the Copyright documents available on our website.

Think of a Creative Commons licence as like your last will and testament. You may think you expressed clearly what you intended, but if it is contested, a legal process will decide what it means in practice. Similarly, only jurisprudence will determine exactly what the Non-Commercial restriction means. As in other areas of life what counts is not what you think you meant, but how the law interprets what you wrote. The same will apply to Creative Commons licences, should they be contested in court.

But none of that should prevent us from working together to create an Open Web of Common Content. MIT, the UKOU, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and others have shown the way. The time has come to make this a worldwide movement.

Mixing the Media

My fourth and final area for blending for success in open and distance education is mixing the media. Some of you may have heard me talk about this before.

I start from the principle that there is no magic educational medium and never will be. A perennial problem with educational technology is that people forget the educational part and get fixated on a particular technology. This is linked to the illusion that the perfect technology is just around the corner if we could just get more bandwidth or bigger screens or more powerful batteries or whatever.

The fact is that educational technology is a matter of horses for courses. What counts is what works, and to work a technology has to be available. The way that the technology is used to enrich and encourage learning is what counts.

Last week I led off a virtual debate for The Economist newspaper. Some of you may have seen it. I was proposing the motion that the continuing introduction of new technologies and new media adds little to the quality of most education. I was asked first to speak against the motion, that is to argue that new technology has improved the quality of most education, but I told them I was sceptical about that and they asked me to take the other side.

One of the points I made came from meeting thousands of graduates during my time as vice-chancellor of the UKOU. At that time the UKOU had 150,000 students working with it online in a teaching system that was a rich multi-media environment. Nevertheless, when you asked students what were the most valuable components of the system for them, two features predominated. One was the printed course texts, which were prepared with great care using a direct and personal style of communication and professional instructional design. The other was the tutors; the 10,000 part-time academics who are trained to comment helpfully on the students' work and are available for personal and group interaction.

Our challenge, as open universities, is to blend technology and people so as to help students learn. The way to achieve success is to keep our focus on our students, not on the latest technology or on the internal dynamics of our institutions. If we keep that focus then we will find our way naturally into partnerships. We shall find ourselves blending the private and the public, thinking in terms of both human and social capital, being pragmatic about our use and licensing of learning content, and being ready to blend different media to achieve our purpose.

It has been a privilege to address the AAOU conference yet again and I thank you. In the time that I have been coming to these conferences I have noticed a marked shift in the status of most of your institutions. In the 1990s many of you were marginal players in the higher education systems of your countries. Today you are at the centre of national development, not only in higher education but also, because of your size and reach, in other areas of national life.

I congratulate you on moving open universities from the periphery to the centre and I wish you well.