

# *Open Education*

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## *The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Grantees Meeting*

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*After-dinner remarks by*

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*Commonwealth of Learning*

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you after dinner. Experience has taught me that these assignments can be more challenging than speaking at the conference proper.

The good news is that if your listeners have enjoyed their food and drink they will be in a tolerant mood. The speaker can then turn to advantage Samuel Johnson's observation that one of the disadvantages of wine is that it makes a man mistake words for thought. I shall, of course, be quite content if you mistake my words for thought this evening. Although I must confess that having seen somewhere the remarkable statistic that 80% of US households do not own a corkscrew, I always wonder whether an American audience will have consumed enough wine to carry me through. The 20% of you who enjoy wine should tell the other 80% of your compatriots that they are missing out on one of God's great gifts to humankind.

The bad news is after a convivial evening like this, when conversations at table are well engaged, you may not want to hear a dinner speaker at all. As you know, the Emperor Nero liked to treat the citizens of Rome to bloodthirsty spectacles. He particularly enjoyed making Christians, who were considered seditious folk in those days, fight hungry lions. This was about to happen in the Coliseum. The Emperor was in his imperial seat; a few Christians, armed only with short swords, were already in the arena and the Roman crowd was baying for the fight to commence.

The gate was opened and the lions rushed in, paused a second for their eyes to adjust to the sunlight, and then bounded towards the Christians. At this point one of the Christians was seen to walk calmly towards the leading lion and say something. At this the lion growled and lay down in sand and the other lions followed suit. The surprised crowd shouted even louder for action but the lions would not budge. Finally Nero called the Christian over to his box. 'What did you say to the Lion?' he asked. 'I said there would be speeches after the meal', he replied.

So after dinner remarks can be a tricky challenge. But this evening at least my choice of topic is easy. We are completing a symposium called open learning interplay. The theme of my remarks will be *Open Education* and I want to explore with you some of the background to the use of this term and comment later on its present manifestation in the phenomenon of open educational resources.

That of course, gives me two more challenges. First, just as each generation of teenagers think that they are the first human beings to discover love and sex, I find that folk who work in the area of educational technology have a particular tendency to think that educational technology was an oxymoron before they joined the field. They are a bit like the American tourist visiting Windsor Castle in England, who remarked that it was a wonderful residence but he couldn't understand why the Queen had built it under the flight path into Heathrow airport. There is no sense of history.

The second challenge is that when it comes to speechmaking, education is a field that has been over-tilled by a thousand vacuous commencement addresses. I am reminded of Lyndon Johnson, who expressed a similar worry when he said that making speeches about economics is like peeing down your leg, it feels hot to you but not to anyone else.

But enough of this levity! I start with some personal history. I did my full-time university studies in medieval universities that had cloisters - a word derived from Latin, meaning closed. Four years of undergraduate work at Oxford and four years for a doctorate in Paris led me to an appointment as assistant professor of metallurgical engineering at the University of Montreal.

Seeing that my long immersion in full-time study had led me into a career as a university teacher I thought that I ought to learn something about education. Before I realised that this was a deviant, even a perverse reflex for an eager engineering academic, I had enrolled in a part-time master's programme in Educational Technology at another university in Montreal. It was the equivalent of a two-year full-time programme and required an internship and research thesis.

All of it was very stimulating, but the internship changed my life. We were required to spend three months in an organisation that was using educational technology. I started thinking about where to do this in 1971, at a time when the press was full of reports about an amazing innovation, by the Brits of all people, called the Open University. It was clearly using educational technology at scale and they were kind enough to take me on for my internship as an unpaid visiting lecturer.

That summer of 1972 in Milton Keynes was a conversion experience. I saw the future of higher education and wanted to be part of it. Everything was hugely impressive and stimulating. First the scale: 40,000 students in its second year of operation. Second the idealism: here were people who walked the talk on access and student-centred pedagogy. Third, love of learning: the students were unbelievably motivated by the opportunity presented to them. I went to one of the residential summer schools where students spent a full day in labs, seminars and field trips and then most of the night in the bar; continuing the academic discourse. Fourth, media and technology: my key task was to help develop computer-marked assignments that tested advanced cognitive skills, but I spent every spare moment viewing the brilliant BBC television programmes.

After this exposure to the open education of the future I was no longer at ease in the old dispensation. I had been infected by the virus of open education. I had signed up to the vision of open education articulated in the greatest speech ever made on the topic. This was the address that Geoffrey Crowther, editor of *The Economist* newspaper, made in 1969. He was speaking as the Open University's first chancellor at the inauguration ceremony that took place in the week of the first landing on the moon. I quote:

*This is the **Open** University. We are open, first, as to **people**.*

*Not for us the carefully regulated escalation from one educational level to the next by which the traditional universities establish their criteria for admission. "We took it as axiomatic," said the Planning Committee, "that no formal academic qualifications would be required for registration as a student." Wherever there is an unprovided need for higher education... there is our constituency. There are no limits on persons.*

*We are open as to **places**. This University has no cloisters - a word meaning closed. Wherever the English language is spoken or understood, or used as a medium of study, and wherever there are men and women seeking to develop their individual potentialities beyond the limits of the local provision, there we can offer our help. There are no boundaries of space.*

*We are open as to **methods**. The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the industrial revolution of two centuries ago. Then the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second. Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding. There is no restriction on techniques.*

*We are open, finally, as to **ideas**. It has been said that there are two aspects of education, both necessary. One regards the individual human mind as a vessel, of varying capacity, into which is to be poured as much it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which human society lives and moves. This is the Martha of education - and we shall have plenty of these tasks to perform. But the Mary regards the human mind rather as a fire which has to set alight and blown with the divine afflatus. This also we take as our ambition.*

*What a happy chance it is that we start on this task, in this very week when the Universe has opened. The limits not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have believed.*

That, you will agree, is a powerful statement about open education. It is hard to believe that it was penned - not word-processed - nearly four decades ago.

Open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods, and open as to ideas. That is a good framework to think about open education. As the virus of open education has spread around the world countries and institutions have naturally emphasised those aspects of openness that were particularly salient for their

environments. In the 1970s for instance, the US was less concerned by openness to people, since there was already an extensive system of universities and community colleges, than by opening up the curriculum.

There was a healthy competition, with professionals in the field vying with each other to prove that their definition of openness was the most important. I am reminded of the breathless conversation between two people fleeing a hungry tiger. One gasped to the other, 'We can't run faster than the tiger'. 'I'm not trying to run faster than the tiger' replied the other, 'I'm trying to run faster than you'.

Recent decades have seen new technologies make tremendous contributions to openness. Already in the 1970s, it was the economies of scale of open and distance learning, based on the technologies of print, television and radio that made it so revolutionary. Never before had it been possible to increase access, improve quality and reduce cost - all at the same time. Open education broke open the iron triangle of access, cost and quality that had constrained education throughout history and had created the insidious assumption, still prevalent today, that in education you cannot have quality without exclusivity.

Each subsequent technology has made those economies of scale even more impressive and recast even more radically the iron triangle. Web distribution of learning materials is almost cost free. Electronic communication between students and institutions means that feedback, a vital part of learning, is faster and cheaper.

The result is that today the major obstacle to open education, because it is the major cost factor, is the creation of good learning materials. Here there are fewer technological short cuts, because the design of courses that are academically current, intellectually attractive and pedagogically efficient will always require serious investment of human brainpower. The answer is not to skimp on the brainpower, but to make the products of that brainpower more widely available.

This, of course, is what the Hewlett Foundation has been doing so brilliantly through its support of the concept of open educational resources and their development around the world. This is another revolution in education. Clark Kerr once said that universities are a federation of academic entrepreneurs united only by a common grievance over parking. Countering the rush of academe to protect its proprietary back, by promoting instead the ideal of a global intellectual commons, has shown extraordinarily farsighted vision by the Foundation.

The main danger that I see - and this has always been the bugbear of new educational technologies - is that people focus on technological details rather than educational goals. Right now the rather sterile debate over how open an open educational resource needs be to qualify as a genuine OER risks bringing the whole project into disrepute. Furthermore, much of the debate is wasted breath until jurisprudence in different parts of the world has established precisely what is meant by the Non-Commercial restriction in Creative Commons licences. I am delighted that Creative Commons has created a special division for education and is giving attention to this problem.

This is a live issue for organisations like my own Commonwealth of Learning that live in the real world, spend their time in developing countries, and must constantly ensure that the best is not the enemy of the good.

The UK's former Prime Minister, John Major, choosing his words rather carelessly, once remarked that when you've got your back to the wall you must turn round and fight. It would be an exaggeration to say that bitter arguments about the theology of openness have put our backs to the wall, but we do have to fight for the principle that in education what counts is what works. And I mean what works for students.

I am reminded of the politician who, after making a speech, was complimented by a woman who told him that he would get the vote of every thinking person present. 'That's not enough', replied the politician, 'we need a majority!'

Similarly, open educational resources need a majority that reaches out beyond the Stalinists of the freedom culture into the real world that is thirsty for real education. In the same way those in the Wiki community engaged in the debate between inclusionists and deletionists should remember that to most outsiders Wikis resemble gated communities more than the global commons that they purport to create.

But having spent nearly forty years working to advance open education I am confident that we can get there. The recent Cape Town Open Education Declaration, which the Commonwealth of Learning has signed, is an encouraging sign of compromise and consensus. I rather regret that it appropriates the term 'open education' to mean only OERs because, as I have argued, open education is much broader than that. But that is a minor quibble.

Finally, I am pleased that the debates about all this are being conducted with particular acrimony and vigour here in the United States for, as Winston Churchill, remarked, the US will always do the right thing - after having exhausted all other possibilities.

Thank you