

Reflections on a Career in Distance Education



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Conversion on the Road to Milton Keynes

I found distance education whilst seeking something else. My first real job, after a long, conventional and highly specialised education, was an assistant professorship of Metallurgical Engineering at the Ecole Polytechnique (Université de Montréal). Fate appeared to have made me a university teacher so I thought I ought to develop some professionalism in my new métier by undertaking formal study of education.

Before I realised that this was an unusual - even a perverse - reflex for a young engineering academic, I had enrolled in a Master's programme in Educational Technology at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University). I had little idea what educational technology was but swallowed my scepticism because it was the only programme in Montreal with 'education' in the title that could be studied part time and appeared to offer some intellectual challenge.

For someone who had specialised in science for many years the whole programme was an eye-opener, but its three-month internship changed my life. As I wondered in 1971 where to go for my internship the press was suddenly full of stories about an amazing innovation - by the Brits of all people - called the Open University. It sounded interesting and Professor David Hawkrige took me on as an unpaid visiting lecturer at UKOU's Institute of Educational Technology for the summer of 1972. I did no lecturing but I had a conversion experience.

I was introduced to the practice of developing courses in teams, which the founding Vice-Chancellor of the OU, Walter Perry, regarded as his major innovation. I was a back-row player in a team for a science course, Solids, Liquids and Gases, which later acquired a reputation as one of the OU's few 'dogs'. Much more interesting was my larger role in a team charged with proposing revisions to the Technology Foundation Course, T100, then being offered for the first time. I had to sift through the abundant information that the OU collects from its students and suggest changes that would improve the course the following year.

I found this systematic approach to quality improvement inspiring, as I did everything else about that summer. All my spare moments were spent viewing OU TV programmes and I was amazed by their quality and interest. I went along to a residential summer school and was bowled over by the 16-hour-a-day commitment to academic discourse: in labs and field trips during the day and in the bar until late at night. The idealism and the commitment to student success were palpable.

Here was a teaching and learning system. When my internship ended I was no longer at ease in the old dispensation. Here was the future of higher education and I wanted to be part of it.

On returning to Montreal an opportunity to join the distance learning revolution came almost immediately in the form of an advertisement in *Le Devoir* seeking a director-general for the new Télé-université; Quebec's answer to the UKOU. With youthful enthusiasm I applied for the job, even though I was an Anglophone, barely thirty years old, who had only stepped off the boat from Europe three years earlier.

To their eternal credit the search committee, instead of binning my application, called me up to Quebec City for interview. They made it clear that they were not going to make me director-general - which was a relief - but told me that I was the only person they could find in Quebec who had seen an open university from the inside. Would I like to join the Télé-université and organise its educational technology unit? I replied that I would!

Improvement by Feedback

We moved from Montreal to Quebec City and had four tremendously stimulating years - both professionally and personally. The UKOU had its well-staffed Institute of Educational Technology; the Télé-université had me! How could I make an impact? I decided that evaluating our first course offerings and feeding back the results to the course teams was the most fruitful approach. It did not make me popular, because even the innovators and risk-takers who had joined the Télé-université did not like to be told that students did not find their work perfect. However, the institution steadily became a self improving system.

The years at the Télé-université were intensely interesting on the personal front because, as a new institution using media to reach large numbers, it was a magnet to the young nationalist academics who wanted to promote change by spicing the traditional academic fare of Quebec social science with more penetrating insights. They were splendid people whose commitment to the sovereignty of Quebec was more than rhetorical. In the election of 1976, which swept the Parti Québécois to power as the provincial government, four of my faculty (by then I had become director of studies) were elected to the National Assembly and three of them immediately became ministers.

During these years I attended my first international conference on distance learning, the 1975 conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE), held in Brighton UK. At that time ICCE's membership was a blend of commercial, military and public sector correspondence schools. UKOU Vice-Chancellor Walter Perry was the star turn of the meeting with a speech about the Open University. In his uncompromising way Perry said bluntly that the UKOU was providing the quality learning material and student support so lacking in the correspondence sector. By the end of the conference the battle lines were drawn. The public-sector university people were feeling superior. The commercial schools were arguing that with generous public funding, they too could offer exciting media and excellent student support.

Improvement by Clarity

By now open-university networks were forming. Alberta had created Athabasca University as Quebec set up the Télé-université. There was contact between the two institutions and we worked together on evaluating the first educational experiments conducted on Canada's communications satellites.

One thing led to another and in 1977, in the depths of the cold Alberta winter, I arrived in Edmonton to take up the post of vice-president, learning services, at Athabasca University (AU). AU had originally been established as an overspill campus to the University of Alberta, but as that became less necessary and scandal erupted over land sales near the campus site, it sought a new mission as an open university.

It had produced one blockbuster course: Ancient Roots of the Modern World, which required nineteen 3,000-word assignments and should have led to the award of a full degree, rather than a few course credits, for any student courageous enough to get through it. (My wife and I later took the course as students in a slimmed-down version and found it excellent).

When I arrived, Athabasca was still trying to find its way to a fuller curriculum. However, each successive meeting of the Senate jettisoned the course and programme proposals approved at the previous meeting and set off in a new direction.

Taking the view that implementing an imperfect programme consistently was more productive than an endless search for a perfect curriculum, I simply insisted that we develop the courses that had been agreed. Once they recovered from their surprise my colleagues thought this was an excellent idea and set to work with a will. Enrolments doubled in each of the three years that I was there.

My stay was short because Sam Smith, Athabasca's president who had lured me west, fancied himself as a kingmaker. Suggesting to me that after six years in unorthodox open-university start-ups it was time to establish my credentials in the conventional sector, he placed before me an advertisement for the post of vice-rector, academic at Concordia University. Being an obedient type I took his advice, applied and got the job.

Appointing me was broadminded on Concordia's part because at that stage I was a drop-out from the Master's programme in Educational Technology that I had started at Sir George Williams University in 1970. I had completed the coursework and the internship but had abandoned a research thesis on the introduction of computers in Quebec primary schools when I moved to Alberta. (Sir George Williams University and Loyola College had merged to form Concordia in 1974.)

Concordia gave me a wonderful training in every aspect of conventional university management under the wise guidance of Rector John O'Brien. The University did not teach at a distance but my involvement with ODL continued through ICCE.

What's in a Name?

ICCE had held another conference in New Delhi in 1978 at which I was elected chairman of the programme committee for the 1982 conference scheduled for Vancouver. Then in 1979 the UKOU held a

memorable invitational conference to celebrate its tenth anniversary. Whether to create an international association of open universities was one of the issues discussed.

David Sewart of the UKOU had been active at both the Brighton and New Delhi ICCE conferences. He and I both thought that it would be better to expand the remit of ICCE to include the interests of the open universities rather than create a new association for them. Discussion at the UKOU conference already indicated that drafting the membership criteria for such an association would be difficult.

At this time the growing professional community of public-sector distance education was increasingly uncomfortable with the designation 'correspondence education'. On the one hand it did not capture the richness of the new multi-media approaches and on the other it had unfortunate associations with dubious courses advertised on packets of matches. Changing the name of the International Council for Correspondence Education was a sine qua non for broadening its membership base.

With the strong support of Kevin Smith of the University of New England (Australia), David Sewart and I began a campaign to change 'correspondence' to 'distance': to convert ICCE to ICDE. This was put to a vote at the Vancouver Conference and approved. Sadly, however, the commercial correspondence sector interpreted this as a repudiation of their interests and gradually drifted away from ICDE, causing its membership to focus more on higher education and the public sector than before.

At the Vancouver Conference I was elected president of ICDE and used some of the surplus generated by the event to convene face-to-face meetings of the Executive Committee and promote the Council around the world. Unfortunately subsequent conferences did not generate surpluses and ICDE gradually became more dependent on government grants, diminishing its credibility as the membership gradually ceded control of the association to its secretariat. The Asian Association of Open Universities emerged in the 1990s as the most stimulating international forum for discussions of ODL.

The Challenge of Dual-mode Operation

Before the ICDE met again for its Melbourne Conference in 1985 I had moved again, to the presidency of Laurentian University, a multi-campus institution serving North-Eastern Ontario from its main campus in Sudbury.

This brought me back into direct operational contact with ODL since Laurentian is dual-mode institution. Watching the faculty struggle - or fail to struggle - to serve both their on-campus and off-campus students gave me a conviction, which has never left me, that managing dual-mode operations is extremely difficult. Whatever arrangements are put in place seem inherently unstable. Too much centralisation of the organisation of ODL and the faculty feel disempowered; too much delegation of responsibility for ODL to individual academics and student support becomes inconsistent.

Some would say that the blending of distance and classroom learning through eLearning has made this distinction irrelevant. That may be true but dual-mode eLearning raises another fundamental question. Does not the cottage-industry approach to eLearning through dual-mode operation effectively ensure that this powerful new teaching tool performs below potential?

Those who believe that expanding access is a fundamental mission of distance learning should also worry that eLearning is diverting attention and resources away from disadvantaged students and back to those who are already well served. For example, the Sloan Foundation's interesting annual reports on eLearning in the USA (Allen and Seaman, 2006) explicitly duck the question of whether the eLearners are new students. Is eLearning just another example of the empire striking back, with traditional academe undermining attempts to widen access?

ODL on the International Agenda

At Laurentian my extracurricular activities within the Canadian Association of Distance Education and the Canadian Higher Education Research Network gave me a good overview of developments across Canada. In 1987 Prime Minister Brian Mulroney hosted both the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and the Sommet de la Francophonie. He intended to propose initiatives for the educational use of communication technologies to both gatherings and I was drawn into an informal group led by Canada's Department of Communications that advised on the presentation to the Commonwealth.

At the CHOGM, which was held in Vancouver, Mulroney's proposal was reviewed alongside a report from a group led by Lord Asa Briggs: Towards a Commonwealth of Learning. This had grown out of the work of the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility which, worried by impact of rising fees on the numbers of students from developing countries going overseas to study, wondered if modern technology could make it possible to move the courses rather than the students.

The upshot was a decision by the Heads of Government to create the Commonwealth of Learning. The UK's Margaret Thatcher was opposed to the creation of another intergovernmental body but India's Rajiv Gandhi supported it strongly and pledged a hard currency contribution, as did Brunei and Nigeria, so the developing world won the day. Exactly what the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) would be or do was left for later decision.

Shortly afterwards I was asked to chair a planning committee to put flesh on the bones of COL. We worked through 1988 and produced a Memorandum of Understanding that governments signed later in the year.

The fundamental question before the planning committee was whether COL would produce courses and offer them to Commonwealth countries through technologies such as satellites, or help countries to build up their own capacity for distance education. The committee chose the second option, strongly influenced by the international development agencies of Australia, Canada and the UK. These agencies were to provide the funding for COL and experience had made them sceptical about hi-tech educational systems for developing countries.

In the initial years the UK, reflecting Margaret Thatcher's scepticism about COL, supported it by funding services from the UKOU rather than by transferring funds to Vancouver, which had been chosen as the home of the organisation. As chairman I joined the other members of the planning committee in expressing disappointment with the UK's unilateral stance.

Open as to people, places, methods and ideas

My criticism of the U.K.'s stance proved ironic because in 1989, when on leave from Laurentian University at a senior executive course in international affairs at the National Defence College of Canada, I was appointed vice-chancellor of the UKOU. On taking up the post in 1990 I found myself in receipt of the funds for supporting COL that I earlier thought should have gone directly to Vancouver!

The UKOU is an extraordinary institution - certainly among the most successful new organisations created in the 20th century - and leading it for 11 years was a thrilling task. Eighteen years earlier I had been an unpaid intern; now I had the top job. Such has been the numerical impact of the UKOU, and such the satisfaction it gives its students, that wherever I gave speeches, all over the world, people would pop up in the audience with warm testimonials to the quality of the institution.

The situation that I found at the UKOU on arrival in 1990 was almost the opposite of the challenge that had faced me at Athabasca a dozen years earlier. The UKOU was brilliant at consistent organisational follow-through but its self-confidence had suffered through the political vicissitudes in the late 1980s. My new colleagues were deeply suspicious of an imminent government review of its funding.

Being able to make international comparisons, I was perhaps more aware than they of the remarkable quality and value for money that the UKOU represented, so I insisted that we work openly and collaboratively with the review. We later discovered that the real purpose of the review was to help government decide how to position the UKOU in the major reform of UK higher education that was coming in 1992. This positioning proved highly favourable. First, the UKOU became effectively the only national university in a newly federal structure. Second, the creation of common funding and quality assurance mechanisms for all UK universities enabled the UKOU to leverage its cost-effectiveness and quality into a doubling of enrolments over the 1990s and a steady rise to fifth place in national rankings of teaching quality in the country's hundred universities by the early 2000s.

As part of my strategy of strengthening the UKOU's faith in its mandate and capabilities I reminded colleagues relentlessly of the inspiring mission articulated by its first chancellor, Lord Crowther: to be open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods and open as to ideas. Fidelity to this mission led the University to grow in numbers, to extend its reach to the rest of Europe and beyond, to embrace the online world, and to lead higher education in the adoption of concepts such as foundation degrees and national vocational qualifications.

In a highly effective and well-governed institution like the UKOU an important role for the leadership is to create room and resources for new initiatives that lack natural constituencies of support among the established faculties and schools. In this respect my riskiest decision was to persuade the Council in 1995 to invest about \$25 million in fully embracing the Internet. Fortunately it paid excellent dividends as the faculties responded with enthusiasm and the Knowledge Media Institute, which was created as part of the package, rapidly acquired an international reputation. This meant that when the dotcom frenzy struck in 2000 the University was already exploiting online technology in a big way.

A decision that my successor came to regret was our establishment of the United States Open University in the late 1990s. The UKOU Council closed it in 2002 because by then the financial outlay and the time required to bring it to breakeven were both too great for comfort for a public-sector institution.

The interesting question is whether the US operation could have been brought to success if the UKOU had been in the private rather than the public sector. This touches on a wider interrogation about the profile of distance education in the future. I was lucky to begin a fascinating career just as the public sector displaced the private sector as the locus of the exciting developments in ODL. As my career draws to a close I suspect that the private sector is returning to the ascendant. Certainly private institutions will play a major role in the development of higher education in developing countries (Daniel, Kanwar & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2006) and some are gearing up to do this through distance learning.

Early in my time at the UKOU I completed the courses for a diploma in Theology by distance learning that I had begun at Laurentian University. Wishing to continue as a distance learner, I was about to enrol in a Law programme when my exasperated wife sat me down and told me firmly that if I wanted to be a student again I should finish the Educational Technology Master's degree that I began two decades earlier.

Concordia University, showing admirable broadmindedness once again, let me back in to the programme and the UKOU gave me a month's study leave. In a month in Montreal, which coincided exactly with the 1995 referendum campaign on Quebec sovereignty, I coined the term 'mega-universities' and wrote a thesis about them which became my book *Mega-universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*. In 1996, 25 years after I had started, I graduated from the Concordia Master's programme. At that time I used to officiate at a dozen UKOU degree ceremonies each year and was able to comfort, by citing my own experience, graduates who felt they had taken too long to complete.

Distance Education for Development

In 2001 my career took a new turn when I joined UNESCO as head of education. This took me away from distance education but plunged me into the challenges of education in the developing world. Job number one at UNESCO, then as now, was to help the world achieve Education for All. I took my second UKOU course, Third World Development, in order to learn more about it.

UNESCO was fascinating, and I learned much about how intergovernmental agencies work whilst assisting Director-General Matsuura in his attempts to reform an idealistic but somewhat dysfunctional organisation.

This experience was invaluable when another wheel came full circle in 2004 and I became president of the Commonwealth of Learning, the small intergovernmental agency that I had helped to plan in 1988. For me this is the perfect job, combining as it does distance education, international development and institutional leadership. COL operates from the principles that development in all fields is largely a matter of learning; that traditional teaching methods cannot cope with the scale of the challenge; and that technology-mediated learning and ODL is a large part of the answer.

This is not the place to go into detail about COL's work, which is described from many angles in my speeches (www.col.org/speeches). Suffice it to say that a small but extraordinarily talented staff of only 40 punch far above their weight in helping the developing countries of the Commonwealth to develop policies, systems, models and materials for expanding and improving learning through technology.

Conclusion

By following the thread of distance education wherever it led me I have been blessed with a thoroughly engaging and enjoyable career. Those beginning a career in the field today will face fresh challenges and different opportunities. My advice to young practitioners is fourfold. First, be clear about the values that underpin your work. Second, pay less attention to technology, which will continue to evolve, than to new ways of doing things. For my generation the great innovation was the course team. For the next I suspect that it will be Open Educational Resources. Research in how best to convert OERs to credit-bearing courses will repay dividends.

Third, be alert to developments in both the public and private sectors, which are moving closer together. Finally, I urge you to follow your own convictions without worrying too much about what others think. A constant feature of my own professional trajectory was that whenever I moved on, colleagues at the institution I was leaving thought I was mad and warned me against putting my career at risk and my happiness in jeopardy. They were all proved wrong!

References

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