

Learning for Development: What McGill University and Continuing Education Have Meant to Me.



*McGill University, Convocation Ceremony for the
Centre for Continuing Education, 28 May 2007*

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Address to Convocation

Sir John Daniel Commonwealth of Learning

Transcript

Chancellor; Academic Colleagues; Graduates; Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honour to receive this honorary doctorate from McGill University at the Convocation Ceremony for the Centre for Continuing Education. Honorary graduates in North America are expected to share some platitudes about life with the graduates. That's not my style so I shall simply tell you why I revere McGill University and why continuing education has been important to me.

McGill's history of research has inspired me, your innovation in teaching has influenced me, your national awareness has helped me, your leaders have encouraged me, and our daughter Catherine graduated here.

J'ai commencé ma carrière universitaire dans le département de génie métallurgique de l'École Polytechnique en 1969. Je venais alors souvent à McGill dans le cadre d'une collaboration fructueuse avec vos professeurs de métallurgie. A Poly j'enseignais la structure des matériaux et, pour faire comprendre à mes étudiants l'histoire passionnante de la découverte de la structure de l'atome, je les ai emmenés à votre petit musée consacré à Sir Ernest Rutherford. C'était une visite mémorable et je vous remercie de nous avoir permis de bénéficier ainsi de votre illustre histoire.

I also began a most productive friendship with McGill Chemistry Professor David Harpp, who was my neighbour in St. Lambert. He taught the introductory Organic Chemistry course here and was passionate about his discipline. To help students visualise chemical structures, reactions and applications he innovated brilliantly with slides using the lap dissolve technique. I taught the introductory Materials course at Poly and adopted the same approach.

Today you can create these effects in seconds with software like PowerPoint, but Dave Harpp and I slaved away for hours in the evenings at his home placing bits of film in precision slide mounts to get the effects of movement we wanted. Although long and painstaking, the work was fun - and the students appreciated it.

In the 1980s I benefited from McGill's national awareness as President of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education. Through the good offices of Professor Janet Donald, McGill allocated a room on campus to the Society where I came regularly to work with Mrs Pat Roman in our little secretariat.

Un peu plus tard, après ma nomination comme recteur de l'Université Laurentienne, je suis devenu ami avec deux de vos distingués recteurs, David Johnston and Bernie Shapiro.

J'ai fait équipe avec Bernie Shapiro à plusieurs reprises. Vers la fin des années 1980, chacune des constituantes de l'Université du Québec demandait d'adhérer à titre individuel à l'Association des universités et collèges du Canada. La procédure d'admission exigeait que l'AUCC mette sur pied un comité d'évaluation composé de recteurs d'universités hors Québec. Or, puisque les recteurs bilingues n'étaient pas nombreux dans le reste du Canada, les trois recteurs bilingues de l'Ontario, Bernie Shapiro, alors à OISE, le feu Ron Ianni de Windsor, et moi-même, ont fait équipe pour visiter les constituantes de l'UQ à Rimouski, à Rouyn, et à Montréal.

David Johnston became a friend when I was vice-rector at Concordia and, having been born in Sudbury, at Copper Cliff, he was most encouraging when I went to Laurentian University as president. David continued a long tradition of excellent leadership at McGill and made it a habit to support rookie presidents. So I revere McGill University.

Why is continuing education so important to me? Because I find that continuing education has had a greater impact on my career than my early training.

Je ne voudrais, d'aucune façon, sous-estimer l'importance de ma formation initiale. Comme étudiant à temps complet j'ai obtenu d'abord un baccalauréat en métallurgie à l'Université d'Oxford, et ensuite un doctorat ès-sciences physiques à l'Université de Paris après avoir effectué des recherches sur les propriétés mécaniques de l'uranium. Ces deux grandes universités de fondation médiévale m'ont donné la formation rigoureuse qui m'a permis d'avoir un poste de professeur à l'École Polytechnique. Par ailleurs, et je n'y vois pas de paradoxe, à long terme les retombées les plus utiles de mes études scientifiques à ces deux universités célèbres étaient de nature linguistique. Oxford m'a habitué à écrire en anglais et Paris m'a appris à parler français.

Nevertheless, my most significant educational experiences began when I came to Montreal. My long education had led me into academic life so I decided that I ought to learn something about education. Before I realised that this was a rather deviant decision for an engineering academic I had enrolled in a Master's programme in Educational Technology at Sir George Williams University. It was a two year full-time programme including a research thesis and an internship but you could study it part-time. So most evenings I would take a course at Sir George on my way home from Poly to St Lambert.

The coursework was interesting but the internship changed my life. In the early 1970s the educational world was suddenly captivated by a British innovation, the Open University, which was using multi-

media technologies to introduce distance learning at scale. I went there for three months as an intern in 1972 and had a conversion experience. Everything about the Open University inspired me: the huge scale; the use of media; the development of courses in teams; the commitment to students and the tremendous idealism that underpinned it all. I had seen the future of higher education and was no longer at ease in the old dispensation.

Dès mon retour à Montréal j'ai pu réorienter ma carrière car l'Université du Québec créait alors la Télé-université et j'ai déménagé à Québec pour faire partie de son équipe fondatrice. Ainsi j'ai commencé une carrière très enrichissante dans la formation à distance. L'un des mes principes, même si je n'avais pas encore complété la maîtrise à Sir George, était de m'inscrire comme étudiant dans chaque université où je travaillais: histoire moderne et informatique à la Télé-université; histoire ancienne et gestion à Athabasca; théologie à la Laurentienne; informatique et développement international à l'Open University.

J'ai profité énormément, autant sur le plan personnel que sur le plan professionnel, de toutes ces études en éducation permanente. Je dis en boutade que mon principe est de trouver d'abord un nouveau poste et acquérir ensuite la formation nécessaire! J'ai été nommé 'lecteur' dans l'Église anglicane avant de compléter mon diplôme en théologie. On m'a nommé chef du secteur Éducation à l'UNESCO avant que je m'inscrive dans le cours de développement international.

But, of course, that is what continuing education is for. As all of you here know very well, people learn better and more deeply when their work in the day engages them with the topics they are learning about in the evening.

I end with a confession. On moving to Alberta in 1978 I had dropped out of the Sir George Master's programme that had transformed my career. In the mid-1990s, having just finished my theology diploma, I thought I might study for a law degree. At that point my exasperated wife, who has always been wonderfully supportive of this scholar gypsy, suggested somewhat robustly that if I wanted to become a student yet again, I should finish the Master's degree that I had started at Sir George 20 years previously.

I thought this was a great idea. Sir George was now Concordia University which, with admirable broadmindedness, let me back into the programme for the thesis. In 1995 I came back to Montreal for a month - coinciding with the referendum campaign - and wrote a thesis on open universities. The following June, twenty-five years after first enrolling in the programme, I received my Master's degree at Place des Arts.

This is what lifelong learning and continuing education have meant to me.

Thank you again for this great honour.