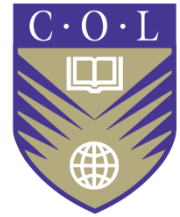


What Educational Technology Means to Me



Concordia University, Graduate Programme in Educational Technology, 40th Anniversary Conference

Opening keynote address (by video), 28 June 2009

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Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Transcript

Colleagues:

It is a great honour to give the opening address at this historic conference. I am sorry that I am not with you in person, but given that I have spent most of my career since I joined the Ed. Tech. programme in distance education it is rather appropriate that I should address you from a distance: *a mare usque ad mari*. We are using well-proven technologies, video and telephone, that I hope will be fit for purpose.

I salute you all and congratulate the Department on organising this conference. In his e-mail message inviting me to address you, Richard Schmid referred to me as the programme's most distinguished graduate. That is a matter of debate.

What is not a matter of debate is that I am the slowest learner to have passed through the programme. I first enrolled in 1970 and did not graduate until 1995, twenty-five years later. I cite this as an example of my commitment to lifelong learning. It was also very helpful, when Open University graduates complained to me at convocation that their part-time studies had taken a long time, to be able to trump their experience with my own marathon.

I came to the Ed. Tech. programme already holding respectable degrees from the universities of Oxford and Paris; but I can honestly say that the Ed. Tech. programme has changed my life more than any other course of study. Maybe that also qualifies me for this spot on the programme – and it is a good lead-in to what I am going to say. If you are looking for a savant disquisition on the theory of educational technology then I suggest you go and get a coffee. This is going to be an autobiographical and anecdotal account of what educational technology means to me.

Indeed, since I like to give a title to every speech, today's title just that: *What Educational Technology*

Means to Me.

I confess that in the beginning it meant very little. I had arrived in the Port of Montreal in 1969 with a freshly minted doctorate from the Université de Paris in Nuclear Metallurgy and a job as *professeur assistant* at École Polytechnique. When I started work at Poly I decided that since I had embarked on an academic career I ought to learn something about education. Only later did I realise that this was a deviant reflex for a young engineering academic. But by then the die was cast.

I looked around Montreal for a programme in Education that you could study part-time and that appeared to have some intellectual bite. Top of a short list was the MA in Ed. Tech. at Sir George Williams University and I signed up in 1970. I had little idea of what Educational Technology was – indeed I was a bit suspicious – but it sounded interesting and I decided to give it a whirl. So for three years, after a day's work at Poly, I would head down Côte de Neiges, grab a quick bite in a greasy spoon and go to classes.

Until then I had had a very orthodox – not to say medieval – university experience in the Natural Sciences. The Ed. Tech. programme was an eye opener. It was my first formal contact with the social sciences.

I realised that I was in a different kind of academic environment when Martha Crampton made us lie on the floor, breathe deeply and use our imaginations. I found some courses a bit superficial – notably educational psychology where instructors went on at great length about rather obvious ideas. But I found others tremendously stimulating. I think of Gary Boyd's Educational Cybernetics, from which the concept of a socio-gram and the Principle of Requisite Variety stay with me to this day. Gary Coldevin's course on Media was also a very useful foundation for what followed.

In those days the MA was a two-year full-time equivalent programme with thesis and internship, so it took a while to do it part time – although I'm glad to say that most completed it in less than 25 years.

I decided to knock off the internship early on and in 1971, when I was wondering where to do it, the press was suddenly full of stories about a massive new initiative in educational technology, by the Brits of all people, called the Open University. It sounded fascinating and I wrote off to Professor David Hawkrige, then Director of the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology, and asked to come there for my internship. He replied that they would be happy to take me on for three months as a visiting lecturer. They wouldn't pay me, but they would give me interesting work.

Fortunately Poly was happy to continue to pay me for the summer months of 1972 so off I went. I had a conversion on the road to Milton Keynes – which is where the OU is headquartered. Everything about that summer was awesome, as my children used to say.

My work was quite varied. I was part of a team making revisions to the Foundation Course in Technology in the light of the experience of offering it for the first time that year.

I was also a member of a team preparing a new third-level science course called *Solids, Liquids and Gases*, which everyone agreed later was one of the few OU courses to be considered a real dog. And I was part of a little team in the Institute of Educational Technology trying to design more cognitively challenging multiple-choice questions than the standard fare at that time.

This last task was fascinating and later I almost caused a riot when I tried these kinds of questions on my students in Montreal. They weren't used to multiple-choice questions that obliged you to think, rather than simply recall.

The work on the Technology Foundation course was also very enriching and complementary to the systems focus in the programme at Sir George. The OU was one of the first universities to make systems a major theme in its technology and engineering programme and I found the materials on systems and systems failures fascinating.

I also had a free run of the OU that summer and spent every spare moment viewing the brilliant television programmes that were being produced by the BBC to accompany the courses. They also sent me to one of the one-week summer schools, where I was able to see at first hand the incredible dedication of the students and staff, who seemed to work all day in labs, seminars and field trips, and then continue academic discussions in the bar until well past midnight. The atmosphere was supercharged and exhilarating.

So my internship was a life-changing experience. I had seen the future of higher education and I was no longer at ease in the old dispensation. I wanted to join the distance learning revolution.

The opportunity came soon after I returned from my internship. In September 1972 there was an advertisement in *Le Devoir* saying that the Université du Québec was creating the Télé-université and was looking for a Directeur-Général. Although I was an Anglophone practically fresh off the boat from Europe, the arrogance of youth made me apply for the job.

To the UQ's great credit, they did not simply bin my application but invited me up to Quebec City for interview. The UQ President, Alphonse Riverin, explained right off the bat that they were not going to appoint me as Director-General – which was a relief – but then added that I was the only person they could find in Quebec who had direct experience of an open university and would I like to come and coordinate the Télé-université's educational technology unit?

So I moved to Quebec City and spent four very interesting years helping to get the Télé-université going. The educational technology unit was just me for most of my time there, so I had to ask myself what was the most effective thing I could do to implement what I was learning at Sir George. I should add that during my time in Quebec City I continued to commute to the Hall Building for classes and got to know Route 20 and the Voyageur buses very well indeed.

I decided, probably inspired by Gary Boyd and cybernetics, that the best approach was feedback. So I

started a systematic process of getting student evaluation of the courses and feeding it back to the course teams. The first programme we offered was PERMAMA, Perfectionnement des Maîtres en Mathématiques, which aimed to train all Quebec's secondary teachers in what was then called the new Mathematics.

I like to think that the effectiveness of this programme thirty years ago partly explains Quebec's excellent performance in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA. Canada does well overall in this, but if you break out the provinces separately the performances of Alberta and Quebec are particularly noteworthy.

Parenthetically, Quebec substantially outperformed France in PISA, which was no doubt why the French government condemned PISA as an Anglo-Saxon plot – which must explain why those well-known Anglo-Saxons, the Finns, the Koreans and the Hong Kong Chinese did well too!

Anyway, this emphasis on feedback did not make me popular, because academics do not like to be told that their work is not perfect, but it did create the beginnings of a systematic and evidence-based culture in the new organisation – which later hired other graduates of the Sir George programme. I think of particularly of my fellow student France Henri, who amused me by insisting on calling British Columbia *la Colombie canadienne!*

Since this address is meant to be about Ed. Tech. rather than politics I shouldn't stray too far off course, but I must note that in those early days the Télé-université was a magnet for nationalist intellectuals. By the time I was promoted from Coordonnateur de la technologie éducative to Directeur des Études the 1976 provincial election was upon us. The PQ swept to power, four of my Télé-université colleagues were elected to the National Assembly, and three became ministers. It was amusing seeing these anti-establishment radicals going out to buy suits and getting used to being driven around in limousines.

At about that time too we developed links with Athabasca University, which was another Canadian open university in the making. Our two institutions were given a contract by the Department of Communications, Canada, to evaluate the educational experiments then being conducted on the Hermes Communications Technology Satellite.

This too was an interesting experience. Most people involved with the project were obsessed with the satellite's interactive capabilities but I seem to recall that our evaluation showed that it really performed most usefully as a very high broadcast tower. I think the interactive capability of satellites really had to wait for the Internet and asynchronous communication to realise its full potential. Given the interactive habits we have all now acquired, the time delay in satellite communication is a pain in a conversation.

This contact with Athabasca University led indirectly to my appointment as its Vice-President for Learning Services in 1978. It was when I moved to Alberta that, to my shame, I dropped out of the Sir George – now Concordia – Ed. Tech. programme. Somehow, doing a thesis on the introduction of computers into Quebec schools, which I had just started, didn't seem as relevant as getting tucked into my

new job.

Athabasca was fun. The main lesson I took away, which is applicable not just to educational technology but to education systems generally, was that an imperfect decision, implemented consistently, is more productive than a never-ending search for the perfect strategy. In the late 1970s Athabasca was very much a work in progress and in the year before my arrival in Edmonton, the Athabasca Senate seemed to have changed its mind at every meeting about what courses should be developed. I simply insisted we actually go ahead and implement the most recent decisions. Things then took off with a doubling of enrolments every year and some interesting uses of audio-teleconferencing for tutorials.

Athabasca was also my first experience of a learning system with no imposed timetable. You could enrol year round and study at your own pace. We also scored two Canadian firsts: the first Canadian university to accept VISA in payment of fees; and the first Canadian university to offer a degree with no residency requirements. If you could show enough credits and a reasonable programme structure you could get an Athabasca degree without taking any courses from the institution itself. The other universities thought we were mad, but I am proud that we loosened up the system in this way for the many people who were migrating west and picking up credits across Canada as they did so.

One day Sam Smith, the ebullient President of Athabasca, told me that after six years in funny, unconventional institutions like the Télé-université and Athabasca I ought to get a real job in a real university. He put an advertisement for the job of Vice-Rector, Academic at Concordia on my desk and encouraged me to apply. I did and I got it.

This, of course, showed admirable broad-mindedness on Concordia's part because I was by then a dropout from one of its own programmes. Anyway, I moved back to Montreal. In those days the two vice-rectors, academic, divided the faculties between them and mine did not include Education. But I did take a part-time interest in the Ed. Tech. programme and acted as an informal supervisor for two student theses.

I also sustained my interest in distance learning as the programme chairman of what was then the International Council for Correspondence Education. We organised a very successful conference in Vancouver in 1982 and a group of us put through a motion to change the name of the organisation to the International Council for Distance Education, better to reflect the changes taking place and the rapid growth of multi-media distance learning.

My time at Concordia as vice-rector was an important period of professional growth. It was there, under the wise guidance of Rector John O'Brien, that I really learned about the leadership, management and administration of universities. It was exciting to foster academic innovation with very little money and to beat McGill to the academic draw when it came to introducing programmes in new areas – as Sir George had done with Ed. Tech. a decade earlier.

It was all good preparation for moving to Laurentian University as President in 1984. The road between

Montreal and Sudbury is a well-travelled academic highway and I am delighted that Judith Woodsworth, having done an outstanding job at Laurentian, has travelled the route in the other direction to become Rector of Concordia. I wish her well.

In terms of educational technology, Laurentian was my first direct contact with a dual-mode university. This is distance education jargon for a university that teaches both on campus and at a distance. I guess with the growth of eLearning most universities now operate in dual mode but it's probably too early to draw any general conclusions about how this is really bedding down.

My own view is that if the aim of distance learning is to increase access and cut costs then dual mode is a tough way of doing it. However, if you simply want to give more flexibility to your existing students and don't care if it makes the university less cost efficient overall, then eLearning is fine.

I left Laurentian in 1990 to go as Vice-Chancellor to the Open University, where I had had my conversion experience 18 years earlier. This was the job I had dreamed of, and to lead that incredible institution for 11 years was a thoroughly exhilarating privilege.

I should have noted earlier that although I dropped out of the Ed. Tech. programme in 1977 I did not stop being a student. I took courses at a distance from the Télé-université, Athabasca and Laurentian. I was already working at the Open University by the time I completed the Diploma in Theology that I had started at Laurentian.

At that point I thought of doing a law degree, but this led to a robust discussion with my wife who concluded by saying, 'if you're so keen to become a student again, why don't you finish the Ed. Tech. degree that you started at Sir George?'

A light went on in my head and I wrote to Concordia asking to be re-admitted to the programme to do the thesis, because I had already done all the coursework and the internship.

I received a sublime letter from the Office of Graduate Studies in response. It said that a) the University didn't re-admit people after such a long gap; that b) that all the courses I had taken in the 1970s were now considered obsolete; but that c) they had looked at my CV and it did seem that I had made some use of my studies and so, as a special favour, they would re-admit me. Concordia is a wonderful, student-friendly institution!

The OU gave me a month's study leave and in October 1995 I came to Montreal for a month, stayed with friends in their basement, and wrote a thesis with the title: The Mega-universities and the Knowledge Media: implications of new technologies for large distance-teaching universities.

I hadn't planned it that way, but I arrived just as the referendum campaign began, experienced a wonderful fall month of sunshine – when I wasn't in the library – and left the day after the 50.5% 'No' vote with the first snow falling.

So this slow learner got his degree and I turned up in person the following spring to receive it. At that time I was officiating at some 15 Open University convocations every year in Europe and it was nice to await my turn as a new Concordia graduate at the back of the hall at Place des Arts .

The thesis was very relevant to my work because a key challenge in running the Open University was to get the introduction of new technologies right. Early in the 1990s the OU student body, which then numbered about 130,000, had done a 180° turn in its attitude to technology. The OU is a very egalitarian institution and the attitude of the powerful student association to technology when I arrived was: ‘unless everyone can have it, no one should have it’. So we had to tread cautiously in making it useful for students to have computers at home – let alone requiring them to do so.

But two years later they were clamouring for the University to move faster. This was partly because, in what some thought was a devious move by the University, we equipped the members of the student association executive with computers at home to help them conduct the business of the association. This got them hooked but the price we paid, which was worth paying, was that if students were unhappy about something the complaints came through to the University much more quickly.

By the mid-1990s I felt that the OU needed to raise its game in integrating the online technologies into the teaching and learning system, so I asked the University Council to approve an additional expenditure of \$20 million from reserves for this purpose. The Deans thought that this was too much to spend on technology whereas some Council members would have given me more – which suggests that I hit it about right.

A formal assessment several years later judged this investment to have been fruitful. During the decade of the 1990s student numbers at the OU grew from 100,000 to 200,000 and by the late 1990s at least 150,000 of them were working with the University online in both administrative and learning applications. I was particularly pleased with the performance of the new Knowledge Media Institute that these funds helped to create. My successor, Brenda Gourley has since built strongly on these foundations. I mention the OpenLearn website, a prime source of self-instructional open educational resources, as one example.

After the OU I spent three very interesting years as head of Education at UNESCO. There I was in the thick of the global campaign to achieve basic education for all but had much less to do with educational technology.

Finally, all this led me to the perfect job, as President of the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, an organisation that has benefited from the inputs of various Concordia Ed. Tech. graduates, David Walker and Clayton Wright being just two of them.

Here I am deeply involved in Ed. Tech. because COL is the world’s only intergovernmental agency whose mission is focused entirely on technology-mediated learning. One of our two sectors, Education,

aims to strengthen formal education systems by promoting technology in Open Schooling, Teacher Education, Higher Education, and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. The other sector, Livelihoods & Health, uses media and technology to improve the income, livelihoods and health of communities and their members.

The purpose of all our work – and COL’s slogan – is Learning for Development. In my view the secret of educational technology, and why it is revolutionary, is that it breaks open education’s iron triangle. Throughout history the challenge of providing education has been to balance three objectives: access, quality, and cost.

Think of these as three vectors making up a triangle. It is an iron triangle because with conventional educational methods you cannot improve on one of these factors without making the others worse. Put many more people in the class and quality will suffer. Provide better learning materials and cost will go up. And so on. This is the basis for the insidious link between quality and exclusivity that has been the bugbear of education for centuries.

But educational technology changes all this. With technology you can have more access, higher quality and lower cost – all at the same time. This is the revolution of distance learning to which I have devoted my career and COL is at the forefront of it.

It is very exciting and rewarding work. I have an excellent team of internationally recruited revolutionaries: Education Specialists who travel the Commonwealth extensively and are backed by a splendid organisational support team both here in Vancouver and in our Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia in New Delhi.

Furthermore, our offices have one of Canada’s best views: over Vancouver Harbour and Stanley Park to the mountains beyond. I shall leave you with that view as I conclude by saying a very personal thank you to Concordia for the Ed. Tech. programme. It has been a life changing and career defining experience for me – and I am sure that many of you can say the same.

I realise that this has been an autobiographical account rather than a learned paper, but maybe a few of the comments I have made about the realities of educational technology will provoke some of you to challenge me. I hope the rest of the conference goes well and I am sorry that I shall not be in Montreal to enjoy it with you.

Thank you.