

Launch of the Open Educational Resource University
Kamloops, BC, Canada

1 November 2013

OERu: What does it mean?

Sir John Daniel

President Shaver; Colleagues:

It is a pleasure to be with you again for the formal birth of this baby that has been gestating in a global womb of collaboration for some years.

What is the significance of this new player on the world higher education scene?

Some of you know the story of the convocation speaker at Yale University who elected to make the four letters of the university's name the structure for his speech. He began with a long disquisition on the importance of Youth. He then tackled 'A' for achievement. When it became clear that his analysis of this second word would be even more tedious, one graduand turned to his neighbour and said, 'thank goodness we are not graduating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology'.

OERu only has four letters and I shall unpack them briefly.

Today's launch of the Open Educational Resource University recalls another great milestone in the history of open education that occurred 44 years ago. It was the inauguration of the Open University that took place, by a nice coincidence, in the week that men first landed on the moon. The world suddenly seemed different.

Open

The address to the new Open University by its founding Chancellor, Lord Crowther, included words that still have the power to inspire us today. He said:

*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." Anyone could try his or her hand, and only failure to progress adequately would be a bar to continuation of studies.

The existing system, for all its expansion, misses and leaves aside a great unused reservoir of human talent and potential. Men and women drop out through failures in the system, through disadvantages of their environment, through mistakes of their own judgement, through sheer bad luck.

*We are open as to **places**. This University has no cloisters - a word meaning closed. Hardly even shall we have a campus. 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.*

Educational

Lord Crowther's comment about ideas brings me nicely to the word 'Educational' in your name. It comes from the Latin *educere*, to lead out. In basing your teaching and learning activities on OER you have an excellent opportunity to treat the minds of your students primarily as fires to be set alight rather than vessels to be filled with the knowledge of just one teacher.

The chances of making this happen will be greater if you use OER developed by teams. Walter Perry, the founding Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, always said that its most important innovation was the development of its courses by teams. Teamwork improves quality and obliges students to grapple with different perspectives on the issues presented.

During my eleven years as vice-chancellor of the Open University I spoke individually to some 45,000 graduands as they crossed the stage at 150 convocation ceremonies. One graduate delighted me by saying, with a mixture of pride and frustration, that after doing a degree at the Open University he couldn't see fewer than six sides to any question. I took this as a huge compliment to our methods.

Resources

At the same time, however, students are the most conservative people in the educational world, which brings me to the word 'Resources'. By inviting people to study through

OER in a more independent manner you are effectively asking them to work harder than students in conventional classrooms and to motivate themselves to study.

Expect such students to be a minority, but we hope for a growing minority as OERu's advantages of flexibility and economy become apparent. Meanwhile, reflect on this passage in a book published two weeks ago by Jeffrey Young, who is the reporter on the MOOCs beat for the US *Chronicle of Higher Education*. His book is titled *Beyond the MOOC Hype: A Guide to Higher Education's High-Tech Disruption*. It includes this passage. I quote:

It's unclear, though, how many students are ready for DIY U. As of the summer of 2013, the number of students actually seeking college credit for MOOCs was minuscule. Colorado State University Global Campus, the first American institution to announce that it was willing to grant credit for a MOOC, still had no takers a year after it announced the option. To be fair, the experiment only involved a single course, on computer science, and the university had not done much to spread the word about the option.

Still, some proponents now admit that takeup has been slower than expected in a variety of experiments. "There isn't some sort of flood of interest," said Richard Garrett, vice president and principal analyst at Eduventures, a consulting company that tracks trends and investments across the education industry. He predicted that numbers would remain low, because most students are more interested in finding a way to pay for a traditional college than to "hack" the system and take online courses in their parents' basements. "It's not going to appeal at scale," he argued. "It will appeal to the select few who are cited in articles as trying to get their degree in one year on some crazy schedule. But I just don't think that's the normal consumer".

You should reflect on that. He was not talking about OERu but you will understand the parallels.

university

Finally, 'university' – even if you do spell it with a small 'u'. I suggest that two principles, one related to ends, the other to means, are universal and therefore central to higher education of quality wherever and however it takes place.

The first principle is simply the academic dogma that 'knowledge is important'. We call this a dogma because you can't prove it. It is an article of faith in academic life. To know is better than not to know. This belief that knowledge is important drives our research activities, our teaching and much of our community service. The belief that knowledge is the common heritage of humankind motivates the whole OER movement. That is the principle related to ends or purposes.

The second principle, related to the first, is about means. How do we pass on to the next generation the belief that knowledge is important? We do it by cultivating in our students an attitude of systematic scepticism.

We must train our students to examine any statement critically, to assess the evidence for and against it, and to make up their own minds whether to accept the statement, reject it, modify it or develop it further. I believe that study through OER also has inherent advantages in this respect.

I commend these two principles to you: ‘knowledge is important’ and ‘inculcate an attitude of systematic scepticism’. As well as being the basis for academic life, the observance of these principles will help the Open Educational Resource university and its partner institutions to separate the wheat from the chaff as new developments come and go.

I wish you well in this exciting endeavour and now I will press a red button to announce to the world that the open education movement has taken another great step forward.

Thank you.

Notes for Second Speech

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Jeffrey R. Young (2013) *Beyond the MOOC Hype: A Guide to Higher Education’s High-Tech Disruption*, The Chronicle of Higher Education.