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Open, Distance and Online Learning: A Brief History

Sir John Daniel

Good morning to you from Paris:

It is a pleasure to introduce your session. I am sorry that I cannot be with you in person but since your topic is distance education it is perhaps appropriate that you are learning at a distance from me this morning. But I am delighted that my colleague Dr. Venkataraman Balaji from the Commonwealth of Learning is with you in Cancun. He knows far more about these subjects than I do.

Professor Jaime Chaire Huerta asked me to give a brief account of the history of open, distance and online learning to start off the day.

My first point is that open and distance learning, or ODL, goes back a long way. The letters that Saint Paul wrote to the young churches around the Mediterranean Sea were an early form of distance learning. His letters were carried by donkeys, read out at churches and discussed by the people with the priests acting as tutors. If you reflect on the growth of the Christian church in the last 2,000 years you have to agree that it was a very successful system.

My second point is that since those days distance education has developed alongside the new technologies that have become available. I note three in particular after the donkeys: namely trains, radio waves and the Internet.

Chancellor Geoffrey Crowther summed this up at the launch ceremony of the UK Open University 45 years ago.

He said: *'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'*.

The steam engine gave the first great boost to open and distance learning by creating railways. Railways then created postal services and almost immediately Isaac Pitman took advantage of reliable mail delivery to teach shorthand by correspondence.

This form of distance education developed strongly over the next hundred years, generating theories such as Holmberg's notion of correspondence education as a 'guided

didactic conversation’, which is just as relevant to online learning today as it was to correspondence education.

The 1970s were next great milestone when distance education took to the radio waves. As Crowther said, ‘the world was caught in a communications revolution’. This was the era of the mass media of radio and television.

The Open University transformed correspondence education into multi-media distance learning. It called it ‘supported open learning’ and ensured that every student had a tutor to help them.

As it developed over the next 40 years the Open University incorporated the successive innovations spawned by the computer into its learning system. It began teaching online in the 1980s and I took one of its first fully online courses myself as a student in the 1990s. I consider that the Open University is probably the most effective example of the use of the Internet for open and distance learning, both in regular credit courses and in MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses.

I’ve now just enrolled in my third MOOC from the Open University’s FutureLearn consortium. MOOCs are a nice example of how computers and networks have increased the power and possibilities of open and distance learning.

But remember that MOOCs usually lack some of the vital ingredients of a good learning system. Many do not permit Holmberg’s ‘guided didactic conversations’ between learners and teachers, and most do not include student assessment and certification.

That brings me to my third point. Putting a course online does not guarantee its quality. Some modern online courses are better than the multi-media distance learning courses of 20 years ago – but many are not as good.

Over the ten years between 1995 and 2004 the UK government assessed the quality of teaching in all its universities, discipline by discipline. This happened before the Open University went fully online: it was then operating a multi-media system of supported open learning with 200,000 students. Yet in these teaching quality assessments the Open University ranked number 5 out of 100 UK universities, one place above Oxford University.

So I stress that achieving quality in open, distance and online learning is not just a matter of using the latest technology. Everything depends on designing the teaching and learning system around the students’ needs. And one of students’ most important needs is to have their learning recognised with credentials. Higher education is not just teaching and learning. The most important power that the state has given to the Universidad Da Vinci is the power to award degrees.

That is the next challenge in the development of MOOCs. MOOCs have taken advantage of advances in computer and telecommunications technologies to reach large numbers of

people spread all over the world. But in most cases MOOCs are still simply information distribution systems. They make possible a one-way broadcast to learners like I am doing now.

But technology can also allow us to include multi-directional communication between learners and teachers during the course and also to include rigorous assessments of student learning leading to qualifications. The open universities have been doing this for years and one reason that the UK Open University scored so well in the assessments of teaching quality was the excellence of its student assessment and certification system.

Let me end with some more comments on MOOCs, because they are a fascinating example of the interaction of technological and social factors in the development of open, distance on online learning.

My key point here is that MOOCs are **not** a revolution in higher education, although they **are** an important milestone in its evolution. Why have MOOCs been so slow to tackle these challenges of interaction and assessment when open universities addressed them years ago? The reason is that the universities that hit the headlines by launching the 2012 wave of MOOCs were selective and exclusive institutions. Harvard University has no interest in diminishing its mystique and exclusiveness by making its degrees widely available.

But Harvard has done us a great service by making online learning respectable. That's why a flock of universities have followed them in offering MOOCs. There are now over 3,000 MOOCs available worldwide.

And while Harvard may not want to put its degree programmes online, other universities are increasingly doing just that. They are learning from the open universities how to provide student support and conduct assessments at scale – which is very good news for increasing access to higher education.

They are also grappling with the challenges of assuring the quality of online learning and I recommend two guides on that subject that I have helped to edit.

The first, published last year, is a *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* that focuses on regular online programmes with student support and assessment. The second, published earlier this year, is a *Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education*. This one addresses quality issues in the newer, less formal components of higher education like MOOCs and Open Educational Resources.

Both these documents are available online and are both Open Educational Resources – so you can do what you like with them: translate them, adapt them and distribute them freely. I commend them to you.

Finally, if you are interested in knowing more about MOOCs I recommend the course called *MOOC on MOOC* being offered by the Commonwealth of Learning and the Indian

Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Dr Balaji, who is with you in Cancun, can tell you more.

I thank you for your attention. It has been a pleasure to address you and I hope that these remarks and the conference generally, will have given you the confidence to get more involved in open, distance and online learning.