

Association of Former Staff Members of UNESCO (AFUS)  
Memory and Future Club

**Open Education for a Closing World**  
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Sir John Daniel  
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Good afternoon: Former Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour to speak for a second time at a debate of AFUS's Memory and Future Club. Last year I joined two colleagues to start a debate with you on the topic, *Sustainable Development Begins with Education*, in which we recalled UNESCO's involvement with the Education for All campaign going back to Jomtien in 1990 and looked forward to its role in the attainment of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Today I am joined by Ian Dennison from UNESCO's Publications and Branding Section and Mathieu Nebra who, with his colleague Pierre Dubuc, conceived the highly successful *Open Classrooms* e-Learning company here in France.

Our title is *Open Education for a Closing World*. Perhaps we named the event too far in advance! We chose the topic when it seemed that trends such as Brexit, Trump and Erdogan would define politics for years to come. I mean the tendency to erect barriers, oppose immigration and denigrate intergovernmental institutions and alliances.

I am delighted that France may be proving us wrong. President Macron's spectacular victories in the presidential and legislative elections mark a turning point, not just for France but for Europe and the world. In other countries, even liberal politicians are often carefully ambiguous about issues such as immigration, free trade and international collaboration, whereas President Macron has been uncompromisingly unambiguous on these topics. The results suggest that French voters want to give liberal policies another chance and this has energised people, particularly young people, around the world. I am proud that under Prime Minister Trudeau my own country, Canada, has nailed its colours to the same mast. Our government also has a cabinet of 15 men and 15 women!

But we still have a fight on our hands. Closing borders and erecting barriers to human movement has been accompanied by more insidious trends. Some speak of today's world as 'post-truth' and 'post-trust' era. Social media make it possible for each of us to live in a cocoon of lies. A key principle of populist rhetoric, of both left and right, is that you can't trust the elites, you can't trust experts and you can't trust institutions.

The thread through today's session is that we can make it easier for people to find the truth and decide whom to trust by making education more open. Throughout history universities have been rather closed places. Ancient universities often have cloisters, a word derived from the Latin for 'closed'.

But some universities opened up in radical ways in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The UK created The Open University, which abolished academic prerequisites for entry and teaches at a distance

on a large scale. Its slogan is ‘open to people, open to places, open to methods, open to ideas’.

Thirty years later the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, pioneered another type of openness by putting its lecturers’ teaching notes on the Web for all to see. UNESCO immediately seized on this as an opportunity to facilitate higher education in the developing world and convened a forum in 2002 to take the idea forward.

That meeting coined the term ‘Open Educational Resources’ or OER, to describe educational materials that can be freely shared, copied, mixed and modified by anyone.

Meanwhile others had been working to put a proper legal framework around these freedoms. It’s called Creative Commons. It is not a substitute for Copyright, but if you see this sign on a document you know that the author has agreed to make it freely available for anyone use under certain conditions. This particular sign tells you that the only two conditions set by this author that if you copy, distribute or modify the work you should, first, acknowledge where it came from. That’s what BY means. And you should share your new version equally freely – that’s what SA means: Share Alike.

With this impetus from MIT, UNESCO and Creative Commons the production and use of OER grew steadily over the next decade. In 2012 UNESCO held a World Congress on OER to assess progress and to bring this important development to the attention of governments.

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić and I were closely involved in organising the Congress. In particular, we had an exciting time holding policy forums in UNESCO’s five regions, where we brought together government people with producers and users of OERs. The focus was on refining a document to be presented to the Congress urging governments to take advantage of OER for advancing their educational agendas.

Its final and key statement was that ‘governments can create substantial benefits for their citizens by ensuring that educational materials developed with public funds be made available under open licenses in order to maximize the impact of the investment.’ We were delighted when this text was adopted by acclamation at the World Congress as the Paris Declaration.

The production and use of OER is expanding steadily, not least through governments such as my own in British Columbia that have launched a programme of ‘open textbooks’, which allows students to download free textbooks for many courses.

This year UNESCO and Slovenia have joined forces to hold a second World Congress on Open Educational Resources in Ljubljana in September. This will enable us to take stock of the progress made in a more systematic way. We should also note that OER are mentioned in the Incheon Declaration as an important tool for advancing tertiary education.

I have mentioned open admissions and freely available learning materials as two examples of open education. Let me finish with a word on MOOCs – *Massive Open Online Courses* or, in Québec, *Cours en ligne ouvert et massif* – les CLOMs.

These began in 2012 when a few universities took advantage of the Internet to offer simple courses to people all over the world at no cost. This created a boom and today there are

thousands of MOOCs available on all conceivable subjects and in many languages. I'm a fan of MOOCs myself and have taken 20 of them on subjects as diverse as *Strategies for Successful Ageing*, *The Controversies of British Imperialism* and *Challenging Wealth and Income Inequality*. They are ideal for semi-retired folk like me because they are free and you can follow them wherever you have an Internet connection.

I'll now turn this over to my colleagues. Clearly the statement in the Paris declaration that 'educational materials developed with public funds be made available under open licenses' posed a challenge for UNESCO itself, since our many publications are developed with public funds. Ian Dennison will tell you how UNESCO has risen to that challenge.

I talked about MOOCs, but they are just the tip of the huge iceberg of online learning. Mathieu Nebra will share the experience of creating an online learning system that is reaching millions of clients.

Thank you