Countering post-truth and post-trust attitudes through online and offline pedagogy

Sir John Daniel
Formerly: Vice-Chancellor (1990-2001), UK Open University
odlsirjohn@gmail.com

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić
Formerly: Head, Higher Education, UNESCO
suvalictrumbic@gmail.com

Abstract

The current post-truth, post-trust and post-factual era is inimical to the core values of higher education such as objective knowledge, academic openness and international collaboration. One element of universities' responses should be to help students to position themselves individually on the attitudinal continua of open vs. closed and inclusive vs. exclusive, which are more salient today than the old left-right divide. We review the pedagogies that can be used for such purposes, which go back at least to Blaise Pascal and rely more on debate and discussion than on didactic teaching. We then ask how online learning and teaching can be used for this purpose, drawing *inter alia* on observations of MOOCs learners.

Introduction

The current post-truth, post-trust and post-factual era is inimical to the core values of higher education such as objective knowledge, academic openness and international collaboration. Surges of nationalism, nativism and populism aim to make societies more closed. A striking example was the legislation passed in Hungary in April, 2017 threatening to remove the right to operate from the Central European University, which was set up expressly as an 'island of liberal thought' to teach 'the values of open society: free minds, free politics, free institutions' in former communist states (The Guardian, 2017). This and similar events, such as attempts to shut down the European University St Petersburg (Public Sociology Laboratory, 2017) run counter to higher education's historic commitment to global openness and rigorous knowledge as the basis for human progress. Such political trends discount the importance of experts, elites and internationalism. They are particularly challenging to higher education institutions (HEIs) in today's digital world because the Internet and social media make untruths and 'alternative facts' as readily as verifiable knowledge.

Our first section examines the trends that have brought us to this 'post-truth' and 'post-trust' era, noting the impact of populism of both left and right. As a result, the old left-right political spectrum is no longer as salient as continua between open/closed and inclusive/exclusive.

In the second section, we argue that notwithstanding this dispiriting context - indeed because of it - humankind will depend greatly on HEIs for its healthy development into the 21st century. The inclusion of higher education in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals expresses a global consensus on its importance (UNESCO, 2015; 2016). But how should higher education respond to this new context? The core objectives of HEIs are to stand up for evidence, facts and the truth (Glover, 2017). University graduates should acquire an attitude of systematic scepticism. This requires curricula that put less emphasis on didactic teaching and more on debate, both online and face to face.

In a final section, argue that educational technology can play an important role in furthering these aims. In particular, the various trends towards openness in academe (e.g. in software creation, access to research results and the sharing of educational resources) can be powerful forces for nourishing diversity and countering trends to close down debate. Moreover, while the impact of social media can sometimes be baleful, they may be turned to advantage if students use them to understand and assess divergent points of view on diverse issues.

The Post-truth and Post-Trust Era

Each year the Oxford dictionaries choose a 'word of the year'. For 2016 that word was 'post-truth'. They define post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Their example is the sentence: "In this era of post-truth politics, it is easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire."

Loss of trust in institutions is another feature of our times. This can be a gradual process. Over 50 years Americans' trust in government has declined from 80% to 20%. Trust in government is one of many measures that the Economist Intelligence Unit conflates to produce its annual democracy index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). In 2016, for the first time, the US no longer ranked among the world's 19 'full democracies', but has been demoted to 'flawed democracy'.

In his book, 'Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order', Francis Fukuyama (1995) demonstrated persuasively that the economic, social and cultural success of nations relates directly to the trust that their people have in each other and in their institutions. Some countries flourish because strangers learned to trust one another when signing contracts, allowing them to do deals outside the circles of family, tribal or in-group kinship relied upon in low-trust societies.

The rector of the University of Oslo, Ole Petter Ottersen, argues that universities should be trust building as well as truth seeking. "In our age of turbulence", he argues, "these two words – trust and truth – are inextricably intertwined" (Ottersen, 2016).

Populism is the political expression of these trends away from truth and trust. It combines nostalgia for the past, post-truth rhetoric, lack of trust in experts and institutions, a desire to divide and, above all, hostility to whatever can be labelled elite, usually by an accuser from another elite.

Populism can develop on either side of the conventional left/right political spectrum. Its common factor is an attempt to mobilise ordinary people against elites that are perceived to be self-serving. Right-wing populism also accuses these elites of coddling a third group, usually immigrants and other minorities (Judis, 2016).

Trump and Sanders stood for the right-wing and left-wing versions of populism in the 2016 US election campaign. In Europe, the right wing has the National Front in France and UKIP in Britain, while the left wing has Podemos and Syriza in Spain and Greece.

Events in Hungary are an alarming example of the threat that populist politics poses to HEIs. On April 4, 2017 the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, pushed a bill through parliament aimed at closing the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, a prestigious graduate university with an international mission and staff and students from over 100 countries. Transforming it into a Hungarian institution with a different name will, in Orban's view, eliminate nefarious influences from abroad. Academics around the world have reacted angrily to this blatant attack on academic freedom and internationalism. The European Union has weighed in and the CEU's Rector, Michael Ignatieff, has pledged to keep the university and its values alive at all costs. The matter is now before the courts,

but unless it is resolved the CEU will have to move to another country. It has received offers from potential hosts.

We note two other symptoms of the threats posed to truth and trust when leaders like Orban try to close their societies to external influence. First, 'expert' was used as a pejorative term in the 2016 referendum and election contests in the UK and the USA. British Leave-the-EU campaigners told people to disbelieve expert projections about the impact of Brexit, whether from economists, newspaper columnists or diplomats. In the USA, the Trump campaign denigrated the work of the intelligence services and the Bureau of Labour Statistics. The business of higher education is to produce experts in all fields of human endeavour. We must teach them use their expertise confidently, fearlessly and persuasively.

A second, less obvious, symptom of post-truth and post-trust thinking is loss of belief in progress. Higher education is grounded in a belief that change is welcome because, on the whole, it is for the better. The students in our HEIs believe that, by pursuing truth, they will operate from a higher base of knowledge and skill than we did, whether in dentistry, ecology, history or philosophy. They expect that their more advanced knowledge and skills will create a better world.

Although they do not always call them 'the good old days', many contemporary politicians hark back to a time when things were supposedly better. Wisely, they don't usually specify when that time was, because surveys show that most people think the world was at its best when they were in their early twenties. Dating the good old days is subjective. Nevertheless, nostalgia has resurfaced in a big way. People and movements are reaching back to an illusory past and trying to chart the future through a form of retreat (Kelly, 2016).

There are two antidotes to this: facts and knowledge. 'Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory', so higher education must be a good memory for humanity. All graduates should leave their HEI with a grasp of the broad sweep of human development. In a recent summary, Swedish historian Johan Norberg documents the enormous progress achieved, not just over previous centuries but also over the decades since the badly remembered 'good old days'. His book, 'Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future', is a powerful antidote to the temptation to generalise from the latest news report about a famine, a war or the health challenges of modern life and conclude how awful things are today (Norberg, 2016). Arguing that 'the Good Old Days are now', Norberg documents long-term trends for the better in vital areas of life all over the world. These underlying trends are persistent and will continue despite occasional setbacks or bad choices.

However, populist campaigns are usually advance warning of political crises. There are many such today and our higher education graduates will have to live through them and solve them.

How should Higher Education respond?

Given the challenges we have outlined, humankind will depend crucially on universities for its healthy development into the 21st century. One indicator of the consensus on their importance is that whereas the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 were limited to basic education, the Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030 has higher education as one of the targets of Goal 4, namely: "by 2030, ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education" (UNESCO, 2015).

As regards what HEIs teach, degrees are a useful foundation, providing evidence that a graduate has learned to think, but today's hybrid jobs require extra skills. People must learn to dissect post-truth

discourse and post-trust attitudes. They should cultivate an attitude of systematic scepticism and they must position themselves on the continua between open/closed and inclusive/exclusive that are successors to the older left/right political distinctions.

To quote Ottersen again: "what role can a truth-seeking university play in an era characterised as 'post-truth'?" His answer is that: "Faced with the prospect of a post-factual society, universities have to re-establish a respect for objective truth and powerful arguments – through our educational programmes and through our public outreach. We have to create many more arenas for debate – arenas that are open and inclusive so as to give a voice to those who feel left behind too" (Ottersen, 2016).

Pollsters noted that in the 2016 political campaigns, in both the UK and the US, university graduates were much less likely than those without degrees to support populist positions. This suggests that higher education, in and of itself, acts as an antidote to post-truth and post-trust thinking. However, HEIs should offer greater diversity in what they teach and how they enable people to learn.

In its report, 'Culture at Work', the British Council (2013) showed that the abilities to demonstrate respect for others and to understand different cultural contexts and viewpoints – as well as knowledge of a foreign language – are prized in the workplace. The report urges that HEIs should do more to develop intercultural fluency by teaching communications skills, giving students opportunities to gain international experience and developing international research partnerships.

The art of opening and changing minds was articulated by the philosopher Blaise Pascal over 300 years ago, when he observed that: 'people are generally better persuaded by the reasons they have themselves discovered than by those which come into the mind of others' (Quartz Media, 2016). Pascal's proposal for how to do this is worth quoting in full:

'When we wish to correct with advantage, and to show another that he errs, we must notice from what side he views the matter, for on that side it is usually true, and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false. He is satisfied with that, for he sees that he was not mistaken, and that he only failed to see all sides. Now, no one is offended at not seeing everything; but one does not like to be mistaken, and that perhaps arises from the fact that man naturally cannot see everything, and that naturally he cannot err on the side he looks at, since the perception of our senses are always true.'

In sum, HEIs should be more explicit in challenging their students to position themselves along the continua of open/closed and inclusive/exclusive and to understand the positions taken by others. We should not tell students where to position themselves but, as Ottersen said, create arenas for debate where they must address this issue personally, possibly arguing for different positions, whether they agree with them or not, rather as students do in Model United Nations simulations.

Whatever the positions that individual students take, universities as institutions must stand for openness. Their motto could be the 50-year old slogan of The Open University: 'open to people; open to places; open to methods; open to ideas'. Their challenge is to maintain openness in the post-truth era when politics can have such a negative influence on higher education policies and practice, as we can see in states like Hungary and Turkey.

How can Technology help?

Finally, what role can educational technology play in achieving the aims we have outlined? Online learning is a powerful tool for opening up institutional reach, notably to older part-time students. By

making people more aware of their thinking processes, online study helps them to be more purposeful in pursuing lifelong learning, which makes for better persistence and outcomes.

For HEIs in the post-truth era, technology is both part of the problem and also part of the solution. Access to digital resources can turn up 'alternative facts' just as readily as verifiable knowledge. However, technology can also greatly facilitate the debates in which students should engage in order to develop their own positions and attitudes of scepticism. It can also traverse national borders and offer quality content and verifiable knowledge even where nationalistic policies attempt to shut out ideas from the external world.

The combination of online technology with the philosophy of openness, as exemplified in open source software, open access to research findings and open educational resources (OER), is of special relevance to HEIs. Target 4.3 of the Incheon Declaration cited earlier (UNESCO, 2015) refers explicitly (item 43) to OER as a tool for promoting higher education, noting that 'a well-established properly regulated tertiary education system, supported by technology, open educational resources and distance education can increase access, equity, quality and relevance.'

Both authors were involved in preparing UNESCO's 2012 World Conference on Open Educational Resources and in drafting of the Paris Declaration on OER that it adopted by acclamation (UNESCO, 2012). Noting that the wider use of OER can also facilitate the achievement of UN goals in many areas, the Declaration argued that 'governments can create substantial benefits for their citizens by ensuring that educational materials developed with public funds be made available under open licences (with any restrictions they deem necessary) in order to maximize the impact of the investment.'

Although the Paris Declaration did not include any formal monitoring mechanism, reports show that the use of OER by both teachers and learners is increasing steadily (University Affairs, 2017). OER may not have not have permeated academe as rapidly as open access to research publications, but open textbooks are very popular with students and substantially cut the cost of higher education in those jurisdictions that make them available. A second UNESCO Conference on Open Educational Resources is scheduled to occur in Ljubljana, Slovenia in September 2017.

Finally, social media can be a rich resource for following Pascal's advice and finding out how people with other opinions see a question. Most MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), particularly those on the FutureLearn platform, make extensive use of social media. Indeed, FutureLearn calls itself 'a social learning environment at its heart'. Both authors have taken FutureLearn courses, where discussion threads attract thousands of contributions, which course assistants review and summarise regularly.

MOOCs, and distance learning courses more generally, are usually developed by teams of academics and professionals. This teamwork tends to ensure that issues are presented in a balanced way from a variety of perspectives and also to filter out 'alternative facts'. One of the authors (Daniel) was very proud to be told by a graduating student that 'after studying with the Open University I can't see less than six sides to any question!'

Conclusion

We have argued that the post-truth and post-trust attitudes engendered by populist politics pose a serious challenge to higher education. HEIs must re-establish a respect for objective truth and powerful arguments and put more of the onus on students to develop their own antibodies to alternative facts through lively debate. Evolving educational technologies can contribute greatly to this work. The importance of higher education to human development will continue to increase and

the momentum to greater openness and international communication is unstoppable.

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