AFUS – Memory and Future Club
Summary of video interview between Neda Ferrier and Sir John Daniel
August 10th, 2020

In the early months of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic obliged schools and universities worldwide to send students home and attempt to continue to educate them there. How did they manage the move to emergency online teaching? What are the implications for the future?

Neda Ferrier (NF):
First, Sir John, a personal question: how are you living out the pandemic?

Sir John Daniel (JD):
In mid-March, when it became clear that COVID-19 posed a serious threat, I was in Paris. The airlines began to cancel flights so I returned home to Vancouver, where I am now. British Columbia, Canada, is a pleasant place to endure COVID-19 and, after UNESCO's International Bureau of Education asked me to do an article for its magazine *Prospects* on 'Education and the COVID-19 pandemic' (https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09464-3), I became rather busy. Thousands of people accessed my article, leading to further invitations to discuss how education systems are coping with the COVID-19 challenge.

NF:
COVID-19 obliged schools and universities around the world to switch to distance and online teaching almost overnight. What is your assessment of the situation: its benefits and its shortcomings?

JD:
I distinguish between schools and universities, because the challenges and impacts are quite different. Although the schools, what they call the K-to-12 level in north America, did the best they could, the experience showed that online and distance education is not well suited to children. This became very clear for elementary school children, but online teaching also proved challenging for secondary school pupils. The closures reminded us that schools are important in children's lives for reasons that go far beyond academic learning.

Schools are where children form their social groups and sometimes receive support and meals that they might not get at home. Even where parents are available to educate their youngsters at home, their own backgrounds may not equip them to be substitute teachers. Many households lack the necessary learning materials, not least the information and communications technology required for learning online. Inequalities are a burning issue today and COVID-19 has made them worse. The poor have been hit harder than the rich by loss of jobs and income. Depriving children of in-person schooling widens these gaps within our societies.

Re-opening schools in autumn 2020 is controversial. Parents are scared that schools will multiply infections, whereas public health authorities in most countries judge that the risk from COVID-19 is much smaller than the harm that would be done to children by continuing school closures.

The situation in higher education is different. There is no reason in principle why university students, who are grown-ups, cannot learn at a distance. After all, millions of people already study successfully with the various open universities that offer online and distance learning around the world. But the situation in the spring of 2020 was, of course, unprecedented. Institutions with no tradition of online teaching had to adopt it, almost overnight, while students had to quit campus, leaving behind the social and cultural extras associated with attending university.

In the event, most universities surprised themselves by how well they made the switch, although none claimed that they did a perfect job. Most students, however, thought that they were getting a substandard product and are not keen to repeat the experience. As the autumn 2020 term begins some students are petitioning for face-to-face teaching, others are asking for fees' reductions if teaching is to be online, and yet others talk of postponing study until things settle down.

This creates difficult situations for universities because how they will teach depends more on the evolution of COVID-19 than on their own planning. The pandemic is far from over. Countries that thought they had mastered it are seeing new outbreaks and in others, like Brazil, India and the United States, it is still out of control.

Educators must learn from the 2020 experience and build resilience into their schools and universities so that, in future crises, all institutions have the flexibility to teach in different ways while maintaining quality.

NF:
Have the open universities that were already operating online helped the campus universities to make the transition to emergency distance teaching?

JD:
When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in March most universities were scrambling so fast to close their campuses and get online that there was little time for creating partnerships. But there were examples where it did happen.

In New Zealand the *Open Polytechnic* made its online learning platform available to 20 other institutions to help them make the switch. This was not the first time such a challenge had occurred in that country, because in 1948 there was a polio epidemic which closed down the whole school system. At that time New Zealand simply expanded the operations of its national correspondence school to serve the whole country and it worked well.

Another interesting example is the French company *Open Classrooms*, which was created in 1999 by two schoolboys who were then aged 12 and 13. It is now a large online learning

organisation operating worldwide. During the pandemic it enabled 120 other institutions to use its courses to reach 120,000 students online.

Meanwhile the *UK Open University (UKOU)* expanded some of its own operations to address the issues of the pandemic. Its *FutureLearn* offshoot, which offers Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) created a course: *COVID-19: Tackling the Novel Coronavirus,* which I took myself – along with 200,000 other learners. It is also offering a course, *How to Teach Online,* that 30,000 people in 170 countries have followed.

NF:
We are likely to see new outbreaks of COVID-19 and online learning will become the new normal. What are the implications for open universities?

JD:
First, I suspect that many explorations of partnerships are happening now as open universities try to help conventional universities do a better job online, either by offering them expertise or ready-made courses.

Second, institutions like the UKOU are expanding their programming to meet people's needs for learning new topics, which range wider than conventional university courses. Some 14% of the UK's adult population enrolled for a free online course during the pandemic, which is a huge number. As a result the demand for the UKOU's short courses on skills has exploded and a course on *Managing your Money* attracted 25,000 people in just two weeks.

A trend that will certainly last beyond the pandemic is the offering of shorter courses. People want courses they can complete quickly and gain a certificate. These are often called micro-credentials and we shall see many more of them.

NF:
Quality online learning requires good logistics and technology. Is it sustainable in developing countries?

JD :
All countries must become more resilient for future crises. This means investing in Internet infrastructure and facilitating the acquisition of computers by ordinary people. COVID-19 has shown us that we cannot afford a digital divide. But, to return to my earlier comment, there is no substitute for face-to-face teaching for children. Schools must be ready with alternatives in emergencies, but the aim must be to re-open the classrooms as soon as possible. Higher education must make its online teaching more effective before it can become a long-term option.