

Charles Sturt University
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Opening Think Tank of Visit

Global Perspectives on ODL Partnerships

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Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to join you for these days at Charles Sturt University. Thank you also for being located in Wagga Wagga, a name that sounds authentically Australian to my friends and family in Vancouver. Vancouver was cold and wet last week so dipping into your long days of warm summer for a few days is a treat.

This is a Think Tank on CSU's strategy for developing online learning and you've asked me to set the scene for a discussion of partnerships in open, distance and online learning, or ODL. In a minute I shall reflect on partnerships that I have experienced or observed in four decades of engagement with ODL and share some observations.

I make three preliminary observations, first to introduce myself; second about my concepts of ODL; and third to recommend some useful resources.

My first contact with ODL was my conversion on the road to Milton Keynes - the three-month internship that I spent at the infant Open University in 1972. This internship was a requirement of the part-time Masters in Ed. Tech. that I was doing as a sideline to my day job teaching Metallurgical Engineering, in French, at the University of Montreal. That summer at the UKOU was a life changing experience. I returned to Canada 'no longer at ease in the old dispensation' - to quote T.S.Eliot - and was lucky enough to be able join Québec's Télé-université soon afterwards and re-orient my career to ODL.

Second, I find it useful to divide both the ends and the means of ODL into three elements.

The Iron Triangle

Regarding ends or purposes I give you the iron triangle. Most educators have three aims: they want to increase access to education, to improve its quality, and to reduce its cost.

Represent these three vectors by a triangle. These aims require you to extend it like this. The simple point is that you cannot do this with classroom teaching methods. Concentrate on changing any one of the vectors and you will make the others worse. Only the use of technology can extend the triangle in the way we want - which is why you are discussing more use of online learning at CSU.

The Three-legged Stool

As regards means and methods of ODL I give you the three-legged stool.

It is helpful to identify three components of distance education: learning materials, student support and administration/logistics. Modern learning management systems integrate the IT support for these three functions into a more or less seamless whole, but I believe it is still useful to distinguish them conceptually.

The point, which your strategy document emphasises, is that good distance learning requires that each of the three functions be carried out with effectiveness and quality.

Useful resources

My third preliminary observation is to recommend four helpful resources for implementing your online strategy.

The first is Tony Bates magisterial work *Teaching in a Digital Age*, published earlier this year, which you can download free from BC Campus. I cannot praise it too highly.

Second is a *Guide to Quality in Online Learning* that I helped to edit two years ago. This also is free to download, as is another *Guide to Quality in Post-Traditional Online Higher Education* that I worked on last year. This one deals with new forms of online courses and qualifications such as MOOCs and open badges.

Finally, I recently wrote a long essay that will soon be published as an Open Educational Resource by Contact North. It is titled: *Making Sense of Blended Learning: Treasuring an Older Tradition or Finding a Better Future?* Don Olcott has a copy. The paper's aim is to help you reach optimal combinations of face-to-face teaching, purely online learning and blended learning.

Now let me turn to partnerships.

Partnerships with government

I turn first to partnerships with governments. All universities have relationships with their governments involving funding (often less and less of it) and regulation (some would say more and more of it), but some ODL institutions sometimes go well beyond those links. Because of their national reach and scale, ODL institutions can help governments achieve particular educational and training objectives in a way that campus institutions can't.

Quebec's Télé-université provides a good example. Its first programme was PERMAMA, Perfectionnement des Maîtres en Mathématiques. In the 1970s the Quebec government wanted to retrain all its secondary mathematics teachers in what was then called the 'new maths'.

This would have been a hit-and-miss process taking years if all the teachers had had to take regular or summer courses on university campuses. But by creating distance learning courses backed up by a regional school-based network of tutorial and mutual support it was possible for teachers throughout that vast province to acquire the new knowledge and

skills in a short time. I believe that the effects of that crash programme of upgrading all teachers are still evident today.

If you take the Mathematics results in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, and break out Quebec as if it were a country it not only leads Canada, but is right up there with the usual high performers on PISA: Taiwan, Finland, Hong Kong and Korea. I cannot prove that this good performance is due to PERMAMA and its follow-up programmes decades ago, but the correlation is telling.

Twenty years later, when I was at the UK Open University, the Government commissioned us in a similar way to offer a crash programme in IT skills for teaching to hundreds of thousands of teachers.

Although I am no longer close to the action there, I observe that there is much less collaboration between the UKOU and UK governments today. This is largely because, in the words of my fellow Vancouverite Professor Tony Bates, the higher education policy of the current UK government is to 'turn the clock back to the 1950's' by focussing on elite institutions, full-time students, and a greater role for the private sector.

The one exception to this generalisation is that a few years ago the UK government strongly encouraged the UKOU to proceed with its FutureLearn MOOC initiative, although the OU declined to accept any state funding for it. But before I talk about FutureLearn I should comment more generally about partnerships between ODL institutions and media organisations.

Partnerships with media organisations

Probably the most historic of all partnerships involving ODL institutions is the partnership between the UKOU and the BBC, which goes back to its foundation.

I always enjoy quoting from the speech that Lord Geoffrey Crowther, the OU's founding chancellor, made at its inaugural ceremony in 1969. Talking about teaching methods he said:

*"We are open as to **methods**. Our original name was the University of the Air. I am glad that it was abandoned, for even the air would be too confining. We start, it is true, in dependence on, and in grateful partnership with, the British Broadcasting Corporation. But already the development of technology is marching on, and I predict that, before long, actual broadcasting will form only a small part of the University's output.*

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.

It has been said that the addiction of the traditional university to the lecture room is a

sign of its inability to adjust to the development of the printing press. That, of course, is unjust. But at least no such reproach will be levelled at the Open University in the communications revolution. 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."

This was nearly 50 years ago and Crowther was prescient. His statement resonates with your planning exercise for online learning at CSU.

In fact broadcasting was never a large part of the Open University's output as a proportion of students' study time - the correspondence texts and assignments were far more important. But, of course, broadcasting put the OU on the map as nothing else could have done. In the 1970s every British home with a television received OU TV programmes in black and white in prime time. This created wonderment abroad, furnished a rich vein of material for comedians, but also acted as a powerful recruitment tool for the OU.

Naturally, as video-recorders became available and TV channels multiplied the arrangements changed. During my time as VC in the 1990s we reached the point where the OU's annual allocation of funds to the BBC only covered the fixed costs of studios and staff, with nothing left over for programming. I thought this might be the end of the partnership, but it evolved into something different, the creation of high-level general interest series, such as *The Frozen Planet*, that bring the OU name a vast worldwide audience.

Today the UKOU's most significant partnerships are with the nearly 100 universities and specialised institutes worldwide that are part of its FutureLearn consortium.

I confess an interest because I am taking my ninth and tenth FutureLearn courses as a student at the moment. I find them excellent. My most recent course was from the University of Auckland and before that I followed an inspiring course about the mind from the University of Cape Town. I am sure that we will discuss MOOCs later this week, but let me say now that, partly thanks to the global footprint that the UKOU gets through the BBC, it is one of the few universities that can honestly claim to recoup its investment in free media such as MOOCs with figures to prove it.

Partnerships for going online

I turn now to partnerships for going online.

I go back to my three-legged stool and the three elements of distance education: learning materials, student support and administration/logistics. Start with learning materials.

We are seeing the beginnings of a new kind of partnership, where universities import into their programmes courses prepared by organisations outside the university. Why would universities, which usually pride themselves in doing their own teaching with their own faculty, want to bring in courses from other organisations?

There are two reasons. The first is the concern that many university courses and programmes are not well matched to the workplaces that students will encounter. One way to address this problem is to bring people in from industry, either in person or online, to teach courses related directly to employment opportunities and the situations that they will find in their future workplaces.

The second reason is that most universities, like CSU, now want to do more of their teaching online and some feel that they need outside help for this.

This help may begin by focussing on the technical systems supporting the online courses, which may be a simple vendor-client relationship. But sometimes it extends to seeking assistance in the development of the processes for course development and management. Once all those processes are in place it is a small step to insert online courses produced by the external partner into the teaching and learning system. This trend is at an early stage. Universities that have taken industrial partners usually thought long and hard before they took this step. I give two examples.

The first comes from the Pearson Company, which is a big industrial player in this field. A colleague there told me that Pearson's negotiations with Arizona State University involved 50 meetings before the agreement to collaborate was reached.

The second example comes from Academic Partnerships, a company that works with nearly 50 US universities, mostly public, and some outside the US. Their experience is that, on average, it takes eighteen months of discussion and negotiation before agreement on a collaborative venture is reached.

I shall identify three types of partnership aimed at helping universities go online, although they often overlap.

Digital enablers

In the first type the industry partner acts primarily as a 'digital enabler', that is to say it helps the university with the technological aspects of going online.

MOOCs are the most prominent example. Companies such as Coursera, edX and FutureLearn were created in order to make it possible for universities to offer online courses to large numbers of learners – hundreds of thousands of learners – all over the world. Back in 2012 the technological capacity and know-how for doing this were beyond the reach of all but the largest open universities.

These companies charge universities fees for their services and millions of learners like me have taken the MOOCs that have resulted. The same principle applies to digital enablers that work with universities to put their regular credit programmes online.

But things have moved on since 2012. Technology has continued to develop and credit courses do not involve the very large numbers of the early MOOCs. Rather than using a big proprietary platform, universities and their partners can construct an online learning

ecosystem using various readily available technologies. Numerous learning management systems, some built on open source software, are available. The social media provide many tools for student interaction and course videos can be viewed on YouTube.

Teaching-learning systems

This leads to the second type of partnership. Although mastering the technology itself may now be less of a challenge, universities wishing to go online at scale quickly find that they need to develop more systematic approaches to course development and student support.

These approaches are not new in themselves because open universities, which offer distance learning at scale, have been using them for nearly fifty years. However, campus universities usually need help with setting up such systems, which are organised very differently from normal campus teaching. Teaching on campus is primarily a task carried out individually by members of faculty, but online teaching requires division of labour and teamwork.

Whether they are attempting to put the whole institution online or just a selection of programmes, universities can find it helpful to have a partner that can assist them in establishing and operating the systems for course development, student support and student assessment. The university and the industry partner then share the tuition fees, depending on the relative costs of their respective activities in the partnership.

Universities do not usually like paying out money to partners for their teaching activities, but they do so more happily if the partnership results in a large increase in student enrolments. For example, some of the partners offering the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) with the Academic Partnerships Company have seen enrolments grow by a factor of ten.

One spin-off of these partnerships is a higher quality of teaching. The industry-university collaboration usually introduces more systematic processes for developing courses that include carefully crafted objectives and a tight relationship between objectives and student assessment. Systems of student support that involve numbers of part-time tutors can, if properly managed, be more effective than the rather haphazard arrangements for supervising students on most campuses.

As a result, after a long period when comparisons of student performance between campus and online learning showed little difference, the performance of online students is now pulling ahead in well-organised partnerships.

Independently managed courses

In the third type of partnership, which is very new, the partner offers the university ready-made courses and manages them as well. These are usually short courses well suited to online learning. The course topics are usually closely related to workplace needs.

It is easiest to describe this development through an example, the ‘Specialisations’ offered by the company Academic Partnerships. Specialisations are short (e.g. 4 week) self-contained and fully online courses.

These are commissioned from ‘provider’ universities and offered through ‘host’ universities, often in other countries. The host university agrees to charge a small additional fee across the board so that all its students can take one or more of these short specialisations. The company manages students’ progress through the courses electronically from start to finish (registration, pacing, assignment correction and final assessment). The host university is then notified of successful course completions and includes the specialisation(s) on the students’ transcripts, either as an integral part of their study programme at the host institution or as an optional extra.

We stress that this model of course export and import is still in its infancy, although a number of such provider-company-host partnerships will be launched next year. If the model proves successful it will have various advantages. First, it will enable host universities to offer their students short, employment-related online courses without the necessity of acquiring the know-how and subject expertise to develop and operate such courses themselves.

Second, because the courses are managed almost entirely electronically, costs can be low if economies of scale are achieved.

It will be interesting to follow these developments over the coming years. If universities that partner with course providers in this way find that it increases their popularity with students and their reputation with employers, then we can expect other universities to follow suit.

To be continued

I’ll stop there. There are many other partnerships that we could discuss, such as those aimed specifically at enhancing student support, but I will leave those for later discussion.