

# **World Conference on Online Learning Teaching in a Digital Age: Rethinking Teaching and Learning**

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## **Open Education for a Closing World**

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### **Context**

The end of WWII saw the emergence of a new world order, symbolised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that celebrated the values of openness, democracy and internationalism.

Some countries resisted these values for several decades, but by the end of the 20th century with the Berlin Wall in ruins and apartheid a bad memory, they were more deeply embedded than ever. Today this consensus is breaking down.

### **Post-truth and Post-trust**

Nationalist and populist movements are gaining support and the very foundations of education are being undermined in what is called the 'post-truth' era. Post-truth societies tend to become 'post-trust' societies. In his *Trust and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, Francis Fukayama argued persuasively that the economic, social and cultural success of nations relates directly the trust that their people have in each other and in their institutions. Fortunately, loss of trust is not a universal trend. Contrast the welcome Canada gives to Syrian refugees and their rejection by the US.

Much of today's turbulence in the West today reflects a loss of belief in progress. Yet education is grounded in a belief in progress. Our students believe that they will operate from a higher base of knowledge and skill than we did and that this will create a better world. In his book, *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*, Swedish historian Johan Norberg shows that on most indicators of human development the underlying trends are persistently positive.

### **How can Education Assist?**

How can education assist in maintaining an open world in which progress can continue?

Step one is to recognise that today's most salient political continuum no longer runs between left and right but between open and closed. Education must enable people to situate themselves on this continuum, not by telling them how to place themselves but by creating arenas for debate where they must address this issue personally by arguing for different positions.

Step two is to help people find their place on another continuum, between inclusiveness and exclusiveness. The best way of doing this is to create educational communities that are deliberately diverse and exploit that diversity proactively to promote trust.

Trends towards post-truth and post-trust societies pose a special threat to higher education. As the rector of the University of Oslo, Ole Petter Ottersen, puts it, "the lack of confidence in academia is a great challenge. What role can a truth-seeking university play in an era characterised as 'post-truth'?" He continues: "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. Universities should be trust building as well as truth seeking" He concludes: "In our age of turbulence these two words – trust and truth – are inextricably intertwined."

What follows from this?

First, as an earlier writer put it, "nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory". One task of education is to be a good memory for humanity.

Second, everyone should leave school with a grasp of the broad sweep of human development. Norberg's fact-filled book is a powerful antidote to our tendency to generalise from the latest news report about a famine, a war or the health challenges of modern life and think how awful things are now. His introduction is titled: 'The Good Old Days are Now'.

### **Helping students to position themselves**

The fundamental driver of progress has always been education. The people coming out of the world's schools and universities will ensure that we continue to progress. Education should challenge its students to position themselves along the continuum from 'open' to 'closed'. We should not tell them where to position themselves but, as Rector 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.

Closely related is the continuum between inclusiveness and exclusiveness. As former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson once said: 'How can there be peace without people understanding each other; and how can this be if they don't know each other?'

I have the privilege of chairing, *pro bono*, the international board of the United World Colleges; a system of residential senior secondary schools in 17 countries. We select deliberately diverse cohorts of pupils from over 150 countries on a needs-blind basis to spend two years with us studying for the International Baccalaureate. It is a powerful response to Lester Pearson's challenge. One reason why universities recruit our UWC diplomates so eagerly is that they get thoroughly stuck in to campus life and act as catalysts for inclusion and teamwork within the whole student body.

To help students position themselves on the continua between open and closed and between exclusiveness and inclusiveness, we must recruit deliberately diverse student bodies and to be proactive in exploiting that diversity. In doing so we need less teaching and more debate so that students can challenge each other and themselves. Graduates should leave university with an ingrained attitude of systematic scepticism. I was proud when a graduate told me that after studying with the Open University he couldn't see fewer than six sides to any question!

Much of this can also be done equally well online once all academics discover that online learning can do more than distribute PowerPoint slides.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude: the 'Good Old Days' are now. Our challenge is to help people see that.

We must never stop explaining why truth, trust and knowledge are the foundations of successful societies.

Finally, if people are to live together in peace it helps if they know each other and have at least tried to understand each other. Instead of taking it for granted, we must use the diversity of the student body as a wonderful opportunity for learning and teaching.

Institutions should aspire to the 50-year old slogan of The Open University: open to people; open to places; open to methods; open to ideas.