

Athabasca University
Doctoral Seminar - May 12th, 2022, at 17:00 PDT

**Distance Learning post-Covid-19:
A Brave New World of Online Education or Repeating the Mistakes of the Past?**

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Introduction

DOCTORAL SEMINAR

Good evening to you all. It's a pleasure to participate in an Athabasca University event again and I thank Dr. Bainbridge for the invitation. I was AU's Vice-President for Learning Services from 1978 to 1980. After that, my nomadic career continued through Montreal, Sudbury, Milton Keynes, Paris and, since 2004, Vancouver. I've had little contact with Athabasca and Alberta since November 2016, when Dr. Bainbridge brought me in for another seminar like this.

2016 TITLE

My title then was '*Universities in 2016: Open or Closed?*'

I am pleased to say that Alberta and Athabasca University have come back into my life in the last year.

RENEWAL CONTACTS

Last summer, I was asked to join a focus group, called a 'Guiding Coalition', for the Alberta 2030 project. This was an attempt by the Government of Alberta, with the help of McKinsey consultants, to plan the shape of Alberta's advanced education system 10 years ahead. It was an interesting experience. It reminded me how much Alberta is an outlier in Canada in its relationships between government and higher education. The Alberta government already controls the province's higher education institutions more tightly than other provincial governments and one new proposal put to us, which happily never saw the light of day, was to abolish the individual governing boards for each university and create a single board for all Alberta's universities.

I had direct experience of the close tabs that the Alberta government keeps on its universities after receiving a call from Nancy Laird, the chair of AU's Board of Governors, last August. She asked whether I would consider joining AU's Board of Governors. I said I would, and after an eight-month process that included approval by the Provincial Cabinet, I was appointed to the Board last month and had my first briefing session just a few days ago.

PETER SCOTT

My third new link is that AU's new president, Professor Peter Scott, was a brilliant colleague of mine at the UK Open University in the 1990s. He was a founding member of the UKOU's high-powered Knowledge Media Institute in 1995, and its director from 2007 until he left to join the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia in 2015. I cannot imagine anyone better equipped to lead AU into the next phase of its development and I look forward to working with him again.

Against this background I was delighted to receive Dr. Bainbridge's kind invitation to address you in this doctoral seminar. My dealings with Alberta and AU over the last nine months have been largely procedural, so it is a pleasure to dip my toe into the real academic work of the University today.

My associations with AU, as a vice-president in the 1970s and as a newly appointed board member today, span more than forty years. Therefore, I will begin on a personal note, although I hope you may pick up some useful tips from my experience and reflections.

OU INTERNSHIP

I am a 50-year veteran of open and distance learning, or ODL, and it has been a wonderful journey. It was exactly half a century ago, in the summer of 1972, that I had the revelation of encountering open distance education at scale during a three-month internship at the Open University in the UK, then in its second year of teaching students. The UKOU had been formally established in 1969 and, after two years of planning, course preparation and systems development, it had opened with a first cohort of 25,000 students in 1971.

I was at the Open University for the summer of 1972 because, alongside my day job as an assistant professor at the Université de Montréal, I was a part-time student in the graduate programme in Educational Technology at Sir George Williams University in Montreal. It was Canada's first graduate programme in that discipline. Why had I enrolled?

ANCIENT INSTITUTIONS

My early education was in ancient institutions. I attended a secondary school, Christ's Hospital, where we wore the world's oldest school uniform still in daily use today. It dated from 1553.

From there I went to Oxford University and did a 4-year degree in Metallurgy that included a year of full-time experimental research. After Oxford, seeking new pastures and a different experience, I went to the Université de Paris where I spent another four years getting a doctorate in physical sciences by identifying the deformation mechanisms of uranium crystals.

ECOLE POLYTECHNIQUE

Before I got serious about looking for a job after I had finished my doctorate, a professor from the Ecole Polytechnique of the Université de Montréal came to our laboratory in Paris looking to recruit academic staff. It was the late 1960s and the expansion of Canadian universities was in full swing. However, French people, including French academics, do not have a tradition of emigration - why would you if you lived in such a pleasant country as France?!

To me, however, the job in Montreal that Professor Tougas described was appealing. I'd never been to Canada - although I had been president of the Oxford University Canada Club - but that's another story. In Paris I'd learned enough French to teach metallurgical engineering in that language, so starting my academic career at the Université de Montréal was very attractive.

EVENEMENTS DE MAI

I should add that Professor Tougas' visit took place in 1968 at the tail end of the series of upheavals, '*les événements de mai*', which had started in the universities but had brought the whole of France practically to a standstill. For this reason, my job interview took place in the bar at Orly airport and after two beers I was offered a post of assistant professor.

I began work in Montreal in the summer of 1969. After my long education it seemed that my destiny lay in universities, so I thought that I ought to learn more about teaching and learning. Before I realised that this was a peculiar idea for a young engineering academic - at least in those days - I started exploring part-time education programmes in the city.

SGWU CAMPUS

The only one that appealed, and seemed to have some intellectual bite, was the new MA programme in Educational Technology at Sir George Williams University, now Concordia. I was a bit suspicious of the concept of educational technology, but I went ahead and registered anyway.

It was a two-year full-time programme and required a research thesis as well as a three-month internship in an organisation that was using educational technology. I found it very stimulating.

TELUQ

The coursework took me five years part-time and by the time I had finished that component, I had already moved to Quebec City to work at the Université TÉLUQ, so I commuted between Montreal and Quebec for the final courses. No Zoom courses in those days!

OU LOGO

However, it was the internship that really fired me up. It was 1971, and educators worldwide were spellbound by the UK's Open University, which had just opened with 25,000 students. If ever there was an organisation using educational technology this seemed to be it, so I wrote to them and asked if I could do my internship there. They welcomed my interest and offered me three months' work as an unpaid visiting lecturer. This didn't involve any lecturing, but rather working alongside the teams preparing and revising the courses, as well as developing more challenging computerised assessment.

I was there for three months in the summer of 1972, and it was an extraordinarily inspiring time: my revelation on the road to Milton Keynes!

I was impressed first by the scale, for with 40,000 students in its second year the UKOU was already the country's largest university.

I was amazed by the enthusiasm and dedication of the students, the faculty, and the whole staff right through to the packers in the OU's warehouses. They sent me off to one of the summer schools for the Technology Foundation Course where cohorts of students spent a week on a conventional campus doing intense programmes of practical work, seminars, and fieldwork. It was a 24/7 experience where discussions at the bar, still about the course, continued long into the evening.

I admired the quality of it all and spent my spare moments reviewing the beautifully produced and engaging course texts as well as the TV and radio programmes produced by the BBC.

I had never seen a learning system like this, and the organisation of it all, with part-time tutors assigned to each student all over the country, took my breath away.

After those three months at the OU, I returned to my academic post in Canada. I felt that I had seen the future of higher education at the UKOU - and I wanted to be part of it. To quote the poet T. S. Eliot, I was 'no longer at ease in the old dispensation'.

TELUQ

I was very lucky, because soon after coming back to Montreal, the Université du Québec advertised the post of Director-General of its new Télé-université, today the Université TÉLUQ, which is Canada's other online university. Although I was at the start of my career and a recent immigrant, I took a deep breath and applied for the job. To their lasting credit the UQ authorities, instead of binning my application, invited me to Quebec City for interview. They made it clear off the bat that they were not going to appoint me as Director-General - which was a relief - but they offered me the job of creating an Educational Technology unit within TÉLUQ, which I accepted.

There followed four extraordinarily fascinating years in Quebec City helping to build this new institution. This was intrinsically exciting, but those four years also coincided with the rise of the Parti Québécois and the 1976 election, when the PQ became the government and four of my professors at TÉLUQ were elected to the National Assembly.

In 1978 I moved to Athabasca University as Vice-President for Learning Services. At that point, having completed the coursework and internship for the Ed. Tech. programme, but not the thesis, I dropped out of the programme. The research that I had barely begun on the adoption of computers in Quebec schools seemed less relevant now that I was starting a demanding job on the other side of the country.

ANCIENT ROOTS

To close that loop, I should add that I have continued to be a student throughout my career. I had taken some courses from the TÉLUQ and when I got to AU I took some courses from AU too, including the blockbuster course of those days, *Ancient Roots of the Modern World*, which may still be part of AU's folklore.

When I got to the UKOU as vice-chancellor I completed an ODL Theology diploma that I had begun in Sudbury. At that point, I had my eye on starting a Law degree, but my wife rebelled and told me to finish the Ed.Tech. degree that I had dropped out from 15 years earlier.

MEGA-UNIVERSITIES

So, I re-enrolled at Concordia and wrote the master's thesis that became my book *Mega-universities*.

Twenty-five years after first enrolling at Sir George Williams University I received my degree at convocation at the Place des Arts. That may be a record of slow learning, but it does show my commitment to lifelong learning.

I've taken the time to give you this chunk of my career history because I want to draw a few conclusions from it. You are doctoral students working towards EdDs in Distance Education and hoping, I imagine, to work professionally in that field for some years at least.

ODL NEW FIELD

Conclusion #1 is that open and distance learning, ODL, is very new as a field of professional study. But I do not mean that ODL itself is new. I have argued elsewhere that the Christian apostle St. Paul has a good claim to be the inventor of ODL and one of its most successful practitioners. ODL has been around for a long time but, until recently, most of those who have developed the field have been amateurs like me.

Fifty years there were no doctoral programmes in Ed. Tech., let alone in ODL, and those of us who got involved came to it through other routes.

PERRY

A good example is Walter Perry, the founding vice-chancellor of the UKOU, who did more than anyone to bring together the basic elements of modern ODL. Perry was a medical doctor, professor of Pharmacology, and Vice-Principal of the University of Edinburgh. His motivation for building the UKOU was not so much a desire to serve mature students as his urge to improve what he saw as the lamentable quality of teaching in Britain's campus universities. He thought that if the UKOU could offer an example of much better quality, particularly by developing courses in teams, it would inspire the other universities to raise their game.

CONCLUSION 2

Conclusion #2 is in three parts. First, if you feel that you need some extra knowledge or training, then go and find it. I mentioned that my decision to do a part-time master's degree in Ed. Tech., right after my doctorate, seemed a bit odd at the time, both to me and to my colleagues. But it turned out to be the best thing I ever did, because it put me on the bottom step of the professional escalator of ODL just as it started to move.

The second part of that conclusion is that if you see an important phenomenon emerging and want to be part of it, so go to where it is happening and find out more. I mentioned that my internship at the UKOU, exactly 50 years ago this year, was literally life changing. I believed that I had seen the future of higher education.

The third part of the conclusion is simply to keep learning. The few undergraduate Management courses that I took while I was at AU constitute most of my training in that discipline, but they were of lasting value. And there is a special reason to take courses from your own institution if you are managing in an ODL university. It's simply the best way to find out whether the courses and student support that your colleagues boast about are any good. With the added advantage that in an ODL institution you can study anonymously,

whereas if the president of the U of A turned up in a classroom as a student there would be raised eyebrows.

In this spirit I've taken some 20 MOOCs from FutureLearn in the last ten years, which has been helpful when I must write articles about new trends in higher education.

TITLE

So much for all that. When Dr. Bainbridge asked for a title for today's seminar I suggested: *'Distance Learning post-Covid-19: A Brave New World of Online Education or Repeating the Mistakes of the Past?'*

Let me conclude with a few remarks to that title. Everyone is asking how the changes in higher education required by the covid-19 pandemic will impact on the way that universities operate in the long term.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD

We can best summarise it by saying that there is good news and bad news.

The good news is that millions more students and teachers now have experience of distance learning and distance teaching. The bad news is that emergency remote teaching through live technologies like the one we are using today has gutted open distance learning of two vital features. First, it has removed the 'open' from ODL. Nearly all emergency remote teaching focuses on the students, already admitted to the institution, who had previously attended courses in campus classrooms.

Yet, the pioneers of modern ODL had a much wider agenda than simply teaching at a distance. Or, rather, teaching at a distance was a route to the achievement of more basic goals for the renewal of higher education.

4 OPENS

This was well expressed by the slogan of the UK Open University: *open to people, open to places, open to methods, open to ideas*. You may be aware that the UKOU was first called the *'University of the Air'*, referring to its integration of TV and radio into its teaching strategy. The planning committee changed the name to the *'Open University'* to focus not on the technology used, but the purpose being pursued.

I note - and this is rather ironic - that AU has recently changed its descriptor in the other direction: from its purpose to the learning technology that it uses. AU used to call itself *'Canada's Open University'*. Now it prefers *'Canada's Online University'*.

AU & TELUQ

And while I'm about it, let me also point out that Canada has two open or online universities: AU operates in English and Université TÉLUQ operates in French. I worked at both institutions in the 1970s and have taken courses from both as a student. For AU to imply that it is Canada's sole online university smacks of colonialism!

My key point here is that we abandon the ambition of openness at our peril. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 forecast a massive increase in university

enrolments in the coming years and we shall need plenty of open distance learning to satisfy that demand - and not only in the developing countries.

ODL TO ERT

The second vital feature of ODL that was pushed out in the rush to conduct emergency remote teaching was the asynchronous components of distance learning. We need to put it back in and that is happening. I observed, at the Acsenda School of Management in Vancouver, of which I am chancellor, that the longer covid restrictions went on, the greater the amount of asynchronous work that was introduced into the courses. Moreover, we found that as the asynchronous components increased, student performance and assiduity of attendance increased too.

INDEPENDENCE & INTERACTION

This relates to the fundamental principle that good distance education has two key elements: good teaching materials that students can work with on their own, and group discussions where they can explore points of difficulty with a tutor and/or with each other. Putting together an effective blend of these two types of activity is the key to successful distance learning. In a paper that I published back in the 1970s, whilst I was working at AU, I called this *'Independence and Interaction: Getting the Mixture Right'*. It made the point that distance education requires the student to do some learning independently, using the learning materials, but also to ensure success, to interact with others to clear up points of difficulty and enrich understanding.

The mistake that we made during the pandemic, particularly in places like Canada with a rich telecommunications infrastructure, was to assume that live lectures over the internet were enough. Although, as I just mentioned, as time went by, at our Acsenda School of Management and elsewhere, instructors started adding asynchronous activities that students can do in their own time.

Let me end there and continue in discussion. You will soon qualify as doctors of distance education, and you are doing so at a time when distance learning has never been more prevalent. People of my generation were surprised that it took so long, after the establishment of the UKOU, for ODL to seep into higher education generally. It seemed, as one wag observed at the time, that the effect of opening the Open University was to close the campus universities even more firmly to mature and part-time students. AU has been an important force in bucking that trend.

Today the combination of the internet and covid-19 has finally embedded ODL in the thinking of higher education generally. You will be called on, in various ways, to help with its integration into the wider higher education enterprise. I wish you well and hope that the experiences I have shared will help you on that exciting journey.

THANK YOU