

PCF10 - Tenth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning
Calgary, September 13-16, 2022

Session: Building Resilience 4.3 2022-09-16 at 11:00

Vancouver ODL veterans discuss the impact and legacy of Covid-19

Tony Bates, Ross Paul & John Daniel

PCF10 AU COL

Good afternoon! I have attended eight of the previous Pan-Commonwealth Forums on Open Learning and I'm delighted that a PCF has now come to Canada, because I have strong links with the two institutions organising this PCF-10. Forty years ago I was vice-president of Athabasca University and later, from 2004-2012, I was president of the Commonwealth of Learning.

The title of this session is: *Vancouver Veterans discuss the impact and legacy of covid-19.*

HOMAGE TO THE LATE QUEEN

Before I introduce my fellow speakers, who will both join you from a distance, I take a minute to pay homage to our late Queen of Canada, Queen Elizabeth the Second. One of her acts as Queen of Canada in 1967, our country's centenary year, was to create the Order of Canada.

I was deeply honoured in 2013, when she approved my appointment as an Officer of the Order of Canada, citing *'the advancement of open learning and distance education in Canada and around the world.'*

This was the first time the Crown in Canada had recognised ODL in this way. I considered it not just as a personal honour but also as a compliment to the great work that institutions such as Université TÉLUQ, Athabasca University, Contact North, the Commonwealth of Learning, and others have been doing for many years.

TITLE SLIDE

My two fellow panellists, Tony Bates and Ross Paul, have also been intimately involved in the development of open and distance learning. Indeed, between us Tony, Ross and I have almost 150 years of professional experience of ODL. Although none of us were born in Vancouver, each of us came there during our careers and we all decided to make that delightful city our home.

This session is about the legacy of covid-19. One aspect of that legacy will be demonstrated in the technology that we shall use.

TONY BATES

Tony is travelling down memory lane in Labrador today, so he will join us through an 8-minute pre-recorded video. After his presentation I shall invite comments for ten minutes on the six lessons that Tony draws from the covid-19 experience.

ROSS PAUL

We shall then hear from Ross Paul, who will join us by Zoom, recalling another mode of delivery that became very familiar during the pandemic. Ross will argue that there are now two solitudes in research in open, distance and digital education. What can we do to bring these solitudes of research together? Ross will come to you live, so if all goes well you will be able to interact with him directly.

JOHN DANIEL

Finally, I shall complete the session in face-to-face mode by arguing the need to put the OPEN back into Open and Distance Learning.

TONY BATES SUMMARY

So let us begin with Tony's short video.

Q&A

ROSS PAUL SUMMARY

We shall now continue with Ross' presentation on Zoom.

Q&A

JOHN DANIEL SUMMARY

Now it is my turn to reflect on the impact and legacy of covid-19.

I shall argue that in their rush to remote teaching, campus institutions neglected an essential function of ODL. A key quality of distance learning, namely the value of openness, went missing in the transition. For the benefit of humankind we need to recover it again quickly.

What is the purpose of Open and Distance Learning?

ICCE BROADY

Over its long history distance education has taken various names. Isaac Pitman used the new postal service to invent *correspondence education* in the mid-1800s. That name stuck for a century. In his history of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) David Sewart (2014) has recalled the evolving terminology of ODL. He also noted that in 1938, at its first international conference nearly a century ago, the ICCE president, Knute Broady, made this claim:

"By equality of educational opportunity we mean extending education of equal quality to everyone, no matter how humble their birth, no matter where they may live, and no matter what their reasonable aspirations may be... I trust that everything we do in this conference will be evaluated in terms of it."

Perhaps we should also make that our aim for this PCF-10 conference?

Open and equal access to quality teaching has been a latent feature of ODL ever since Broady made that statement, although it has received more or less prominence as technology has gradually transformed ODL delivery.

CROWTHER AND MOON

In the 1960s, when the concept of a large-scale multi-media distance teaching university was developed in the UK, they first called it the 'university of the air'. But it was soon renamed the 'Open University' to put the focus on its purpose. At its inaugural ceremony in 1969, held as the first humans landed on the moon, the OU's chancellor, Lord Geoffrey Crowther, charged the university to be open on four dimensions.

CROWTHER 1

"We are open, first, as to people: no formal academic qualifications will be required for registration as a student..."

CROWTHER 2

"We are open as to places: wherever there are men and women seeking to develop their individual potentialities... there we can offer our help. There are no boundaries of space..."

CROWTHER 3

"We are open as to methods: 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. There is no restriction on techniques..."

CROWTHER 4

"We are open, finally, as to ideas: We start on this task in this very week when the Universe has opened. The limits not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have believed..."

Crowther was the Editor of The Economist and very conscious of the communications revolution that was developing as he spoke. But even Crowther could not have foreseen the developments that would come at the turn of the 21st century, with the emergence of the internet and the world wide web. These tools enabled all schools and universities to dabble in online learning and try it for some of their teaching.

But mere dabbling in remote teaching suddenly became core business when the pandemic hit. Educational institutions had to vacate their classrooms and try to reach their students and pupils remotely.

UNESCO QUOTE

This worked in higher education but not in the schools. Most university students were able to continue their studies after a fashion, but the impact on school pupils, particularly the most vulnerable learners, was devastating. According to UNESCO (2022):

The pandemic has increased inequalities and exacerbated the pre-existing educational crisis. Disruptions have ranged from no school closures in a handful of countries to more than a year of closures in a number of countries. Lack of connectivity and equipment prevented at least a third of learners from pursuing distance learning. ... the consequences in terms of learning, health, well-being and drop-out are considerable. Making education a priority public good is essential to avoid a generational catastrophe and enable a sustainable recovery.

ODL should have an important role in preventing this generational catastrophe, although, sadly, national authorities do not yet understand this. I urge you all to go out and get the message across. The challenge is double: first to repair the damage to the education of school-age children and, second, to provide adults, who are being sideswiped by the many uncertainties and disruptions of the 2020s, with learning routes to fulfilling lives.

INSTITUTIONS WISHING

Institutions wishing to contribute to this 'priority public good' must do more than continue some remote teaching for their usual pupils and students. They must apply and expand the expressions of openness that Crowther listed half-a-century ago.

Open to people:

Decades of experience show that open admission works. With sensitive guidance, motivated people can study successfully without satisfying the traditional pre-requisites. But sensitive guidance both before and during study is crucial - especially for school children (Daniel, 2020).

Open to places:

Taking education into homes is fine, but home is not a conducive environment for study for many of the world's children. The open schools that operate at scale in some emerging countries (e.g. India, Namibia) combine home study with access to study centres that provide human support and richer technology (Daniel, 2010). There is huge potential for conventional schools and universities to team up with these open schools to add stronger local support to their work.

Open to methods:

UNESCO (2022) noted that: 'Lack of connectivity and equipment prevented at least a third of learners from pursuing distance learning'. Now is the time to address this issue at all levels. This means giving pupils ready access to robust equipment along with the data plans that make it usable. It is today's equivalent of providing classrooms on campus.

Open to ideas:

Because they were already proficient at remote teaching, institutions like the UK Open University and Athabasca University functioned normally during the pandemic, whilst also implementing new ideas (Blackman, 2020). The UKOU ramped up its offer of free online learning, creating many new and shorter courses, often focused directly on helping people address the disruptions that the pandemic had brought to their lives. Athabasca University accelerated the implementation of its 'near-virtual' strategy by allowing more of its staff to work from anywhere with enriched technological support.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this session has reviewed the impact and legacy of the covid-19 crisis. Although former US President Kennedy got it wrong when he famously claimed that the Chinese characters for 'crisis' combine those for 'danger' and 'opportunity', his mistake fits our times.

Covid-19 has created the danger of a generational catastrophe in education, but ODL gives us an opportunity avoid it. To do so we must emphasise the OPEN in Open and Distance Learning.

I invite you all to engage with that challenge.

THANK YOU ON BEHALF OF THE THREE OF US

References

Blackman, T. (2020) The Open University: a university for our times.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/open-university-our-times-professor-tim-blackman>

Crowther, G. (1969). Chancellor's address at the inauguration of The Open University

<https://www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/pdf/script/script:5747089b4a53f>

Daniel, J. S. (2010). Mega-schools, technology and teachers: achieving education for all.

Routledge, New York & London.

Daniel, J. S. (2020). Education and the covid-19 Pandemic, *Prospects*, 49, UNESCO Bureau

for International Education, Geneva: 91-96. <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09464-3>>

Sewart, D. (2014). Through the mirror of ICDE : from correspondence to distance to online.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b99664675f9eea7a3ecee82/t/5e15c37b4de27a2740bc18a9/1578484603658/davidsewart-throughthemirroroficde-fromcorrespondencetodistancetoonline.pdf>

UNESCO. (2022) Education: from school closure to recovery.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/covid-19/education-response>