SUPPORTING MEMBERS SUPPORTING LEARNERS:
A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION GRAPPLES WITH CHANGE

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Introduction

Having identified myself as a distance educator for almost thirty years, it is uncomfortable to have to admit that I am now going through a crisis of identity. This could be a good thing. A crisis not only provokes angst it also provides an opportunity for reflection, questioning and evolution. What differentiates a distance educator now that the mainstream has adopted our practices? Why do I need to belong to a professional association focused on open and distance learning? How do I convince newcomers that it is not the technology, it is the personal that makes effective learning environments? Now that my specialist skills are absorbed in supporting the mainstream, how do I maintain a focus on the less privileged? And how do I reconcile the equally convincing arguments put forward here by authorities such as Hillary Perraton and Ross Paul?:

. . . there is an ideological case to be made for distance education in attacking educational inequality . . . and for attacking geographical as well as other forms of deprivation . . . But (my) concern (is) that arguments about the methods of distance education have been too narrowly based and that arguments about its legitimacy have been too self serving . . . Research on distance education belongs in the mainstream of educational research. (Perraton, 1995, p.20)

The danger, both for education in general and the field of distance education in particular, is that those most enamoured with new technology, who come almost exclusively from outside the domain of open learning, will dominate educational developments over the next decade – and that those who have so much to contribute, the distance education practitioners, will be passed over once again. Those of us in the latter category must ensure that this does not happen. (Paul, 1998, p. 21)

The tensions addressed by Perraton and Paul would appear to be recurring themes in the development of distance education, Holmberg (1986, 2001), Hawkridge (1976), Gough (1984). And the questions expressed in the opening paragraph, and the doubts they raise, are not mine alone. As the incoming president of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA) these were the questions put to me by members and by the executive who were grappling with the declining influence of the Association, and wondering if perhaps it was time to get with the strength and merge with the burgeoning associations focused on elearning and the use of computers and communication technology in teaching. Thus my own crisis of identity was one shared by the Association as a whole and put some impetus behind the need to explore the purpose of the Association, its membership and the processes and services it provides. ODLAA too was in its thirtieth year of service and it seemed timely to gather education, government and industry experts to discuss the issues and assist the executive in identifying the reasons behind the change in the Association's focus and to explore a strategy for future action. The new executive wanted to ensure that distance education practitioners were not passed over, and that distance education students would not be denied the support services that mitigate the impact of inequality, geography and other forms of deprivation not shared by those with the freedom to choose any mode of delivery. We also wanted to raise the profile of our research tool, the International Journal of Distance Education, as a product of the Association.

ODLAA's thirtieth anniversary invitational summit was held in December 2003. It was an exceptionally challenging and stimulating consultation process, provoking considerable reflection on a broad range of issues. How well we grapple with those issues will depend on our shared understanding of the role and purpose of the Association. It will depend on how well we engage with our members and put in place processes for their participation in breathing life back into their professional body. The purpose of this deliberation is to support our members by improving the quality of the learning they experience in their professional development, and in turn for them to influence the quality of

support for the learners who participate in open and distance learning to attain their goals. This paper is an examination of the role of a professional association in open and distance learning and the new forms of organisation and processes emerging with the new tools for knowledge creation and sharing. Do the emerging economies of teaching and learning within education generally provide a model for how the Association might evolve its services and the ways it engages with its membership? Can we practice what we preach?

The Professional Association as a Learning Organisation

Professional associations vary in their mandate. In some professional fields, registration requirements are legislated and the peak professional association manages accreditation guidelines and processes that influence curriculum and course structure, and determine whether graduates are eligible to practise in the profession they have studied.

The Australian Council of Professions defines a profession as:

. . . *"a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and uphold themselves to, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others". (Australian Council of Professions, AGM, 1997)*

Law and medicine led the professionalism process, with areas such as accountancy, engineering and architecture relative newcomers. The social sciences, including education have tended to organize as self-nominating academies with less emphasis on registration to practise. The commonly expressed purposes of a professional association are the promotion of the profession itself through advancement of knowledge in the field, promotion of professionalism among practitioners and the protection of consumers. Some professional bodies take their self regulation role quite seriously and may set standards and guidelines for qualifications, require a continuous program of professional development and adherence to a code of ethics and thus need to maintain a monitoring process with associated disciplinary procedures.

In a cursory exploration of the many organizations identified with open and distance learning worldwide it would appear that they do not take on these more formal roles. The Distance Education Clearinghouse of the University of Wisconsin-Extension lists forty public, private, non-profit and commercial organizations and associations relating to distance education worldwide (http://www.uwex.edu/disted/assoc.html). The Commonwealth of Learning lists a further twenty five associations not found on the UWEX site reflecting its relationship with a broader international field and with practice in developing countries (http://www.col.org/resources/weblinks/associations.htm). In addition to local organizations, there are a number of national and international umbrella organizations that manage a network of associations with a shared interest. The Commonwealth of Learning, based in Vancouver, has established the Federation of Commonwealth ODL Associations, FOCODLA. The European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) runs a network for the ODL community in Europe through its European ODL Liaison Committee. The United States Distance Learning Association has established State Chapters and International partnerships. The International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), with a long established secretariat in Norway, has been the world's leading umbrella organization, managing a biennial conference and maintaining significant information resources through its partnerships, particularly with the Open University in the UK.

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), (http://www.usdla.org), describes itself as the "leading organization developing, promoting and supporting the distance learning industry" (www.usdla.org). The USDLA convenes national policy forums, provides resources and represents members before government and regulatory bodies. It operates a network of State Chapters and is increasingly active in partnerships with international associations.

The USDLA lists its goals as:

- To provide national leadership in the field of distance learning
- To advocate and promote the use of distance learning
- To provide current information on distance learning
- To represent the distance learning community before government policy and regulatory bodies
- To serve and support the state, consortium and individual organizations that belong to USDLA
- To provide annual recognition and awards of outstanding achievements in distance learning
- To serve as a catalyst for the formation of partnerships among education, business, healthcare and government
- To achieve a global leadership role through liaison with international organizations
- To promote equity and access to lifelong learning through distance learning
- To promote diversity in our organisation and its programs.

The Canadian Association for Distance Education (CADE) describes itself as a national association of professionals committed to excellence in the provision of distance education in Canada. In addition to publishing a refereed journal, managing special interest groups, professional development services and general publications CADE conducts an annual conference. On its web site (www.cade-aced.org.ca) CADE lists its aims and objectives as:

- To advance and promote distance education generally
- To promote research into distance education theory and practice
- To provide membership services including professional development
- To provide a forum for interaction on a national, regional provincial and local basis
- To represent Canada internationally in distance education; and
- To promote access to learning at a distance

There is a common language used in these mission statements and a reasonably articulated shared set of principles. However all associations in ODL are conscious of the evolution taking place in education and training generally and many are undergoing considerable self examination to clarify their purpose and to differentiate their activities within the explosion of new communities emerging with a focus on learning technologies and the virtual campus. With the broad adoption of ODL approaches generally, the large professional associations within mainstream education and training have also undergone an epiphany of sorts, evolving their processes and services to reflect new communities of practice.

The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) for example, has over 70,000 members. Established in 1944, ASTD is celebrating sixty years as the peak professional association for workplace learning and performance professionals. It has embraced distance learning and new methods of delivery evidenced within a manifesto (January 2002) that illustrates their vision, *Leading the Learning Revolution: a Manifesto for the Whole Community of Learning and Performance Professionals?*:

*"We are daring to overturn our own paradigms. It's not how much you invest in learning and performance improvement, but how strategically you do it. It is not how pure the pedagogy, but how quickly you can move a workforce to demonstrate competence. It's not how well managed the change, but how much innovation you can inspire. It's not how flashy the technology, but how well it serves learning and performance needs. And for many, there's the tough paradox of wanting to have both old and new." (*http://www.astd.com/ASTD/About_ASTD/manifesto.htm*)

Practitioners in open and distance learning find themselves immersed in a sea of alternative elearning organizations, many emerging rapidly in response to seemingly new fields of application. The competitive environment includes hundreds of organizations such as:

- ALT, the Association for Learning Technology
- EduCAUSE
- The British Learning Association

- E-Learning Network
- elearning Alliance
- Eifel, European Institute for e-learning
- Prometeus

Newcomers to elearning are mostly focused, if not obsessed with, acquiring mastery of the tools. They are also, for the most part, working in the mainstream, in classroom-based environments where distance education approaches are an option in a range of enhancements to enrich and provide more flexibility for the already well served. As Perraton observed above, distance education has much to contribute to the methodology, with the implication that distance education research must be applied to the mainstream in order to have influence. These organizations provide significant professional development alternatives and focused communities of practice engaged with the implications of electronic communications, knowledge management tools and standards. They are not alternatives to ODL associations – they tackle the tools of the trade, not the philosophy of approach. The differentiation comes down to three principles.

Open and distance learning focuses on:

1. *Learning.* Learning that takes place with a mix of independent and supported modes of delivery. Our concerns are for the learner, the learning environment and the systems supporting interactive learning; Daniel and Marquis (1979)

2. *Access, equivalence and excellence.* Our practices are designed to enable participation in lifelong learning for all. We aim to optimize learning effectiveness in all modes of delivery and gain parity of esteem based on learning outcomes. We strive for excellence by assuring quality in all aspects of our professional practice. Gough (1984)

3. *Collaboration and team based approaches.* As practitioners and researchers we recognize the value of collaboration and team based approaches to achieve the highest quality learning outcomes for individuals seeking opportunities for education and training in every sector and at any age. Holmberg (2001)

So the question that remains has to do with the role of the ODL community in supporting the three principles listed above. Has the recent failure of parent communities, such as the ODL community, to attract newcomers been simply one of communication and poor marketing. Is it because the experience in ODL has been largely forged on the periphery and thus too easily left there? The image conveyed through the ODL language associated with removing barriers for non-participants, and meeting the needs of those suffering forms of educational "deprivation" has perhaps failed to appeal to newcomers as relevant when they are seeking engagement with the media-rich and commercial end of town. Or is it that the knowledge society is challenging all of us, that we need to find new ways of generating support for each other as we surf this psycho-social tsunami of an information explosion?

Some ODL associations have begun to tackle these issues. The European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) (http://www.eden.bme.hu) for example, has articulated a new image reflected in its recent name change (formerly the European Distance Education Network) and in its stated policy approach (Wagner 2003) as

- a facilitator for transnational cooperation, exchange and business;
- a knowledge and professional community;
- a hub-organization and a leader in a network-of-networks; and a
- European organization with a global view.

Going further, the Canadian Association for Distance Education conducted a national consultation, with funding support from the Office of Learning Technologies – Human Resources Development Canada over 2001 to 2003. The research aimed at identifying current practices and potential future directions for CADE (CADE 2003). On the whole the outcomes were consistent with the goal statements of the associations listed above, but with two significant enhancements, the exhortation to "act as a distance education certification body for the country" and to implement a National Institute of Distance and Distributed Education Advancement (IDEA).

The following statement encapsulates the beachhead position that CADE has attained in ensuring that its distance education practitioners and researchers will not be passed over in the swarming of emerging technology-led communities of practice:

With the ever increasing capabilities of technology and telecommunications it is acknowledged both nationally and internationally that distance education in all its forms (distributed learning, e-learning, resource-based learning) as stand-alone applications, or as part of its integration into mainstream institutions, is on the rise. Governments, institutions and practitioners are grappling with issues of policy and practice in this emerging and fragmented area. Canada is a world leader in distance education. By establishing IDEA/IPED, CADE-ACED is providing a vehicle nationally for governments and organizations to gain access to this expertise. IDEA/IPED could also work to represent Canadian distance education expertise to international organizations. CADE (2003) Appendix C)

These developments in CADE and EDEN demonstrate the imperative for professional associations to recognize that they need also to be learning organizations. Starkey (1996) defines the 'learning organization as a metaphor, "with its roots in the vision of and the search for a strategy to promote individual self-development within a continuously self-transforming organization" (p.2). For an organization to be self-transforming it requires certain pre-conditions for learning to be met in relation to its leadership, structure and management processes. Only then can it "integrate the sum of individuals' learning to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts" (ibid, p2). The dilemma facing ODL associations is that they are on the whole voluntary, with loose organizational structures and a revolving door leadership resulting from an elected executive. While, some would argue that stability comes with size and the resources to establish an administrative and executive core to provide continuity and operational effectiveness, it is more important to inspire allegiance through identity with a shared vision. A well-resourced secretariat can be the seeds of bureaucratization, inflexibility and institutionalization, resulting in administrators who have a vested interest in the operations and are not active practitioners with a finger on the pulse of change.

Differentiating learning communities, in service for all

Developing countries have the highest numbers of learners currently participating in distance education and the fastest growing demand for access to education and training. The Commonwealth of Learning, UNESCO, national aid agencies and financial organisations such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank dedicate their services to alleviating poverty, building capacity and improving health through investment and support of distance education. Certain institutions and individual distance education practitioners have provided consultancy services but what role have ODL Professional Associations played in contributing their expertise to the development agenda through member professional development support and services? How active are special interest groups in this area? Mission statements include reference to access and equity, but these are generally applied within the national context. Perraton, in the aforementioned quote, alludes to the "ideological case to be made for distance education" in addressing issues of deprivation. But is it more than an ideological case? Could it be that as professionals, privileged with expertise and knowledge, we have an ethical responsibility to apply ourselves in the service of all, and not just to our local interests, but to embrace our global community?

In establishing the Federation of Commonwealth ODL Associations, FOCODLA (http://www.col.org.ca), the Commonwealth of Learning, sought to encourage networking and connectivity between the ODL associations of the Commonwealth specifically to:

- Act as a vehicle for collegiality for ODL (professional association) development, benefit and sustainability;
- To assist new and emerging associations becoming viable and effective;
- To help member associations build on each other's strengths and experiences;
- To provide opportunities for professional collaboration in research, intellectual debate and ODL implementation strategies;

- To facilitate the exchange of good practice and close co-operation between the association members, to encourage new professional development especially in the domain of technology-based ODL in general;
- To encourage and assist members in the elaboration of collaborative projects, and in seeking adequate sponsorship for such projects;
- To provide advice to COL including priorities for funding and identification of trans-national activities for support by COL; and
- To organize a biennial Pan-Commonwealth Forum

FOCODLA is a critical agency, but appears to be withering on the vine through lack of active engagement. The Pan-Commonwealth Forum attracts over six hundred delegates, mostly from developing countries. The contribution of "mainstream" distance education researchers has been restricted to the few, and has diminished, as has the active participation of delegates from digitally rich distance education environments (we nevertheless, have pockets in our own countries of development and poverty with learners facing equivalent hardship arising from ethnicity and class). Are we now so self serving that we have allowed ourselves to focus exclusively on contributing to the mainstream and riding the elitist wave ascribed to those with expertise in elearning and neglecting the rights of the under-served? Should we let the mainstream take care of itself and get back to solving real problems for learners who lack basic support?

With these considerations in mind, the ODLAA executive planned the Summit meeting as an opportunity to consult broadly but selectively, with educational experts who would both challenge our assumptions and irritate for change.

Designing the ODLAA Summit

The invitation to attend the summit was extended to twenty seven individuals who were the key decision makers and chief executives of organizations known for innovation in education and training, policy making and provision in key sectors, including ODL in Australia. While effort was made to balance the meeting across all sectors and to include industry and government, the constraints of numbers and timing led to some omissions, most regrettably, direct student and transnational representation. The meeting was restricted to one full day in Sydney with participants generously meeting their own costs. With the ten members of the ODLAA executive the participants included senior executives from:

Industry: Telstra, MicroSoft Pty Ltd, NextEd, Open Learning Australia, ACL Pty Ltd, IDP Education Australia, Education.Au Ltd, AEShareNet Pty Ltd, private consultants.

Schools: Open Access College.

Vocational Education: Open Training and Education Network; Flexible Learning Leaders Project; Queensland Open Learning Institute.

Universities: Deakin, South Australia, Sydney, UTS, Monash, UNSW@ADFA, Canberra, Charles Sturt, Southern Queensland, Macquarie, and New England.

Government: Queensland Department of Employment and Training, Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Technology, Australian Agency for International Development.

Professional Associations: APESMA (Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers of Australia), Australasian Council of Open and Distance Education, Transnational Education Directors Forum.

The program was designed to provide each invited participant an opportunity to present briefly on how the objectives of their organisation might be embraced within ODL, or on priorities faced by particular student communities. The day was launched with two prepared presentations, the first designed to position ODL within a global context of change. The second on the role of a professional association in ODL, its services and strategies for differentiation. Round table discussions were convened three times during the day. In conclusion, three individuals were asked to reflect on the days discussion and present feedback on the critical issues raised. Members of the ODLAA executive continued meeting the following day to explore the implications of the discussions and to draft a plan of action moving forward.

Outcomes of the discussions

For the purposes of this paper I have put forward only the key questions, the core "take-aways" from the day's consultations.

Specific to ODLAA as a Professional Association

- ODL specialists need to advocate for positive change in education generally, to apply our skills on behalf of all students, embrace the mainstream.
- First define the association's topical space and identity, who is it serving, how can it focus its services and what processes will deliver leadership and interactions to maintain relevance.
- Who needs to be in this community of practice, what is the boundary of the "topic of passion" and what are the strategies for communicating the knowledge we have?
- The changing nature of demand is leading to disaggregation involving multiple players in the value chain. ODLAA needs to provide professional development and leadership in assisting providers in understanding and working with emerging business models.
- Need to facilitate knowledge sharing and critique within the professional community of practice, requires interaction of knowledge and action.
- Need to influence new business models for organisations generally, apply the ODL systems approach, market orientation and project skills.
- Opportunity to exercise leadership, to build the community of practice

Youth and the future

- The growth area in the schools sector is with learners who are alienated from the traditional structures and with learners suffering from depression and mental illness. The politically sexy overtones of e-learning distracts from the core needs for professional development of teachers.
- The future for ODL will be with the 'net generation', those who value free expression, collaboration and networking to achieve. ODL will need to meet their demands for learning tools that invite interaction and co-production. They will demand more team learning and assessment, more integration with work place projects. They will want really short chunks of learning delivered through wireless, hand-held devices.
- Performance Support, Knowledge Management and Gameplay will dominate pedagogical design, with the need to focus learning environments according to the skills of "digital immigrants" and "digital natives".
- Students need guidance to improve their navigation and evaluation of web based resources as well as instruction on conducting effective and scholarly searches

Emerging markets and marketing analysis

- The customer in ODL is not just the learner, but includes teachers, administrators, industry and society as a whole.
- What impact has ODL had on Australia's education market and what is the growth rate relative to conventional delivery?
- Take a demand driven approach, determine the true competitive advantage of ODL and communicate its benefits to target markets.
- Distributed offshore delivery growing at 30 – 40%, with networks of learning centres
- Emerging, leading edge initiatives occurring in professional post-graduate education
- A focus on access, equity and development will impede growth of a competitive industry
- Key vocational education and training issues relate to learning pathways and the implementation of tracking processes using customer relationship management systems.
- We need more data on outcomes for particular industry groups, benchmarking and identification of best practices.

Development and Transnational

- What role can ODLAA play in Australia's development agenda particularly in the East Asia and Pacific region? Current development projects struggling to find content and providers.
- Transnational education demands market intelligence, a database of expertise and consultants, quality guidelines. Could ODLAA provide a "one stop shop" of resources and advice? It is certainly needed.
- In the delivery of English language programs, the international client is an institution not an individual.
- Transnational education is about interactions between cultures with students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Improving quality

- Investment in education here is allowing Australia to "slip through the statistics". We are losing ground internationally, our products are becoming non-competitive, mainly because we are not adapting products designed for our local market. ODLAA needs to provide access to examples of good practice.
- The infrastructure and support services for rural and remote students are being duplicated by individual providers as a source of competitive advantage. No one wins and access is diminishing.
- Government will be investing heavily in technology as infrastructure, not particular modes of delivery, to enable more entrepreneurial autonomy.
- Educational institutions no longer control access to the information used by students, security and costs will inhibit scholarship.
- Librarians can and do play a counselling role in addition to their academic support role in their interactions with distance students. They assist in creating a positive learning environment which reflects well in the student's experience of the institution generally.

The above set of issues, requirements, and proposed actions represent but a small part of the universe of change that the Association must grapple with. The day following the consultations was spent by the executive in sifting through the key issues and nominating specific areas to initiate action. It became clear however, that this represented a huge agenda. We first had to clarify our purpose, identify the boundaries of the "topic of passion", and re-establish ODLAA as a community of practice.

The Professional Association as a Collective of Communities of Practice

The concept of "community of practice" had come up repeatedly during discussions. Wenger's (1998) framework for communities of practice is based on a social theory of learning; learning as experience - meaning; learning as doing - practice; learning as belonging - community and learning as becoming - identity. He places the focus for rethinking learning on participation. In transposing Wenger's participatory framework: to the community building of our professional association it means that

- Individually, we need to engage and contribute to the practices of the profession, a "mutual engagement"
- As communities, we must seek to question, critique and refine our practices to ensure new generations of members, with "a shared repertoire" and as an
- Organisation, we must sustain the interconnectedness of the many communities within our collective, a "joint enterprise", "through which an organisation knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organisation" p.8.

It is clear that the process ahead, as we pursue the practice of our profession, participate in our communities of practice and seek coherence for our activities and services as a collective of communities, or like EDEN, a network of networks, will depend on how well we develop our social relations. We are at the very beginning of this journey with the comforting knowledge that we are not alone, and that some of our fellow ODL associations are further down the path.

Conclusion

Holmberg opened his book on the Growth and Structure of Distance Education (1986) with "*Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*" and closed it with "*It is difficult to imagine a future in which distance education will be de trop*". In that book, Holmberg recognized the blurring of distinction by the use of distance teaching methods on campus, but he reiterated that the needs of distance students for special study support would have to be met by "*suitable methods, media, administrative procedures and organizational patterns.*" The challenge for ODL practitioners is to maintain the distinction of practices needed for supporting distance education students whether they are on or off campus, all or part of the time, using whatever tools of communication and learning that become available. Our professional responsibility is to seek to improve the learning experience and learning outcomes of all learners, including our members and ourselves.

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