Looking Back, Looking Forward: What Have We Learned?

Roger Mills

Abstract

This chapter reflects on lessons learned over some 30 years working in distance education, and as such, it is personal and anecdotal. What becomes clear from long experience is that trends are cyclical. The OU UK decentralised its admissions and marketing activities to its 13 regions in 1991. In 2004, as a consequence of the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT), and as a result of tighter management leading to more centralist policies, the institution is once more centralising these activities. However, despite these changes, some principles remain constant no matter how they are converted into practice. Some of these principles upon which learner support practice in distance education are based are highlighted in this chapter which ends with a discussion of the critical importance of reducing the digital divide within and between countries.

Introduction

The title of this volume poses huge questions of definition about teaching and learning environments, some of which have been dealt with in other chapters. The title of this chapter poses the even bigger question: who is 'we'? The environments within which we work determine to a great extent how we work, and the degrees of separation between developed and developing countries are great and have to be acknowledged.

What follows is a perspective from one relatively rich and well supported institution. Although I have been able to visit and work with many distance educators and institutions across the world, I have no real appreciation of what it is like to be faced with those challenges which the majority of colleagues involved in distance education either as learners or teachers have had to overcome in much less privileged circumstances. The Open University in the United Kingdom (OUUK) is very much at one end of the spectrum of distance learning models, embracing as it does the principles of both mass production and division of labour with a cost structure which has high up-front development costs and student-number related variable costs. It is very clear that the majority of distance education approaches are not like those of the OUUK and it is important to recognise this at the outset and to acknowledge that the very particular circumstances in the UK, notably high population density, a good postal service and telephone network together with a supportive government and a national broadcasting corporation which takes educative television and radio seriously, were instrumental in the design of the Open University's distance education system. Indeed, it is important to recognize that the design of a distance education system is influenced by the geography, the environment, climate, resources, both human and financial, population density, transport systems, postal and telecommunication services as well as by the influence of politicians.

A further introductory point is that it may no longer be useful to talk about distance education as if it is something totally different from other forms of education. Information

and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have led to the convergence of systems and the development of new approaches sometime referred to as blended learning. For a fuller discussion of this issue cf. Mills (1999).

In this chapter, I put five key issues forward for consideration. These are based first on looking back over the years of experience in distance education and then on looking forward to what lies ahead. These issues are all prefaced by one essential point: that we should not forget for a moment the historic role of distance education in widening participation and the underpinning role of learner support in meeting this objective.

The five issues are as follows:

1. Avoid the temptation to treat distance education solely as a business;
2. Be on the side of the student;
3. Use resources in the best possible way for students;
4. Use ICT in a careful and creative way for improving teaching, learning, and assessment;
5. Give absolute priority to reducing the digital divide.

Looking Back

There are enough histories of distance education describing milestones in the development of the genre to be quite confident about omitting a further history in this chapter. In particular, Alan Tait's (2003) editorial in the International Review of Research in Open and Distance Education is a brief but cogent and challenging account of some of the main events of the last 30 years. Hence, this chapter will focus on five key issues for discussion, drawing on the past and looking to the future.

1. Avoid the Temptation to Treat Distance Education Solely as a Business

The late 19th century and first half of the 20th century saw an enormous growth in correspondence education both in the UK and the developed world. It is worth noting that during the first two thirds of the 20th century, some correspondence schools brought discredit to the notion of teaching at a distance by their sharp commercial practices (it was more commercially viable to have high drop-out rates once students had paid their fees) and others were subject to interference from governments for propaganda and political purposes. It is worth looking at this issue again in the context of today's vast growth of on-line distance education in both private and public institutions. As pressures grow to break even financially, the opportunities for commercial and pedagogic malpractice may never have been greater. Simon Midgely (2003), in an article in the Guardian, quoted Professor Stephen Heppel, Director of Anglia Polytechnic University's Ultralab (claimed to be the biggest centre of research into e-learning in Europe) as stating that "*… there are probably more scoundrels in e learning than there are in used car sales at the moment*" (p. 42). Issues of quality assurance of e-learning are critical for the way in which distance learning is regarded in the future and must continue to be addressed in the most stringent manner.

2. Be on the Side of the Student

In 1982, the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) changed its title to 'Distance Education' (ICDE), reflecting the major evolutionary change in both

the use of technologies and in institutional approaches which had taken place over the previous decade. Teaching and learning in richer countries moved through a whole range of media from print, correspondence, television, radio, face-to-face and telephone, various graphic transmission systems to on-line teaching and learning and back again to mobile phone and text messaging. However, whatever medium is used for distributing learning materials or for interactions between teachers and learners, the core of what we have learned about effective distance learning is that the systems have to be in place to ensure learners get what they need, when they need it, in a context of knowing that the institution and its staff are on their side and are not creating barriers or hurdles to be jumped over. Too often, across the whole of higher education, one comes across notions of elitism, with those who have 'made it' somehow believing that learning has to be made as difficult as possible for those who are still on the learning ladder. Distance education institutions have been at the forefront in breaking down these attitudes. Perhaps this was because it was understood from the outset that studying at a distance was inherently difficult. Walter Perry, the founding Vice-Chancellor of the OUUK, said that *'… studying at a distance was the most difficult way to study yet invented'* (personal communication, 1971). It followed that distance education institutions and their staff took particular concern to support students.

More than ever before, especially in the context of widening participation in education, the institution and its staff must be on the learner's side. There are pragmatic as well as moral reasons for this. Institutional budgets with public funding elements increasingly have a requirement in relation to reporting retention rates rather than simply enrolment rates. There is an argument which suggests that the medium of delivery and the quality of the content, whilst important, is less important than the way in which a student is treated by an institution and its staff. Many people deride the notion of *customer* when applied to education (cf. for example Van Voorhis and Falkner on this subject in this volume), and certainly students have reciprocal responsibilities to the institution. For example, they must do the assignments and complete examination papers, comply with rules, and maintain standards but it is helpful to think of students as customers when it comes to the way we provide support services for them. It is also important in this context to constantly survey what students want from the institution. Some of the following stories illustrate how easy it is for an institution to think solely of the provision they make rather than the way in which they interact with and support students in their learning:

A professor at a Northern University in the UK vowed in the 1960s to make her department the best in the country. In order to do this she said, she would not award a first class honours degree for 10 years.

A professor in a European country boasted to his colleagues that his courses were of the highest quality in the institution as he had a 90% failure rate.

A Northern UK University in the 1970's had an admissions policy which saw it take in far more students in the first year than it had places for in the second and subsequent years. It simply removed 1/3rd of its first year students at the end of the year regardless of the quality of the bottom 1/3rd of the students.

On the other hand, there are examples from the other end of the spectrum. While most of post compulsory education still takes place in off-putting school-like buildings, it is

interesting to note that *Learndirect*, the UK national sub-degree on-line learning system, has made great efforts to move its learning centres out of conventional educational institutions to places like railway stations, football grounds and community centres in order to attract a wider audience to its courses.

Institutional empathy can be demonstrated in many ways. Perhaps the most important is in the balance between the flexibility of systems and their role in ensuring equality of support and provision. Clearly there have to be rules and procedures. However, institutions dealing with adult and younger students must ensure that procedures can be waived in individual cases. Dealing with such 'exceptions' costs money but may well be a major element in reducing avoidable student withdrawal. Personal contact is also important. Gaskell and Simpson (2000) suggest that a friendly and empathetic tutor is far more influential in student success than the formal commenting on scripts or excellent course materials. For a fuller discussion of the issue of institutional empathy, cf. Paul (1990) and Mills and Paul (1993).

3. Use Resources in the Best Possible Way for the Students

Despite increasing awareness of the need to support students, institutional priorities in the past and present have rarely reflected the needs of students as individuals in resource allocation. Perhaps because much distance education is predicated on a cost model which requires a large up-front investment and relatively low running costs, institutional managers have always seen the production of learning materials as a wealth generating activity and student support as a cost (Mills, 2002). Various attempts have been made over the years to argue the case for giving higher priority to advice and guidance to students but in the end generic study skills work, careers advice and personal educational counselling and support have always taken second place to the materials, to correspondence and face-to-face teaching or other forms of direct course/subject related support from a subject expert.

Looking back at the history of student support in the Open University, it feels sometimes as if those of us involved did not make the case sufficiently well in economic terms. Simpson (2003) has demonstrated that activities leading to the retention of students can be just as economically beneficial to an institution as the production of high quality course materials. Just as it has been argued that ICT has led to the convergence of distance with other forms of more traditional education systems (Mills, 1999), it is interesting to reflect on how ICT is influencing the cost structures of distance education institutions and the balances between course production and student support. This is discussed under point 4 below. The development of work-based and work related learning is another contributing factor to the increasing emphasis on teaching and student support rather than materials production.

One very effective use of new technology is to track student progress in order to help ensure that appropriate support interventions are made at critical times for the student. Simpson (2003a) has shown that proactive student support can reduce withdrawal by about 4.5% if accurately targeted and sympathetically handled (p. 129). Customer Relationship Management systems have a critical part to play in the future for ensuring students feel part of large systems but in the end we have to recognise that it is the personal contact and understanding which is critical to student support and student success.

4. Use ICT in a Careful and Creative Way for Improving Teaching, Learning and Assessment

It can readily be argued that ICT is a major force in breaking down barriers between those who produce learning materials, those who support and tutor students and indeed between the teacher and the learners. This is having the effect of breaking down the division of labour and opening the way for individual academics to engage directly with students. This in turn is influencing the role of the part-time Associate Lecturers (and tutors) who sometime may feel that their role might be reduced to one of correspondence. If ICT can help to remove the separation of course writers from learners, so much the better. However, it will probably always be the case that in high volume contexts, staff who produce learning materials will not be involved in supporting and assessing students.

It is generally accepted that cost of production of high quality web-based learning materials is significantly higher than that of print although providing greater pedagogic opportunities for teachers and learners. This might suggest that we are on an inflationary track with the costs of production of materials ever increasing as more and more opportunities become available for more and more elaborate ways of teaching. There are three points to make in rejecting this suggestion.

The first is that some institutions are beginning to share the development costs of web-based materials through open source movements and the development of reusable learning objects. Secondly it is clear that the role of teacher has changed from one of information provider and explainer to resource manager and selector of information and learning opportunities from the Web or from other sources. This should reduce the time spent by academic staff in simply preparing and transmitting information though the lecture mode and enable them to spend more time working with individual students or in small groups, thus providing a greater level of student support for the same cost. This might also help to avoid the temptation of academics producing materials aimed more at impressing their peers than at supporting their students. The availability of resources on the Web changes the whole dynamic of teaching and learning. A student's ability to sift and assess the vast quantities of information and opinion on the Web is an increasingly significant and important skill to develop as part of the educational process. Thirdly the use of ICT enables, somewhat paradoxically, a more personal approach to teaching.

At Empire State College, New York, individuals (or more usually and better for quality assurance, pairs of academics) write 'courses' which guide students in the learning from the Web and from a range of other sources. These learning materials are sent to relatively small groups of students (approximately 20) who then 'meet' with the academic and each other on-line to discuss issues arising from the course. The whole process (materials preparation, academic marks, comment on students' assignments) is simpler than the model of the OUUK where there is a division of labour among these tasks, at least on large population courses.

The impact of ICT on assessment is significant in a number of ways. In the first place it enables efficiency in submitting assignments electronically to tutors, thus reducing the amount of paper used, of time between dispatch of assignments and receipt of comments/ grades, and easing the processes of quality assurance of the tutor's work. Secondly, learning and assessment can be integrated in new ways. In a very interesting paper,

Jordan, Butcher and Ross (2003) describe the development of a Web-based assessment system by which remote students take a credit-bearing test on line at the end of a Maths for Science course. During the test, students receive immediate, targeted feedback on their answers and are awarded a mark which reflects the amount of help they have been given by the computer system in arriving at their answers. Clearly, as such systems are developed, the costs of assessment will be reduced and at the same time, students will get more feedback on their performance. Such assessment systems might not have universal application in all disciplines, but the development of an electronically submitted assignment system has huge potential in that it reduces costs for students and the institution and speeds up the return of comments from the tutor to the student.

Use of both synchronous and asynchronous computer conferencing opens many possibilities for the reduction of the isolation felt by many students and tutors who work in distance education systems. The OUUK now has a huge number of student conferences, some official, some run by the Students' Association and some completely unofficial. What is clear is that many students do use such systems and benefit from them greatly. What is also clear is that the downloading of course materials to students is unlikely to replace the printed word in the foreseeable future except in a small number of courses where the medium is linked to the content (e.g. in distance education courses).

Each application of technology should be examined carefully for impact on students, both positive and negative.

Looking Forward

So what of the future? There is no doubt that the use of a range of powerful systems, of on-line and mobile communications, is already having a significant impact on the provision of learning opportunities at a distance as noted above. When looking to the future, there are so many issues to consider but only space to address one. It is not difficult to identify one overriding issue, and that is the digital divide.

5. Give Absolute Priority to Reducing the Digital Divide

Used thoughtfully and as part of an overall package of blended learning, there is no doubt that the Internet and ICT more generally provide a very real and exciting new generation of opportunities to teach, assess, and support students. As such, it is easy to succumb to the lure of ICTs, to aspire to an on-line approach to all communications with learners. However, it is important to remember that access is still a barrier for many learners. Although, this is changing, with the rapid introduction of broadband, we must avoid the temptation to do what is easiest for the teacher and the institution regardless of the implications for learners. We constantly try to guard against a producer-led curriculum and we must also guard against a producer-led mode of delivery.

In rich and particularly in poorer countries, there remain many people who do not have access to the world wide web in their own homes or local communities. Many are still unable to afford the price of a computer and telephone line charges. A current research project, jointly managed by the Open University in the East of England and the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education is looking at the impact of ICT on social exclusion in the East of England (Open University, 2003). The findings are not a foregone conclusion, but the hypothesis is that ICT will help people to be less socially excluded.

One possibility for increasing access for those who are unable to have home-based access is through Internet cafes or in community centres.

In poorer countries, where there is a very limited system of land-based connectivity, the mobile phone is being used increasingly for student support. Gaskell and Mills (2004) consider whether the telephone has become a neglected technology in distance education and Brown (2004), in a very powerful paper, describes how the use of the mobile phone is rapidly developing in Africa with some 100 million phones expected to be in use by 2006. He notes that 1750 students at the University of Pretoria receive support via mobile phones from their tutors. Despite concerns about access, there is absolutely no doubt that ICT provides a range of great opportunities to develop systems to support and teach students in the future. If we keep a check on those who see opportunities for financial gain and exploitation of students and we remember that in the end that it is people and not materials, systems or gadgets that ultimately make a distance education system successful, the student experience will be greatly enhanced by the increasing use of current technologies and by those as yet unimagined.

Finally, one area that we have not yet successfully addressed is how those institutions in rich countries can provide learning resources for use by those in poorer countries. This is not the place to go into detail about some of the related issues but it does seem very important to stop distance teaching institutions reinventing the wheel in content production in print and on-line. It is very expensive to produce good learning materials, and resources could be applied more effectively to serve more learners, particularly in poorer countries. We are still relatively inexperienced in the process of adapting materials and producing reusable learning objects. However, work is being done in both of these areas and progress is being made. We should all follow MIT's lead in this respect and make our materials open source and developing the notions of reusable learning objects. The Commonwealth of Learning is doing an excellent job in trying to enable materials produced in one part of the Commonwealth to be used more widely. If such work can be developed further, Distance Education could be the most powerful tool for the global, trans-national improvement of education at all levels. Institutions could then shift the balance of their work from course production to learner support.

A recent Guardian (2003) newspaper editorial comments as follows on the draft declaration of the world summit on the information society which opened in Geneva on 10th December 2003:

> The problem is translating good intentions in to action. Nowhere is action more important than in bridging the digital divide between those with instant access to the internet's treasure trove and those who do not. While the digital divide is narrowing within richer countries-about half of all households in the UK now have access - it is widening between the industrialised and developing worlds mainly because of the slow pace of change in the latter. About 90% of global internet users come from industrialised countries even though they have less than 20% of the world's population. Africa, which makes up 19% of the world population is home to only 1% of internet users. The possibility of satellite and wireless links offers Africa the prospect of leapfrogging over a whole generation of fixed-link telecommunication infrastructure - but little progress seems to have been made despite ambitious plans (¶ 1).

What better way of ending a chapter about looking to the future than to reflect on the power of distance learning, partly through the internet, to start to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, between those desperate for educational opportunities and those who regard them as a right to be used or not as they choose. The Guardian (2003) editorial continues:

> That is why the role of the UN is so important. A mission to diffuse technology is different from so many other highly charged situations the UN inherits. In this case it starts with a clean sheet and oceans of goodwill. This will not be much of a help without enhanced resources - but at least richer countries have an incentive to help since they manufacture most of the hardware and software that will be purchased. There are few more noble returns on capital than using western money to speed the information revolution in developing countries – at an affordable price. But the consequences of failure could be disastrous (¶ 3).

The use of distance education to support universal primary education, equality, reduction in child mortality and to address the other UN Millennium goals is the greatest challenge to distance educators in the next 30 years.

References

Brown, T. (2004). *Towards a model for m-learning in Africa*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Gaskell, A. & Mills, R. (2004). Supporting students by telephone: A technology for the future of student support. In U. Bernath & András Szucs (Eds.), *Proceedings of the EDEN Third Research Workshop: Supporting the Learner in Distance Education and E-Learning* (pp. 462-467). Oldenburg: Bibliotheks-und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg.

Gaskell, A. & Simpson, O. (2000). Student support in distance education – What do students want from their tutor? In E. Wagner & A. Szücs (Ed.), *Proceedings of the EDEN First Research Workshop: Research and Innovation in Open and Distance Learning*. (pp. 120-122). Budapest: European Distance Education Network.

Guardian Newspaper. (2003, December 10). Across the great divide - Editorial. (2003, December 10). *Guardian Newspaper*, 3 para. Retrieved June 10, 2004, from http://www.guardian.co.uk/leaders/story/0,3604,1103599,00.html

Midgely, S. (2003, October 28). Distant choices. *Guardian Newspaper, Education Supplement*.

Jordan, S., Butcher, P., & Ross, S. (2003). *Mathematics assessment at a distance*. Retrieved September 29, 2003, from http://1tsn.mathstore.ac.uk/articles/maths-caa-series/july2003/index.shtml

Mills, R. (1999). Diversity, convergence and the evolution of student support in higher education in the UK. In A. Tait, & R. Mills (Eds.), *Patterns of flexibility for the individual learner: The convergence of open and distance learning and conventional education* (pp. 71-85). London: Routledge.

Mills, R. (2002). The centrality of learner support in open and distance learning: a paradigm shift in thinking. In A. Tait, & R. Mills (Eds.), *Rethinking learner support in open and distance education: Change and continuity in an international context* (pp. 102-113). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Mills, R., & Paul, R.H. (1993). Putting students first: Management for quality in distance education. In T. Evans, & D. Nation (Eds.), *Reforming open and distance education* (pp. 113-129). London: Kogan Page.

Open University. (2003). *Overcoming social exclusion through online learning*. A joint research project by the Open University and the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education; supported by the Community Fund. Contact information available at http://www.niace.org.uk/Research/ICT/overcomingSE.htm

Paul, R.H. (1990). *Open learning and open management: Leadership and integrity in distance education*. London: Kogan Page.

Simpson, O. (2003). *The cost-benefit case for new student retention*, Open University Internal Paper. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Simpson, O. (2003a). *Student retention in online, open and distance learning.* London: Kogan Page.

Tait, A. (2003, April). Editorial: Reflections on student support in open and distance learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 4*(1). Retrieved February 2, 2004, from http://www.irrodl.org/content/v4.1/tait_editorial.html