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Why Research Distance Learning?

John Daniel
Assistant Director-General for Education
UNESCO

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be with you. I begin by congratulating the Open University of Hong Kong in general, and CRIDALA in particular, for the tremendous contribution they are making to the practice of open and distance learning around the world. I have been privileged to serve on the Council of OUHK on two occasions. The first was in the late 1980s. It was then called the Hong Kong Open Learning Institute and I well remember when it published its first prospectus in 1989. The people of Hong Kong queued up around the block to get hold of copies and we realised that we might have a success on our hands.

My second period of service as a Council member was in the late 1990s. The highlight of that time was the achievement of full university status. In one of the last acts of the British colonial administration, the Hong Kong Open Learning Institute became the Open University of Hong Kong. It was a proud moment. No institution of higher education in Hong Kong had ever won university status so quickly, which is a tremendous tribute to the staff and students of OUHK and to its three presidents, Professors Swift, Dhanarajan and Tam.

There are two aspects of this success that are especially striking. The first is that OUHK has had to develop quickly to the point where it supports its operations from the fee income that it collects. The government has provided funds for capital expenditure but now contributes little to the recurrent budget.

Against that background the second striking aspect of OUHK's success makes it unique. It has made a commitment to develop research as an essential part of its academic activity. CRIDALA is one expression of that role. I congratulate Professor Jegede on what he and CRIDALA have achieved in a short time and I commend him for his personal commitment to helping restart the Open University in his native Nigeria.

Its financial structure imposes a daily discipline on OUHK in the present and research activity symbolises its academic aspirations for the future. This combination of operational effectiveness and intellectual ambition has allowed OUHK and its staff to carry away many international prizes for excellence in the last few years. This conference is another manifestation of the world-class status of the Open University of Hong Kong.

The title of my contribution is simply *Why Research Distance Learning?* I was originally scheduled to give this address at the beginning of the conference but my arrival was delayed by a meeting of the Ministers of Education of the

Nordic countries in Oslo earlier this week. However, I have decided to stick to this title even though my remarks now have a retrospective rather than a prospective role. There is never a bad time to ask basic questions.

My talk falls naturally into two parts. First, I shall suggest three answers to the question in my title, why research distance learning. Second, I shall suggest three areas where, in my view, research is particularly important.

Why research distance learning?

My three reasons why we should research distance learning all begin with the letter E. The first E stands for *evidence*, which we as academics should seek out and respect. The second E stands for *expectations*, which the development of distance learning has created. The third E stands for *environment*, which is changing. I shall say a word about each, starting with *evidence*.

Those of us who work in universities have made a personal commitment to the academic mode of thinking. This is an approach that weighs the evidence, if necessary conducting experiments to gain more evidence, and tries to form hypotheses about the way the world works that have general application. Usually the formulation of hypotheses allows us to conduct further experiments in order to test them. This is the basis of the research activity of universities, including OUHK.

It is true, sadly, that in the past universities have rarely applied the academic mode of thinking to their teaching activities. This is odd, because higher education is now a rather large economic sector in most countries. Other economic sectors of similar size would take it for granted that their activities should be illuminated by ongoing research. Those of us involved in distance learning have the chance to change that embarrassing state of affairs and we should take it. The basis of university life is the academic dogma that knowledge is important. We must be true to our calling and increase the knowledge available about distance learning.

This brings us to the second reason for researching distance learning. I refer to the great *expectations* that it has inspired. Politicians, businesspeople and increasingly the general public, have the idea that distance learning can change radically the face of education, especially higher education. We have a duty to let them know whether or not these expectations are grounded in reality. Those who apply technology to cars, computers, medicine or media, usually have clear aims. They want to make things better, faster, safer or more user-friendly.

I like to express the analogous aims for education in what I call the eternal triangle made up of the vectors of access, quality and cost. A year at UNESCO has reinforced my view that, to be useful in education, technology must help us increase access, improve quality or reduce cost. If it can do all of these at the same time then it is truly a helpful development – even a revolutionary one. We should research distance learning to see whether it can reshape the eternal triangle. I shall come back to that in a minute.

The third reason for researching distance learning is the *environment* in which it takes place. It is a changing environment. Conventional classroom education has used the same approach for decades, even centuries. It has

evolved a relatively stable set of methods and there are no irresistible pressures to change them. Distance learning, on the other hand, cannot avoid change.

This is not just because new technologies become available, but also because old technologies become unavailable. Early in my career, when I was at Quebec's Télé-université, we used to send 33rpm vinyl records to students with the audio material for the course. You could not do that today. Today many distance-learning institutions send out videocassettes. Before long those too will be obsolete. Since no technology is an exact replacement for the one it supplants we must at least research our use of technologies. Once you start doing that you will find that the study of distance learning is rather like overcooked spaghetti; once you pull on one strand you find you are engaged with the whole tangled mass.

Those then, are three reasons for researching distance learning. Where do they lead us in practical terms? What are some of the priorities for research? Since time is limited let me identify three broad areas of importance. Just as the letter E linked my three reasons for doing research, the letter C links the three topics that I see as priorities. The first C is for *concepts* of media use. We can conceive of the use of particular media in different ways. How do these different designs impact on the learners who use those media?

The second C is for *costs*. Most people prefer to avoid talking about costs. At the end of the day, however, it is by reducing costs that technologies cause revolutions. We must base our assertions about the cost structures of distance learning on more than wishful thinking.

My third C is really two Cs – *collaboration* and *combination*. Distance learning has spawned many collaborative ventures between institutions. Which models of collaboration work best and why? This is closely linked to the trend to combine distance learning and traditional methods, with information and communication technology providing the bridge between the two. Here again, what works best and why? In particular, how do these collaborations and combinations impact on the teaching staff?

It is not my purpose here to set out a research-funding proposal in each of these areas, but let me make a few comments about each, starting with research on concepts of media use and on the way that learners actually use media. The pioneer of research on the learner use of media was Tony Bates, who is now at the University of British Columbia but began a programme of research on learning media in distance education in the early days of the Open University. The research on media use at the UK Open University – and in other open universities – stands out, in both quality and relevance, against the mass of trivial and badly conceived research that has been spawned as distance learning has become fashionable in conventional campus institutions.

This research is badly conceived because its main purpose seems to be to compare distance learning to classroom teaching. Indeed, it is usually worse than that. It seeks to compare instruction through a single medium, such as the Web or teleconferencing, with classroom instruction. There are two main problems with that.

The first is why should classroom teaching be a benchmark when everyone knows from experience that learning in classrooms is not particularly effective nor efficient? The second is that any sensible teaching and learning system, including the classroom, is a complex reality. The most visible medium in such systems, such as lecturing in a classroom, is only the tip of an iceberg that includes other activities, not least the homework done by individual students and the discussions that take place between students about that homework. Simply to compare the tips of two icebergs, to continue with that analogy, tells you little about the differences between the larger masses of ice below the waterline.

We need instead to study the way that learners use a particular medium within the context of all the other media and methods that make up that particular teaching and learning system. This must be done from the student's point of view. Let me give two simple examples.

First, if students are told that a particular media component is included in the course for enrichment purposes and will not be the subject of questions in the examination, then many students will rate it as unimportant no matter how brilliant its producers think it is. Second, a television programme sent out as a videocassette or DVD is quite different from the same programme broadcast on air, simply because the student can readily stop it, rewind it and replay it. I could give many more examples but you get the idea. Start from where the student is.

My second priority topic for research is costs. This is a complex area where, once again, people associated with open universities, such as Tony Bates and Greville Rumble, have done much of the best work. However, researching this area does have the advantage that you have to break away from the standard comparisons with classroom instruction. That is because most campus universities have no idea what their cost structures are at a detailed level.

My own preference is to study the total and marginal costs of different elements of distance learning systems in relation to student numbers and to try to compare this with the learning effectiveness of each medium. This is easier said than done, but it does have the virtue of showing you quite quickly if the medium in which you propose to make an investment is either not scaleable or not valued by students. I believe that the distinction between independent and interactive learning activities that I made twenty-five years ago still provides a useful lens through which to look at the costs and effectiveness of different media.

Researching costs may be complicated but my final topic, namely the impact on staff of collaborative ventures and of combinations of distance learning and traditional teaching, is a nightmare. This is partly because each example tends to be *sui generis* and partly because it takes us straight into the areas of institutional and inter-institutional politics. Nevertheless, it is very important that we study and document the way in which Internet technology is blurring the line between distance learning and traditional classroom teaching.

It is particularly important that we analyse the impact of these developments on the academic staff. Several scholars, notably David Noble in Canada and

Carole Fungaroli in the United States, have boosted their careers by becoming standard bearers for hostility towards distance education and online learning. This is good and we should welcome the debate they are generating. We should welcome it – but we should also bring solid evidence to the debate in order to take it forward. That requires research.

Conclusion

I will end these brief comments there. As scholars engaged in researching distance learning you are making an important contribution to the renewal of education in general and higher education in particular. I have suggested three reasons that should motivate your work. First, expressing the academic ideal in the search for evidence. Second, bringing realism to the great expectations people have for distance learning. Third, helping the practitioners of distance learning react intelligently to a changing technological environment.

In this spirit I have indicated three important topics among the many that you could choose. First, studying how we conceive the use of media from the student's perspective. Second, understanding the cost structures of distance learning more fully. Third, assessing the effect of the evolution of distance learning on staff as traditional and online methods become intertwined.

I hope those thoughts illuminate your own reflections and I wish you success in your important work.

References

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