

# **The Challenges of ODL, Open and Distance Learning, for Higher Education in Europe**

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The advent of new ICT and the WWW has encouraged educational institutions to think that ODL is no longer the sole province of specialist institutions working only with students located somewhere other than at a University or College campus. Increasingly, all higher education institutions are looking at what new technology and ODL offers both for their existing students and for potential 'new' students. The latter frequently referred to as part of the drive towards wider or increased participation in education and lifelong learning. It is also seen as an important means for facilitating co-operation and collaboration between different educational actors and institutions within and across Europe as well as I will discuss presently more globally.

Much of the political interest in Lifelong learning is of course a reaction and response to the so-called transition from the Industrialised Society to the Information Society. To this extent it is worth being mindful of Manuel Castells comments in his widely acknowledged book *The Rise of the Network Society*. In it he states:

*'Of course technology does not determine society. Neither does society script the course of technological change since many factors, including individual inventiveness and entrepreneurialism intervene in the process of scientific discovery, technological innovation, and social applications, so that the final outcome depends on a complex pattern of interactions' (Castells, 1997)*

In the same way, neither does technology determine, nor should it determine, education processes but it is equally difficult for educational institutions to script the impact that technology will have upon education practice and learning processes.

This said many commentators are raising questions about the adequacy of current models and approaches to higher education. The increased capacity for global communication, together with the easy access to information rich repositories accessible via the Internet and/or WWW has led educationalist to suggest we need to change our teaching and learning approaches. We need they claim to move from a predominantly instructional paradigm of teaching and learning to a more constructionist one.

In essence the traditional role of, particularly, University and College lecturers has been until now one of expert researcher and/or teacher in their declared field of study. In the role of teacher we have traditionally been required to convey to our students a critical understanding of the accepted body of knowledge in our field. However, on the one hand the very idea that there is an accepted single body of knowledge in a given field has itself been seriously challenged from a number of different stances, in recent years. And, on the other hand, the increase in access to ideas and knowledge, some would argue, is or will inevitably radically change these expectations upon the role of teachers.

Writers such as Dale Spender (in her book *Nattering on the Web*) suggest, for example that teachers will become teachers of human beings rather than of a particular subject and that rather than reading books in order to know, people will use computers to do their own learning. They will, she claims, become creators of information rather than receivers of it. She goes as far as to suggest that in the future we should not think in terms of knowers and learners but, instead, of users. Her thinking is influenced by the recognition that in the future what will be important is not the amount of information we hold in our heads but the way we use and create information that is in our computers and accessible through the WWW. (much as we already use calculators for what we once did in our heads )

Dale Senders ideas may be amongst the more radical views about the extent new technology will impact on the way we think about and approach education. There is however a more widespread acceptance of the need be considering the use of less instructional approaches and move towards more constructional approaches to teaching

and learning. As I have already stated ICT supported ODL with both its capacity to increase access to information and it must be said provide support for communication and collaboration between learners is seen by many as potentially more inherently able to support constructionist approaches to teaching and learning. But remember Manuel Castells warning and let us not forget that technology can not in itself determine educational practice. Indeed if we look at what actually happens in the great majority of existing Web-based and online courses there remains a large instructional dimension to them. As shown in a recent study published by G. Tenenbaum, S.Naidu, O.Jegede and J.Austin (2001) there is still a wide difference between theory and practice with respect to interest in constructionist approaches to learning. In their study Tenenbaum et.al first sought to elaborate what constructionism looks like in practice through an online discussion with pedagogical and educational experts. The authors come up with the following 8 indices of constructionism;

1. ethos/environment (learner-centred; tutor or content centred; neutral or indecisive)
2. authenticity of content (realistic/real world; theoretical)
3. learners' personal experiences (sought or offered and utilised; not sought or utilised)
4. learner-learner interaction (encouraged; not sought; encouraged and tutor participation)
5. learner "thinking aloud" (development of student own line of thinking encouraged; not sought or encouraged)
6. feedback on contributions (positive and encouraged; negative or dismissive)
7. development of thinking skills/understanding (dominant; partial or incident neglected), and
8. learners contributions to tutorials (publicly valued; not valued; not sought)

Tenenbaum et. al. used these indices to study 17 telephone tutorials and 20 distance learning units only to find little evidence of the incorporation of any constructionist principles or strategies. Tenebaum et. al. suggest that ignorance of constructionism is likely to be the main explanation of the inability or reluctance of tutors to conduct what were labeled tele-tutorials but were in it seems in practice largely monological mini-lectures. It is, however, a salutary reminder of how little of existing educational practice incorporates constructionist principles.

The picture is much the same when we look at many of the ODL/Minerva Socrates projects despite the frequent claims and statements made in many project proposals about the importance of using ICT to support more constructionist approaches. It has to be acknowledged that within the constraints of existing educational and indeed accreditation systems it is not an easy thing to move from predominately instructional based approaches to teaching and learning to more constructionist ones. In a recent survey that I did of some of the ODL projects that had explicitly struggled with the issues involved a key aspect of all of their experiences was the significance and importance of confronting states of uncertainty when working with more constructionist models of teaching and learning. The need to come to terms with and accept complexity and diversity when and if working across the kind of boundaries and constraints they encountered was perhaps the key idea/issue to emerge from examination of the projects.

Seymour Papert would however claim that it is important that educationists accept that they increasingly need to work with these kinds of difficulties and complexities. Seymour Papert has discussed at length the inherent complexity and rapidly changing nature of society as it becomes ever more digitalised and knowledge based. He claims that current education provision is based on an industrialised model of society. He believes however this model of education no longer reflects the complex and constantly changing world that we now live in. He describes it as a production-line organisation of the product of school of which the idea of the linear curriculum is a manifestation. Papert argues that the new avenues of learning opened up by digital technology will oblige us to give up such a linear curriculum mode of dissemination of knowledge (Papert, 1998). Papert is referring mostly to schools but his comments are I would suggest as equally relevant to higher education.

What is perhaps most interesting about the ODL/Minerva Socrates projects is they all by definition have to work with complex situations and differences. This is the case whether or not they are in practice either attempting to work with constructionist principles of education or even really engage with the different educational challenges and or opportunities that arise from being able to offer courses via the Web or via other online

environments. By definition they have to have partners from at least three different countries and this immediately brings up cultural and language differences, different education traditions and different perspectives on Europe and European issues and indeed on the status and nature of knowledge. They are as one might expect more or less successful in dealing with these differences. An examination of the issues and problems they encounter are all, however, arguably, significant ones for European Higher Education.

Some of the issues or problems (not including technological issues) that the projects most frequently mention are;

- Use of the English language as the linguafranco
- Insufficient acknowledgment of different approaches and attitudes to UG/Master/Doctoral work in different countries
- Difficulties of integration and academic recognition of work done online as opposed to as part of conventional studies/courses
- Difficulties of coordinating the timing of virtual meetings
- Insufficient attention given to the process and the changing or different roles/responsibilities of both tutors and students

Arguably one of the mistakes most commonly made by consortium is to try to impose a single framework and solution on all partners in an attempt to overcome these problems. An interesting article recently published by three of the partners from a Belgium Coordinated project, Learn-net, is I think very insightful on this point. Learn-nett is a Higher Education project that aims to develop a collaborative learning environment for teacher education students from 9 institutions in 5 different countries. The intention was to provide the pedagogical support and tools for students to do collaborative projects with students from another University than their own. What is interesting about Learn-nett is its recognition of the need to both provide a central frame and allow for local autonomy. They sought to attain a common vision of collaborative learning shared by all partners without imposing a common solution for implementing that vision.

In practice this meant that each University designed its own pedagogical scenario within which the collaborative projects were located taking into account both they're own

situation and the common characteristics of the learning environment. Some aspects were consequently constant across the institutions and some variable. In the paper recently published by the project they describe these characteristics as follows (Bonamy, Charlier and Saunders, 2001)

- The subject domains should be wide with low specifications of content
- The learning environment should have high specification of learning process
- The learning environment should allow for high level of learner decision making on content
- Subject tutors should adopt the role of facilitator, not instructor
- Learning process takes place in team
- A technical infrastructure must be in place
- A minimum of technical and procedural training must be offered
- Additional time is required for group formation, decisions on project goals, methods, etc.
- Different time allocation and assessment requirements of members of the cross institutional team should be specified
- Tutors will help teams to develop flexible academic ‘outcomes’ [products] so that aspects of collaborative experience can be assessed at different times in the learning process. The collaboration should allow for different exit points

As I have already indicated new technology and associated ODL courses not only allow for greater co-operation and collaboration at the European level but also allow far greater opportunities for penetration into Europe of non-European education providers. As I mentioned in my abstract it has been claimed that the ‘big’ players will come to dominate the education ‘market’ and become global providers. Specifically, it is suggested selected, generally, US based institutions working in partnership with large corporate organisations are the biggest threat to existing institutions and approaches to Higher Education. A view that clearly has important implications for both European Institutions

of Higher Education and, indeed, for those working in the management and business studies fields in particular.

At a conference held at Lancaster last year Dale Spender gave an address which dealt very explicitly with this issue she pointed out that there was an enormous increase in the US and increasingly else where in the number of Corporate Universities.

Her basic message was it seemed summed up in the following comment and accompanying quote from Lester Thurow:

*“Education is being transformed into the learning business and there are many new and highly influential players on the global scene. It’s not just the corporate universities, it is the for-profit businesses as well.*

*And as Lester Thurow suggests in his book Creating Wealth, it will be “the profit making business firms rather than the nonprofit universities that will be the best positioned to be the prime educational institutions of the future.*

*For the sceptics he has the following message:*

*Think of the recent rapid changes in health care (in the United States). An industry that had been dominated by non-profit hospitals for a century was within a decade converted to an industry dominated by for-profit HMOs.”*

Dale Spender was reflecting in this talk a message that is increasingly repeated elsewhere. Not everyone takes this view but it is clearly one that has to be at least considered. Equally we should be mindful of until relatively recently the American dominance of Web-based education and the continuing dominance of use of English on the Web. A paper written by Boshier, Wilson and Qayyum (1999), who are Canadian academics, gives some interesting thoughts on this issue not least the way Web-based education constitutes one of the so-called ‘soft technologies’ that positions American culture and values as the norm and serves significantly better US interests than those of

other nations. Boshier et. al do, however, seem to assume that Web-based courses are and will remain basically defined by content and instruction rather than by dialogue and construction and it is with this point that I would like to close. I believe the key challenge of ODL for Higher Education in Europe is to use the opportunities afforded by ICT and the Web to increase the level of dialogue and collaboration between learners and to seek to actively engage with and learn through that dialogue. I think we do need to move from delivering content via the Web to creating learning via the Web.

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