Open Learning Expert Interview. David Sewart, Greville Rumble, Graham Gibbs, and Anne Gaskell choose individual papers to discuss and to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the journal

David Sewart

I have taken the opportunity of going back through Open Learning from its beginnings in 1986 and also going back even further to its predecessor, Teaching at a Distance, which began in 1974. I took over the Chair of the Editorial Board of Open Learning in its second year, 1987, so I’ve known all its Editors over the years. It’s been fascinating to see how our journal has developed but how do you pick out a single article of particular significance? For me the answer has to be, you can’t, so I’ve taken one of the articles which exemplifies what I believe is the challenge in open and distance learning. It’s an article by Rye and Zubaidah from 2008 on the Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia. The authors look at the openness of open universities in an ICT era, using the Universitas Terbuka masters programme in Public Administration as a case study, and their report on the digital divide in action. The lack of access to the internet, private access very expensive and unreliable, work access complicated by shortage of time and lack of suitability for places to study, internet cafés few and far between. This is a theme which has been touched on in many other articles in our journal and of course it’s compounded in Indonesia as in many other parts of the world by an equally unreliable postal service.

But has this or something like it always been a problem? In 1990 there appeared in Open Learning an earlier article on Universitas Terbuka. The speed of ICT development was brought home to me by the fact that this earlier access, only 18 year earlier, predated, actually predated the ICT revolution. The problem that was being identified in 1980 was the difficulties which students at the Universitas Terbuka faced, in attending tutorials. Students, so it was reported, were disenfranchised because pressures of work, family pressures, as well as travel distance and costs, were major stumbling blocks to attendants. Now, I thought to myself, I was working for the UK OU at the beginning of 1971 when it took in its first cohort of students. Its television and radio programmes were broadcast by the BBC, but at that time many people in the UK still didn’t have a television, and in addition many students couldn’t receive on their televisions the channel which the BBC was using, BBC 2. So students had to go to one of the Open University’s study centres, or as some people might remember, ‘viewing centres’ as we called them, to watch the programmes. Now in the article on the Universitas Terbuka, the students of the university reported that difficulty was in access to the internet, but still any access at all was an advantage over no access, and of course, 18 years earlier they were saying the same thing about tutorial provision. “It’s hard to attend tutorials but we like tutorials so keep them going”. And the same was true for the Open University students who couldn’t receive television broadcasts in their homes in 1971. They didn’t want the broadcasts removed; they would make efforts so that from time to time they would go to the viewing centres and be able to see them. And what I learn from this is that we would be wrong to set our models at the lowest common denominator. We must always be planning for the integrated and coherent educational systems of the future. Contributors to Open Learning have provided us with insights into what these are and what they might be, which leads me to the central requirement for Open and Distance
Learning: the management of an emerging strategy. This is a challenge surrounded by the big and intransigent question of logistics, of culture and of politics. How do we plan, manage and sustain an evolving integrated system of open and distance learning? Someday, perhaps somebody will give the answer in Open Learning.

Greville Rumble

Right, well I’ve chosen an article by Mary Thorpe, who was at the Institute, or is at the Institute of Educational Technology in the UK, and this appeared in 2002, Volume 17 Number 2 — ‘Rethinking Learner Support: The challenge of collaborative online learning’. I think what’s interesting about the experience of the Open University and indeed about the history of the journal in itself (which came out of the University) is that it was always based on practice. How do you make a good learning experience for students? How do you help students’ to succeed? And one of the thrusts was always the quality of the materials and so there were lots of articles in the early days on instructional design. The original journal was called Teaching at a Distance and there was an enormous emphasis on the role of tutors and councillors and the way in which the institution structured their experience to help them. I think Mary’s article tackled this issue at a crucial moment in time when computer mediated communications were beginning to take off and affect the way in which distance educators communicated with the students. Because if you think about it, Distance Education used to be criticised by many as having isolated learners, learners who didn’t have tutors they could contact easily, never met tutors, who never met other students, and suddenly you had this technology which enabled tutors and students, and students with students, to communicate incredibly easily.

Mary’s article talks about the interesting issues that lie between the boundary of learners’ support and course design and she suggests that, whereas originally so much of the effort on design was put into the designing of materials, and student support was something that was an afterthought, suddenly the student learning experience became the crux of the whole experience. It was where the really interesting things were happening. Now of course you’ve got Universities like the University of Maryland, University College, who structure courses around the conferences; the textbooks that are required reading are in a sense ancillary to the real student experience. Mary just happened to capture that moment when that change was taking place and she identified the key function and elements at this moment when Distance Education was leaving its roots and changing into what some people saw as a totally new paradigm.

I think her article, I mean it’s only what, 8 years ago now, 2002, is quite interesting too because of the things it doesn’t say. And one of the things she doesn’t talk about is the impact that e-learning has had on the role of the tutor and the fact that most people now when they reflect on teaching by electronic means, supporting students electronically through e-learning and supporting students in traditional distance education, the biggest comment is that their workload has increased significantly, its doubled approximately, and there are all sorts of reasons for this which Mary doesn’t mention. And amongst those reasons are; it takes quite a long time to type in comments to each individual student, far longer than it does to chat to somebody in a classroom. If you are available electronically, you are available 24 hours of the day in theory, 7 days a week. Whereas if you are only available through correspondence tuition, of the old postal variety, then the letter pops
in and you can pop it aside and answer it at your leisure; it doesn’t have the same immediacy. If you go to a tutorial it starts at whatever time, 7 o’clock in the evening and it’s over by 9 o’clock in the evening. All of those boundaries began to go and I don’t think Mary had taken on board exactly the impact.

The other interesting thing I think about her article and what it doesn’t say is that, now that people have begun to be aware of the work-load problems of supporting students electronically, there are all kinds of pressures on institutions to reduce their expenditure by relegating the tutor to a background role and by suggesting that students more or less learn independently and support each other to be independent and group learners. Much of the rhetoric about Web 2.0 technologies currently seems to me to be pushing Distance Education away from precisely the crucial support that Mary was talking about. In a way we are losing, I think, our knowledge base that successful Distance Education required; excellent, well thought out, well structured materials, and it required an excellent and responsive learner support system. I think we need to go back to some of the things Mary talks about in the article, and rethink our current practice in the light of what she says and in the light of our experience about what e-learning has actually brought us.

Graham Gibbs

I’m Graham Gibbs and I edited a special issue of Open Learning about ‘Retention’, and what was different about it from some of the other issues is that I got about half of the articles from people who work in conventional higher education rather than open and distance learning, and I’d been back and looked at my editorial and looked at the articles and what I wanted to do was to pull out some things that stand out to me. If someone was interested in, ok, what do I do to improve retention, and use all of the articles in that issue; this would be my hot list of tips.

So I’m just going to run through things that stand out from these articles. One of them is ‘don’t rely on the students identifying themselves as being at risk’, you have to do it for them because by the time they’ve identified themselves, it’s too late. You have to do it early and you have to find the right students early and intervene yourself, you can’t expect them to voluntarily take up extra support that’s available as it just doesn’t work.

In order to be able to identify them you need good information so you need a management information system that helps you to spot their progress at a micro level. It’s no good spotting them once they’ve dropped out, or once they haven’t completed a course, you need to spot them the first time they don’t submit an assignment. Or you need to know enough about them that you talk to them even before they’ve submitted the first assignment to encourage them to do so, so you need really good information about the students that can be used really quickly and easily by different people in the system.

I guess the next thing would be, what we know about formative assessment about assessment that’s just for the purposes of learning rather than for marks, that we know from a variety of places, that if students tackle an assignment early just in order to learn then they are more likely to last the course. The function of early assignments is really about self efficacy, it’s about student’s believing they can
do it and they get enough confidence to carry on, so early easy assignments just as a learning activity seems to be an important thing to do.

The timing of any interventions you need to do is absolutely crucial. Most drop out decisions happen incredibly early, sometimes almost before a student’s engaged with a course at all. If you wait till half way through a course there is almost no chance of you having much impact on retention, so you can’t wait till someone has missed two assignments or something like that, it’s almost certainly too late by then.

Do cost effectiveness calculations to find out where you are going to spend your scarce resources. Some interventions might look cost effective until you’ve got the data on who it actually keeps in the system. The studies we were doing at the Open University involved using management information systems to track what happened to people, costing the interventions that we made and working out how much it cost per student to keep them in the system, then comparing that with how much you lost if they dropped out of the system. You needed data like that to persuade the accountants because otherwise you would never get the funding you needed for the interventions. You really had to engage with the people who ran the money at the organisation; otherwise you were never going to run the interventions you wanted on the scale that was necessary. So thinking about things in terms of cost effectiveness was crucial to success.

There is another aspect of this that is very conventional to open and distance learning. In conventional institutions, what keeps students in the system is what’s called academic and social integration, and of course in open and distance learning there’s not much social integration. People have said ‘well that’s not a relevant dimension’, well I don’t believe that. I think that there is much more scope than is exploited for peer tutoring, for engagement between students, for students enrolling together in groups and tracking through courses as a group and things like this. They have at least some identity as part of a group of students who are progressing through a course. You don’t achieve that identity in the same way as you do in face to face courses but if you don’t have any at all there is very little that stops students saying ‘I’ve had enough of this I’m going to give up’. What gets students persisting through things that trip them out of courses is some kind of social engagement in the context. The Open University is very light on collaborative learning, peer tutoring and things of that kind. It doesn’t enrol students as cohorts that stay together, so there are a number of social tricks that even institutions that have improved retention are not using.

Another thing I’d say is to try and avoid putting labels on drop out that aren’t appropriate for the students. In conventional higher education in the States, about a half of all the students who drop out, almost immediately sign up at another organisation, another university. They collect their degree from two, three, four universities. Most people who drop out have only dropped side-ways, they’re just collecting the credits they need in one way or another and they don’t see themselves as drop outs; they are continuing with their education, they are just making very practical decisions about where and when it happens. So that’s conventional higher education actually operating like an open system but for each institution it feels as though they’ve failed and the student’s dropped out. Well they haven’t failed, the student has successfully moved on somewhere else. So you have to try and see drop out as a practical decision that students take in the context of the learning that may carry on over a number of years and a number of different providers of education. The accountants’ won’t like that model but it makes more sense to understand that that’s what students are doing.
Finally, the last point is something that came out of the symposium that we organised that led to that special edition of Open Learning on ‘Retention’. There were people there who came from the business world who knew about customer relations, service quality, customer loyalty, things like that, and they were conceptualising what was going on in the same way that a car insurance company would make sure that a client would stay with the same company the next year. They were thinking about what kind of relationship you had with your customer and they were talking about how much more it costs to find a new customer than it does to keep an old customer. The cost effective thing to do is to put time and trouble into keeping your customers so they sign on to future courses. Lots of open learning and distance organisations drop students as soon as they finish a course. Companies that keep customers pay attention to what happens at the end of one contract or one kind of engagement and they make sure that links up with the next engagement. Lots of organisations aren’t very good at that as it’s often an anathema in Education to see students as customers but actually see them like that is actually quite helpful in terms of drop out. I think many of the things I’ve summarised weren’t very well articulated before we had the symposium and we wrote up those articles.

Thank you.

Anne Gaskell

I’m Anne Gaskell and I’m the current editor of Open Learning and I’m very pleased to contribute to celebrating the 25th anniversary of the journal by selecting an important article, however it hasn’t been an easy task. Open Learning has such breadth of scope including articles that are research based, that celebrate good practice and theoretical discussions, and so I’m spoilt for choice. I can recommend to you for example Alan Tait’s discussion on what an Open University’s for, published in 2008. Here he looks at the role of Open Universities and their origins as radical and innovative teaching institutions. I can also recommend Colin Latchem and colleagues’ article on the Open Education System at the Anadolu University in Turkey, published in 2006. Anadolu is one of the world’s largest and least well known mega universities, with over a million distance education students in Turkey and the EU. And the authors look at the ways in which e-learning is being introduced and the challenges faced. This is no small task when less than 6% of the population had a computer with an internet connection.

There are many others that I could be happy to recommend, however in the end I have chosen an article by Carol Bertram from the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa, in which she explores teachers’ reading competencies. Her research demonstrates that more than a third of the distance students on a post graduate bachelor of education programme, were reading a key text at frustration level, and so were unable to engage with its meaning even with the help of tutors, and 90% were working outside their home language. This is especially worrying as Bertram also demonstrates a clear correlation between reading competence and academic success. So I’ve chosen this article for several reasons. The millennium development goals for universal primary education do not at the moment look realisable in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2008 only about 71% of children went to school and 38 million did not. Fully trained and supported teachers are one of the key factors in increasing this target. Bertram not only outlines some of the issues faced, but also proposes some solutions. The second reason I’ve chosen it is that it raises a wide range of issues such as teaching
and support for students working outside their home language, which are of relevance to all
distance teaching institutions, particularly when much of our teaching is done through print,
whether in hardcopy or online. The article also illustrates the breadth and scope of articles published
in the journal. It is a truly international journal and I encourage contributions on all subjects related
to open, distance and e-learning.

Open Learning Expert Interview: Highlighted Articles

Celebrating 25 years of publication!

Take an in-depth look at the significant articles recommended by the past and present editors;
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David Sewart’s recommendations:

Distance education and the complexity of accessing the Internets
Ståle Angen Rye & Ida Zubaidah
Volume 23, Issue 2, 2008, Pages 95 – 102

Student opinion of tutorial provision in the Universitas Terbuka of Indonesia
Yahaya Hiola & Dennis Moss
Volume 5, Issue 2, 1990, Pages 34 – 38

Greville Rumble’s recommendation:

Rethinking Learner Support: the challenge of collaborative online learning
Mary Thorpe
Volume 17, Issue 2, 2002, Pages 105 – 119

Graham Gibbs recommendation:

Graham highlights the 2004 Special Issue about the subject of ‘Retention’ which he edited

Check out the Editorial here:

Editorial
Graham Gibbs
Volume 19, Issue 1, 2004, Pages 3 – 7

Anne Gaskell’s recommendations:

What are open universities for?
Alan Tait
Volume 23, Issue 2, 2008, Pages 85 – 93

The Open Education System, Anadolu University, Turkey: e-transformation in a mega-university
Colin Latchem, Ali Ekrem Özkul, Cengiz Hakan Aydin & Mehmet Emin Mutlu
Volume 21, Issue 3, 2006, Pages 221 – 235
Exploring teachers’ reading competences: a South African case study

Carol Bertram

Volume 21, Issue 1, 2006, Pages 5 – 18