

Open Learning in Transition: An Agenda for Action

Nigel Paine (Ed.)

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494 pages (softbound), including bibliography and index.*

This book, produced for a conference celebrating the 25th anniversary of the National Extension College, Cambridge, England, contains contributions from over 30 people, most of them active practitioners in distance and open learning. Some individuals have contributed more than one paper. The articles concentrate on developments in the UK, with the exception of John Daniel's paper on the development of distance education worldwide and Charles Handy's on management education in four advanced industrial countries. The publishers claim that "this book is essential reading for anyone involved or interested in producing or delivering open-learning systems. The contributors ... provide a wide-ranging and informed analysis of current open-learning initiatives in the UK and offer a critical view of likely developments to the year 2000 and beyond.... This book is ... not only an outstanding account of contemporary developments but an accessible handbook for anyone wishing to open the door onto the current open-learning scene."

Editor Nigel Paine has divided the publication into six parts: five attempt to draw out themes, and the sixth (pp. 437-459) offers a brief resumé of the major issues in the book. This last part also includes a list of questions which Paine feels those involved in open learning will need to address as the field develops. Because the book consists of contributions from so many people, it is not surprising that the division of papers into sections does not always work. The organization also makes it quite difficult to decide on first reading whether the book has something really important to say. Different readers will be seeking different things, and individuals will have to work quite hard to elucidate important messages for themselves. On the other hand, the book does provide a rich view of current concerns and practice in open learning in the UK and rightly suggests a field that is in flux and hence extremely exciting.

Naturally enough, the first part of this book (pp. 1–77) celebrates the achievements of the National Extension College, a remarkable, small, self-financing college which in its short history has been highly innovative in the evolving fields of correspondence, distance, and open learning. Incidentally, the college has also demonstrated the importance of visionary leaders able to identify opportunities, inspire their colleagues with a sense of mission, and institute change to meet new circumstances. Nevertheless, what is said about the NEC is tantalizing but not comprehensive; the various contributors assume the readers are familiar with the institution. (Those who wish to find out more about NEC should examine Hilary Perraton's *The Invisible College: NEC 1963–1979*.)

There can be no doubt that there is a burning need in England for education and training—a point that emerges in part 2 of the book (pp. 79–171) which seeks to explore the wider context of change and development in society and the role which education and training (including open learning) must play in a changing environment. Nevertheless, the central concerns of the book are the subject of parts 3 to 5, which look at major directions and trends for open learning (part 3, pp. 173–230), open learning as a response to changing demand and need (part 4, pp. 231–347), and different methods of open learning (part 5, pp. 349–438).

As one would expect, the quality and character of the numerous contributions varies. Some are essentially case studies (for example, on the Open College, a traditional Further Education college, media-based training in B & Q's chain of retail stores, high tech training in British Steel, and Radio Tay's "Campus Radio"). Another group of papers looks at specific issues, such as collaboration, delivery and new technology, or guidance and counselling. Such articles form a backdrop against which the reader can come to a personal assessment of the value of open learning.

Two issues are particularly intriguing. The first has to do with the nature of open learning. In his paper, John Fricker quotes Professor A. J. R. Cooper's definition of open learning as "an attempt to break down the traditional barriers to training such as pre-qualifications, age, geographical location, availability, scheduling, learning style and cost" (p. 339). Elsewhere in the book open learning is characterized by Roger Lewis as being "essentially a means to enable individuals, of whatever age, to take responsibility for their own learning" in respect of content, learning methods, the place of learning, the time of learning, feedback on progress, and who can help the learning to occur (p. 257). Later Anna Rossetti defines open learning as involving open entry, individualized learning, self-assessment, learner support, self-pacing, and a variety of start dates (pp. 308–309).

Richard Crawley argues that those involved in open learning must address the issue of "distinguishing open learning from correspondence courses or distance learning" (p. 328). He goes on to say that "distance learning conveys a picture of a learner isolated physically from the tutor or other experts, and isolated too from the hub of activity—the teaching or training institution. Open learning in industry, on the other hand, is at its best when it makes the learner's company the hub of activity, with a group of people learning in that organisation. It raises the profile of learning in the client organisation and makes human resource development much less remote as an activity" (p. 331). Elsewhere Roger Lewis argues that *open learning* must not be confused with "*distance learning* or even worse with *correspondence courses*. These terms imply a thin educational experience delivered to isolated learners deprived of those interactions supposedly normal in conventional classrooms" (p. 257).

Such statements seem to lack intellectual rigor. Distance education involves the separation of the teacher and the student in physical terms, such that technical media have to be used to enable the two to communicate. Correspondence education is a particular form of distance education based on print and written assignments and letters, whereas distance education uses a wider range of media. In its "pure" form distance education does not involve physical meetings between teachers and students, but many institutions which are predominantly teaching at a distance arrange for or even require students to meet with teachers while supplementing this with written, telephonic, and computer-based communication. Equally, traditional classroom-based education involves the use of "media"—text books, audio-visual aids, and so on—and, particularly at the higher levels, requires students to work independently from media, using teachers as a resource.

Wholly "contiguous" education (to use Holmberg's [1981] implied term for face-to-face contact—he describes distance education as "non-contiguous communication) and pure distance education are extremes of educational delivery which are rarely seen today. More significantly, distance education liberates students in terms of the time and place of study and, to some extent, what to study, since within the constraints of a course students have an opportunity to miss some sections altogether. Not surprisingly some of the attractive features of distance education are features which are also attractive in open learning.

There are, however, other aspects of openness, relating to both access and content. Access involves the ability to participate; here the time-free and space-free nature of distance education makes it truly open—provided, as Bates warns us, the media used by the institution are accessible to potential students (pp. 365–369). Access also depends on the existence or elimination

of educational barriers, which need to be tackled through policies on open admission, on-demand entry, credit transfer, acceptance of experiential learning, and so on. Both traditional and distance education institutions can be closed in this sense. As Ian McNay states (pp. 217–220), the existence of distance education has been a convenient excuse for traditional institutions in the UK to remain less accessible than they might have been. And Geoffrey Melling rightly points to the American experience, where institutions which teach by traditional means have been more “open” than their British counterparts (pp. 212–215).

More significantly, openness has to do with content and the plurality of information and opinion available to students. The purely instrumental training of B & Q (pp. 318–325) does not seem open. This is not to belittle it; it is efficient and perfectly attuned to its purpose. However, it is not intellectually open, and very few firms (such as Jaguar, p. 318) are willing to invest in a well-educated (as opposed to trained) workforce by offering courses that are not job related. Of course, distance education can also be little short of an instrument for state control over content and a means of isolating students from colleagues who might challenge received ideas, as Tait (1988) argues. As McNay reminds us (p. 221), the artifacts of open learning (packages, course units, and TV programs) are as open to abuse “in a society which is regressively more closed and meretricious” as are those of distance education.

This leads me to the second issue of importance here. Many of the contributors rightly stress the need for in-company support for open learners (see for example Richard Crawley, pp. 331–333 and Diane Bailey, pp. 406–423). Good distance education institutions which care about their students and want them to succeed will be student- or client-based (more “service industry” oriented), and will therefore provide students with adequate and responsive support mechanisms. They will eschew an approach which is manufacturing-based and which sees the development and production of the materials as an end in itself, leaving the students to get on with it as they can (see Sewart, pp. 246–255). However, student support services are expensive to provide, particularly if they are aimed at dispersed, home-based populations of individual learners. Furthermore, the closer they come to the support offered in traditional educational establishments, the less likely it is that a media-based system will achieve economies of scale. It is easier to provide materials to corporate clients who are left with the responsibility for supporting learners. Both sides can gain. The firm benefits because training need not involve long absences on courses or a great effort in devising courses (though some larger enterprises like B & Q and British Steel do create their own materials for

multiple use). The providers gain because their budget does not carry the cost of support.

However, many firms will invest their money in non-job-related education and training, and while there are government schemes for the unemployed, such an approach may not serve many sections of the general population. Is it the cost of supporting individual home-based learners which has led the Open College to emphasize its corporate clientele and, since this book was published, close the National Distance Learning Centre (see p. 235) which provided support to home-based learners following its courses? When Richard Crawley complains that "distance learning conveys a picture of a learner isolated physically from the tutor or other experts, and isolated too from the hub of activity—the teaching or training institution. Open learning in industry ... makes the learner's company the hub of activity" (p. 331), he is actually forgetting the need to provide doors for many who are outside the company. We are indeed in danger of forgetting large sections of potential learners. As Ian McNay warns us (p. 223) we risk "cutting cost, not creating opportunity" and leaving "students to an *independence* for which they have not been prepared."

Defenders of open learning will protest; they may point to the example of the local Radio Tay which successfully retained its audience (and hence its advertising revenues) while providing educational programs instead of "non-stop pop and prattle" (p. 429). However, this is an individual example, and Naomi Sargent is right to warn us that the loss of broadcast educational programs from national networks will disadvantage the unemployed, the elderly, the disabled, and those at home with family responsibilities (p. 147). So open learning—a valid concept—may actually develop structures and artifacts that result in a closing of doors.

Is this book worthwhile? First impressions must be favorable. The attractive cover opens to reveal clear type, well laid out, on good paper. The contributors' work has been professionally edited and proofread to a high standard. The editor and publishers are to be congratulated. The book is rich in interesting case studies of the UK experience, as well as reflecting the nature of the current debate about open learning and its role in the UK. As such it is a worthwhile book for those involved in or interested in the discussion, but the reader needs to test the ideas and concepts against his or her own experience. It is a crucial debate, and there is some shoddy thinking around. This book, above everything else, introduces one to the issues, and I have no hesitation in recommending it on that basis.

References

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