

Convocation Address 2014

Som Naidu, PhD, D.Litt.

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Looking Back Looking Forward: The Invention and Reinvention of Distance Education

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) has very generously conferred upon me, an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters for my “valuable contributions to the field of distance education regionally and internationally”. This is a tremendous honour for which I am very grateful.

It is therefore imperative that I take this opportunity to reflect on the field of distance education, its journey during my lifetime and where it might go in the future.

Like many of you in this audience, I started off my career as a teacher. In fact, I recall making a very conscious decision about becoming a teacher because I liked the idea of going to school, and being around people who were going somewhere. Since then, I have remained passionate about teaching as a profession, so much so that a brief stint as a journalist early on in my career trajectory swiftly brought me back to teaching to where I felt I belonged.

My encounter with *distance education* occurred quite early in my professional life as well, when in the early 1980s I took up an appointment as an educational designer in the distance education centre at the University of the South Pacific. It is here where I saw the opportunities and the challenges of learning and teaching at a distance, a subject which formed the focus of my graduate studies and the many roles and positions I have served in throughout the world since then. That means more than 30 years of studying and working in the field in one form or another.

One of these roles has included editing the journal *Distance Education*, one of the oldest journals in the field. Volume 1, Issue number 1 of this journal carries an article by Desmond Keegan which identified six key attributes of distance education (see Keegan, 1980, p.33).

Correspondence should be addressed to Som Naidu, *Melbourne, Australia* (email: [sommnaidu@gmail.com](mailto:somnaidu@gmail.com)).

These six attributes described what distance education looked like then! But what does it look like now? How are those defining attributes of distance education being interpreted today? Furthermore, what is it likely to look like in the foreseeable future? Let's take a look at them closely.

1. Separation of teacher and learner

Distance education methods grew out of the need to meet the educational needs of those who could not be in the same place and time with the teacher. Its aim was to release educational practice from the shackles of the four walls of the classroom and make it accessible to anyone who wanted and/or needed it, and not just those who could afford the time and money.

As such distance education was a liberating force as it embraced the notions of openness (see Lewis, 1986; Rowntree, 1992). Moreover, it was borne out of the need to serve a socio-economic and political agenda geared towards improving the quality of life of the not so privileged members of our society earning it the label "Learning at the Back Door" (see Wedemeyer, 1981).

Today of course, the concept of openness conjures a lot more than merely access to educational opportunity. It includes the need to adopt *open educational practices*, *open scholarship*, and the use of *open educational resources* in learning and teaching (see <http://www.oer-quality.org/>; Naidu, 2013a). The value proposition of the adoption of open educational practices generally, and open scholarship in particular, is that education is a basic need that should be accessible to all, and as Amartya Sen reminds us, the path to real freedom because it is education that opens doors to meaningful choices that are so essential for social and economic development (Sen, 1999). In order to achieve this goal, there is a need to redefine copyright while protecting the rights and intellectual capital of the creators of educational content such as that proposed by the Creative Commons license framework (see <http://creativecommons.org/about>).

No organization demonstrates this fundamental concept better than institutions such as the Open University of Sri Lanka, for had it not been for the educational opportunities that organizations such as the OUSL affords, many of us would not be here in this room today doing what we are doing!

2. Influence of an educational organization

A critical attribute that has most clearly separated distance education from all the other forms of formal and informal learning is its *organized nature*, such that it is not mistaken for *independent study or learning* in informal settings (see Wedemeyer, 1981; Latchem, 2014).

Traditionally these forms of organized learning and teaching activities have been called by various names such as *Distance Education, Distance Learning, External Studies, Extramural Studies, Off-Campus Studies, Independent Studies, Correspondence Education, and Continuing Studies, etc.* The term used to refer to this kind of organized educational activity had much to do with the educational tradition of the organization that was offering the programs. And the term “distance education”, perhaps more widely used than others, has often been questioned as an adequate description of the various organizational models that have been emerging under that banner (Rumble, 1989).

So as in the early-1980s, just as the term distance education superseded the term correspondence education, a variety of terms have emerged to include various forms of learning and teaching that look like distance education, namely *Open Learning, Flexible Learning, Blended Learning, Distributed Learning, Online Learning, and eLearning*. Each of these terms is describing some aspect of distance education, for among all other things, their one common trait is *organized educational provision* that does not require the learners and teachers to be in the same place and time (Paine, 1989).

Today however, while the influence of the organization remains a hallmark feature of distance education, the range of providers is much broader and larger. These comprise dedicated distance teaching organizations, conventional campus-based organizations including reputable research-intensive Ivy League institutions such as Harvard, MIT and Stanford, virtual universities, and commercial, government and public sector agencies, as well as a whole range of private providers. There has been a tremendous expansion in organizations offering distance education programs so much so that it seems like everyone is offering such programs (see Gallagher & Garrett, 2013).

The nature of the “educational organization” is also undergoing change from its traditional bricks and mortar form located in a specific physical setting. The educational organization of the future might be an entity such as the OER University which leverages the affordances of the Internet and the Web to bring together learners, teachers and willing educational partners to make education available to anyone, anywhere and anytime (see <http://www.oer-quality.org/tag/oer-university/>).

Educational provision can no longer be seen as the sole right or responsibility of the privileged nor any particular type of organization. A variety of players are emerging on the scene to offer educational opportunities where it is needed, and in ways that best meet the needs of the students.

3. Use of media to unite teacher and learner

Something was required to bridge the physical separation of the distance learner from the teacher and the teaching organization without anyone moving physically. In the early days, this was the role of the printed study materials. And while the printed materials afforded a great deal of *flexibility* and *independence* to the distance learner, as a medium for uniting the teacher and learner and carrying the educational content, it had its limitations. Students as well as teachers hungered for more to improve their distance learning and teaching experience. Something had to be done to lift this somewhat impoverished picture of distance education as learning at the back door.

The availability of affordable technologies offered considerable hope. First there was multimedia, then audio and video conferencing and more recently online learning tools. The use of these technologies to “unite the teacher and learner and carry the educational content”, as Keegan had put it, has made the distance learning experience a lot more *effective*, *efficient* and *engaging*, so much so that distance education is increasingly being seen as not only a viable mode of learning and teaching, but one that is equally effective, and highly regarded in terms of parity of esteem (see Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Wai, Fiset, & Huang, 2004).

Although, in its excitement to embrace the Internet and the Web for bridging the distance between the learner and the teacher, it is arguable that distance education has in fact further

disenfranchised those it set out to empower especially the very large numbers of students in developing contexts who do not have access to reliable and affordable Internet service (see Baggaley, 2008).

A classic example of this is the concept of *cloud-based learning* which is built around the use of the Internet as the backbone for learning and teaching. It incorporates bringing together teachers and tutors over the Internet to help learners at a distance on the assumption that learners are self-organizing systems and capable of learning by themselves with the help of open educational resources, lots of encouragement and motivation, and a little bit of guidance (<http://bit.ly/3dsj42>).

Ironically, this is what the printed study materials sought to do in earlier iterations of distance education on the assumption that adult distance learners were highly motivated and independent learners. We found that while the printed study materials afforded flexibility to the learner, in terms of the time, place and pace of their study, it did not suit many who needed a bit more help over and above that, hence the surge to integrate a greater degree of interactivity with occasional face-to-face meetings in the distance learning and teaching transaction.

Currently though the technology that is being utilized to bring together the learners and their teachers and mediate the learning and teaching process is different. However, whereas, the printed technology did not exclude anyone, contemporary tools and infrastructure such as the Internet does, and large parts of the developing world still have no or unreliable, and inequitable access to the Internet. Without reliable, affordable and equal access to the Internet, online educational resources such as those developed and promoted by organizations such as the Khan Academy (see <http://bit.ly/1e5kGyU>) will run the risk of becoming an elitist educational provision that will remain inaccessible to those without the requisite tools and technologies.

4. Provision of two-way communication

A critical component of attempts to reunite and reconnect the distance learner, the teacher and the teaching organization without anyone moving physically has been the establishment of communication between the parties. The earliest forms of communication between distance learners and their teachers was

correspondence with letters delivered by the regular postal services, hence the use of term *correspondence education* to refer to the operation.

In most cases however, this was a tiresome and frustrating experience as in those early days in the mid-nineteenth century postal mail was slow and unreliable. Today however, the postal service is a lot more reliable and speedy. In addition, a whole suite of contemporary technologies, ranging from audio and video conferencing, online messaging and emailing to social media tools are available to support two-way and multiple-way communication between learners, teachers and the teaching organization, both synchronously and asynchronously.

These technologies, especially the Internet and Web are responsible for the exponential growth of online education, including our current fascination with Massive, Open, Online Courses (see Naidu, 2013b). They are also responsible for promoting the view that knowledge and understanding is the result of communication, discussion and debate, epitomised by the concept of *connectivism* and connective knowledge (see Downes, 2012; Milheim, 2013; Siemens, & Downes, 2011).

In so doing however, contemporary communications technologies invariably excludes all those who do not have access to reliable and affordable connectivity to the Internet, especially those in large areas of the developing world. Yet that is where education is most needed to bring about the kind of development and as a result of it, the kind of freedom that Sen is talking about (see Sen, 1999).

Has contemporary distance education gone wrong, and if so then where and how? (see Baggaley, 2008; Cooper, 2013). Perhaps there is no one size that fits all. Perhaps there ought to be different models of distance education for different purposes, contexts, and learners (see Baggaley, 2009).

5. Possibility of occasional meetings

Distance education methods did not set out to preclude face-to-face meetings completely, as long as most of the time there would be no need for the learners and teachers to be in the same place and at the same time. However, if the need arose, and if it were possible, then occasional face-to-face meetings would be

organized, and depending upon their purpose these meetings could be made optional, so that students would not be required to attend, if they could not, or chose not to attend.

The purpose of these occasional gatherings could be many and varied. They might include meeting for laboratory work requirements in the Sciences and Engineering, give oral presentations as might be required in Business and Law, but also to network, socialise, and build a sense of community generally to break the loneliness of the distance learner and the overall tyranny of distance.

The earliest iterations of *online* distance education adopted a similar approach. Even with constant online connectivity, online learners and teachers hungered for occasional physical meetings, and as in the case of print-based distance education, for all sorts of reasons including learning and teaching and socialization purposes, leading to the emergence of the concept of *blended learning*, which was really blending online education with occasional face-to-face meetings.

In the early days, this would include travelling by road or air to the designated venue at some significant cost to the student, both in terms of time and loss of income. Now of course, with the availability of advanced communications technologies such as audio and video conferencing, online meeting and social media tools, the ability of distance learners to meet virtually for socialization and building community is significantly improved. And developments in technologies for conducting laboratory work remotely are eliminating the need for face-to-face meetings in the study of subjects like engineering and architecture at a distance (Lindsay, Naidu, & Good, 2007).

6. Participation in an industrialised form of education

A final distinguishing feature of distance education is its adoption of industrial processes. In comparison with conventional educational practices which was characterised by the classroom lecture, tutorial and laboratory work, distance education appeared to look like an industrialised form of educational practice. This seemed like so, not only because of its progressive thinking in its use of technology for mediating learning and teaching and offering a choice to those who could not afford campus-based education, but more so because of its logistics which were characterised by

specialisation of tasks and the division of labor, as was the case in the industrialization of our economy during the 18th century (Peters, 1983).

In conventional educational practice, the teacher is the aggregate of all educational functions. This includes designing the course, teaching it, assessing student work and providing learners with feedback, as well as engaging in research and scholarship in their field. In distance education however, these functions are disaggregated and carried out by specialists in specific areas of design, development, distribution, support, and research and evaluation. Moreover, this course may be delivered by a whole range of people including full time, part time or adjunct faculty.

In an increasingly competitive tertiary educational environment, with declining public funding for higher education, distance education methods including the disaggregation of teaching functions especially from those of research and scholarship are being seen and adopted as a viable way forward by many conventional campus-based educational organizations (Gallagher, & Garrett, 2013). A compounding factor is the proliferation of information and communications technology which is requiring a variety of additional teaching skills and competencies that have to be developed by staff, over and above subject matter knowledge, in order to be effective and efficient.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the teacher, who is usually the subject matter expert, and not a trained teacher but a researcher by training to perform all of these tasks effectively and efficiently in the one role. As a result, the aggregation of the various functions of teaching and research and professional engagement in academe in the one role is undergoing change, leading calls for its disaggregation as has always been the case in distance education (see Rosenbloom, 2011).

In conclusion

The current model of campus-based and face-to-face educational practice is increasingly becoming unsustainable, and there are many reasons for this. Foremost among these are the pressures that are at the heart of its funding model and the increasing availability of information and communications technologies that are opening up educational opportunities. There are many more

routes for accessing educational content today (see Gallagher, & Garrett, 2013).

As a response to this, it seems that after years of existing on the periphery and competing for parity, distance education methods are appealing to mainstream educational provision. Conventional campus-based educational organizations are adopting practices that were pioneered by distance education, not as a cheaper and poorer option, but as a sustainable and viable response to the pressures and demands facing the higher education sector.

In the early days of the invention of this nontraditional form of education, distance educators walked alone and on the periphery and looked in from the back door. Today we have the support of mainstream educational forces and the company of Ivy League institutions which is heartening. A new norm is emerging and it is opening up access to educational opportunity, as well as learning resources. It is time for us in the field of open, flexible and distance learning to rise up and seize the day and this opportunity -- and based on our track record, to lay claim on the movement to transform education at all levels, not just higher education.

In this region, the Open University of Sri Lanka is well placed to lead this movement to liberate education and make it available to all and to especially those who can least afford it. This is a serious responsibility that requires careful thought to selecting and adopting teaching methods and appropriate technologies that are best able to support teachers and their learners in the context within which they live and work.

You and the Open University of Sri Lanka have the experience and the expertise to lead this charge! So go forth in the knowledge that you are part of a progressive educational movement that is here to stay and is poised to significantly influence future educational practice more generally.

Congratulations on your achievements, and I wish you all well.
God Bless!

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Bio: Som Naidu, PhD, D.Litt.

Currently a Monash University Affiliate, Dr. Naidu has recently held positions as Associate Professor, Learning Transformations at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne (2013), Associate Professor and Director, Teaching and Learning Quality Enhancement and Evaluation Services at Charles Sturt University, NSW, Australia (2008-2013), and Associate Professor of Educational Technology and Multimedia Education and Head of Research and Evaluation in technology-enhanced learning at the University of Melbourne, Australia (1997-2008).

Dr. Naidu is the current president of the *Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia*, executive editor of its journal *Distance Education*, assistant editor of *Interactive Learning Environments*, and a member of the inaugural Routledge Education Arena Panel of Editors.

Dr. Naidu possesses undergraduate qualifications in *Education* (curriculum and instruction) from the University of Waikato in New Zealand and graduate qualifications in *Distance Education* (from the University of the South Pacific), and in *Educational Technology* (*curriculum and instructional design* and *distance education*) from Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. His publications in this area include several books, book chapters, journal articles and conference papers and his professional consultancies include numerous curriculum development projects in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Belize, Namibia, Western Samoa, Maldives and the Solomon Islands.