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Rewriting a History of Open Universities: (Hi)stories of Distance Teachers

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Abstract

This article reports eight distance teachers' stories about teaching at two open universities over the past two decades with a focus on their perceptions and feelings about the changes in their teaching practice. This qualitative study employed a methodological approach called the autoethnographic interview, aiming to document more realistic histories of the open universities and to imagine a better future for those universities. As a result, the paper presents autobiographical narratives of distance teachers that dissent from the general historical accounts of open universities. These narratives are categorized into three interrelated themes: a) openness: excessive openness and a lost sense of mission; b) technological innovation: moving online and long-lasting resistance, and c) teaching: transactional interactions and feelings of loneliness. The paper then presents a discussion of useful implications for open universities, which can serve as a starting point for more meaningful discussions among distance educators in a time of change.

Keywords: history, open university, distance education, distance teacher, autoethnographic interview

Introduction

This article reports lived histories of open universities—the stories of distance teachers who have actually lived through the history of their open university. The aim is to offer a more sophisticated understanding of the current development of open universities, and to imagine a better future for open universities. Open universities have played an essential role in making university-level education more accessible to the general public, by removing various physical, financial, and educational barriers to university entrance (Lee, 2017). Over the decade following the birth of the Open University of the United Kingdom (UKOU) in 1969, 20 open universities were established around the globe (Peters, 2008). Since then, those open universities have strived to meet the needs of underserved students, often adults with multiple social responsibilities and/or under disadvantaged circumstances. Up to now, as a result, a huge number of adult students have earned their university degree(s) from the open universities as part-time distance students.

In more recent times, a growing number of higher education institutions, including campus-based universities, have offered distance education (DE) programmes targeting part-time students. Yet, there has been a rapid decrease in a number of part-time students overall (Callender & Thompson, 2018). In the context of heightened competition, many open universities, including the UKOU, have been exposed to multiple challenges seen as threatening their survival (Coates, 2017). The situation of the UKOU, in particular, has made a large number of distance educators worried, since its unique mission of making university education open to all is still perceived as valuable and important (Tait, 2008). In fact, issues of educational inequality strongly persist in current higher education contexts around the globe (Black, 2013).

In this context, distance educators have focused on identifying different factors causing the recent financial crises faced by open universities, while romanticizing the past achievements of open universities and feeling nostalgic about the old days (see Harris, 2018). However, such an approach does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical development of today's crises. Therefore, this paper looks at the past and the present of open universities together more critically. This work is by no means the first attempt to look at the history of open universities: there has been a good number of published works on the topic (e.g., Haughey, 2010). Nevertheless, what makes this work distinct from those previous ones is that it tells different stories of open universities using distance teachers' actual voices, which have not been taken seriously in previous literature. Consequently, it rewrites the general history of open universities that has been more commonly told until now.

Many general historical accounts of the development of open universities start from the original purpose of DE, that is, opening the door of HE, and then trace their achievements in that regard. These achievements are sometimes also placed in the broader context of the advancement of the technological tools mediating teaching and learning activities (Pittman, 2013). A number of academic narratives have reported a dramatic instructional transition from paper-based DE to online DE as an important milestone in the history of many open universities (Davis, 2001). The temporal division between traditional DE and online DE has become commonly used by many distance educators as a useful set of markers conceptualizing the history of open universities. Most previous authors, however, seem to take an unbalanced position toward the two, regarding online DE as a more innovative way of doing DE, one which is far superior to traditional paper-based DE (Bates, 2008).

While both narratives, namely opening the door of HE and moving DE online, provide interesting stories about open universities, reading them does not provide a realistic sense of what has been happening in real-life DE contexts over the past decades. This paper, therefore, argues that an one-directional view of history (one that assumes every society is progressing from worse to better) does not provide a useful ground for understanding the current crises. This article also argues that stories of distance teachers, who have lived both the past and the present of their open university, can potentially be more informative than those more general (often, abstract and impersonal) accounts. This article, then, has a rather obvious, but nonetheless unusual, starting point when it comes to the task of writing a past, a present, and a future of open universities: distance teachers' stories. The following section will provide a brief definition of the concept of history used in this article.

A Conceptual Approach

In this article, the author follows Southgate's (2009) conceptual understanding of history as fictional truth. Histories are stories that we tell (and are told) about the past. Theoretically and ideally, those stories are based on reliable evidence deriving from the past, and aspire to "truth" through their correspondence with what actually happened; but in terms of practical reality, insuperable problems arise to negate that possibility. First, any supposed "facts" are themselves questionable as having been taken from inevitably partial (however "primary") sources; second the incorporation or "emplotment" of those building blocks into a narrative is constrained by the cultural forms currently available and by the necessarily subjective input of individual historians – their choices, selections, purposes, and ideological positioning. (Southgate, 2009, p. 195)

Despite his critical position towards the possibility of attaining ultimate truth in any single story, Southgate's definition of history does not shut down the possibility of aspiring to higher credibility for the fictional truth. That is, this conceptual approach allows and encourages distance educators to invite and value multiple stories, each attaining some reliable facts and some elements of truthfulness, within a process that might build a more credible story of the past and the present of open universities. Given that everyone can be a historian to a certain extent, when it comes to the moments of telling about their past and composing their personal (hi)stories, this article focuses on collecting distance teachers' own fictional truth of the past and present of their open universities.

A Methodological Approach

In this qualitative study, eight distance teachers—four from Athabasca University (AU) in Canada and four from Korean National Open University (KNOU) in South Korea—took part in a two- or three-hour semi-structured interview. A purposeful sampling method was used to select the eight interview participants, prioritizing the selection of informants who were expected to be "information rich" (Patton, 1999, p. 169). Two DE researchers working at the target open universities supported the study and acted as gatekeepers. Each recommended four academics who would know the university history the best (and who, in their view, would have something interesting to say). All suggested academics had been teaching at the university for 20 years or longer, and they had all also been an active member of the

institutional leadership team at different times in their university's history. The author sent an e-mail invitation to each of the eight academics and all accepted the invitation.

Research Sites

AU, established in Alberta, Canada in 1970, offered its first correspondence study course, *World Ecology*, in 1973, and achieved self-governing status as Alberta's fourth public university in 1978. It created unique models for course production (i.e., course team structures), course delivery (i.e., self-paced study models), and student support (i.e., telephone tutorials), and also put significant effort into improving the quality of DE by using technological media. AU pioneered the use of computers to deliver online courses: AU's online Executive MBA program was introduced in 1994. Since its founding, 265,000 students have registered at AU and, today, it serves over 40,000 students worldwide (Athabasca University [AU], 2019). A recent review report (Coates, 2017), however, argues that AU needs to make significant changes in its operational and pedagogical models if the institution is even to be sustained.

KNOU was established in 1972, originally as an affiliate of Seoul National University (SNU), offering two-year college-level programs. The first five-year bachelor's program was accredited in 1981 and KNOU was formally separated from SNU in 1982. It launched television programmes in 1985 and radio programmes in 1990: since KNOU TV (OUN) was launched in 1996, KNOU has strived to improve the quality of national lifelong education by broadcasting its lectures across the country. It first adopted an Internet-based DE system in 1996. As of 2018, 607,799 students have graduated from KNOU and it has more than 130,000 students in current enrolment. KNOU (2017) has also experienced a rapid decline in its student numbers to the extent that its financial model is being seriously questioned: for example, the number of students enrolled decreased from 72,183 in 2010 to 46,946 in 2017, a reduction of 35% (KNOU, 2019).

Autoethnographic Interview Method

In order to collect the personal stories of those distance teachers—the fictional truth of open universities—the author employed an autoethnographic interview technique. The term autoethnographic interview in this article refers to a specific interview technique informed by the methodological principles of autoethnography. Autoethnography is a qualitative research attempt to collect stories of/about the self, in order to understand the shared aspects of general culture embedded and represented in those personal stories (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography, which positions the self at the centre of research, allows researchers (and participants) to articulate their own personal experiences, and to access complex inner thoughts and emotions relevant to those experiences (Ellis, 2007). By using autobiographical stories and self-reflections on those stories as main data sources, autoethnography explores connections between those personal stories and their wider social meanings and, thus, strives to develop more comprehensive understandings of social phenomena (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

In this qualitative study, it was necessary to choose the autoethnographic interview method, rather than other forms of interview, because it empowers interview participants not only to tell their autobiographical stories but also, firstly, to explore their inner thoughts and emotions related to the stories and, secondly, to further analyse the social meanings of their stories. From the author's perspective, therefore, the eight distance teachers were not a passive source of data, but active

composers and owners of the data, whose own reflections directly informed the research outcomes. Based on the theoretical belief that histories are stories constructed by individual historians' subjective selections and ideological positioning (Southgate, 2009), the author conceptualized autoethnographic interviews as a dialogic process involving co-constructing histories of open universities with the distance teachers. All interviewees were experienced distance educators, highly knowledgeable and perceptive about the past and the present of their open university—although their voices were not commonly listened to by contemporary distance or online educators.

Following Chang's (2008) ethnographic interview technique, the author started each interview with grand tour questions in a casual, conversational manner. The author printed out a short passage excerpted from the university's mission statement, with which all participants were already familiar. Then, the author asked general questions such as "what do you think about the passage?" and "how do you understand the meanings of the highlighted words in the passage (e.g., barriers, success, excellence)?" After the simple text analysis exercise, the conversations moved onto the self, with questions such as: "how and why did you end up being here at (open university)?" and "could you please share your stories of teaching at (open university) with me?" With most interviewees, this grand tour section of the interview took about an hour to complete.

From responses to grand tour questions, some more specific mini-tour questions were "spontaneously and methodically derived" and asked (Chang, 2008, p. 105). Here, the author explored participants' inner thoughts and emotions about their stories. This dialogic exploration with participants was facilitated by both spontaneously emerging questions and by prepared questions, such as: (a) "how did you feel when you were first asked to teach online?" and "how do you feel now?"; (b) "how was working with other members of the course team?"; and (c) "what are you most and least satisfied with your current courses?" The final part of the interviews focused on drawing out more self-reflective narratives from the participants, guided by many why-type questions such as "please think back to your response to the last few questions: why do you think you are teaching and feeling in the ways you described?" Towards the end of the interviews, the author also openly shared other views and stories, including her own, with each interviewee to facilitate more critical discussions.

To make the conversations as comfortable as possible, the author visited both universities to have face-to-face conversations, and allowed each interviewee to choose a space most convenient and comfortable. The interviews were conducted at various places, including a living room, office, café, and meeting room. During each interview, the author carefully used autoethnographic data analysis strategies such as: (a) searching for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (b) connecting the present with the past; (c) analysing relationships between self and others; and (d) contextualizing personal experiences broadly (Chang, 2008, p. 131). The author's attempt to collect and analyse the autobiographic data simultaneously, and to do so in collaboration with the providers of the data, was particularly effective in this project, resulting in very rich interview outcomes, both intellectually and emotionally.

All audio-recorded interview files were transcribed. The transcribed text was broken down as a series of meaningful units of analysis (i.e., sentences, paragraphs). The initial open coding was conducted by highlighting meaningful phrases on the printed transcripts and making notes in the margins of the transcripts of the potential categories emerging from the highlighted parts. Next, a second round of reading was undertaken to develop the open coding results further and to find relevant links and

relationships among the identified codes. Here, the codes were more carefully examined and compared with/against each other, and further conceptualized as independent categories by using the chronological order and the temporal division between the past and the present of open universities as organizing principles. This axial coding exercise was assisted by using Microsoft Excel.

The author shared the categories with the interviewees for the purpose of member-checking and collected additional thoughts from them via e-mail. The final round of reading was undertaken by moving back and forth between the original interview transcripts and the Excel sheets. Three themes were drawn from the categories as a result of a selective coding process. The author wrote a draft of this article and invited one of her colleagues to act as a critical friend, whose role was to read and provide comprehensive feedback on the claims made by the author, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following section presents the main findings from the eight autoethnographic interviews. It includes a considerable volume of direct quotes from their interviews to present teachers' authentic voices in a manner distorted as little as possible by the author's arbitrary reinterpretation.

Findings

It is important to stress that there are some variations in the eight teachers' stories; their perceptions about the past and the present of their university should not be understood, by any means, as homogenous. While making marginalized, but important, voices heard, the significant discrepancies among those voices will be highlighted to provide readers with a more accurate representation of the stories.

Openness: Excessive Openness and a Lost Sense of Mission

To begin with, all eight teachers emphasized the extent of their pride in their university's original mission of being open to the underserved. Indeed, that mission seems deeply engraved on their minds. For example, Dan said, upon seeing the excerpt from the AU's mission statement:

I've been with this university for 20 years and I really do have strong feelings about the mission, I mean, the social mandate in that. It's one of the things I like about working in this place that you feel like you are making a difference for students, that you imagine yourself working with people who have been up against barriers, and now you are at institution that is a little bit different so it's going to help them along. So, I have very positive feelings and then kind of have incorporated it into my own life.

Similarly, Eva suggested:

I think it reasonably describes what we all inspire (sic) to at the university. I've been at this university for 20 years and we always talk about that mission. It's the foundation of every single discussion we have as a group. We know we don't always meet that ideal. But, I believe that anybody who's been at the university for any length of time is actually proud of that statement. We actually work at AU because we believe that to be a good thing to aspire to.

Kim also stressed that the original purpose of establishing the KNOU was to provide “educational opportunities for all citizens including those with lower social-economic status.” Moon emphasized that the KNOU, since its establishment, has made a significant impact on the lives of numerous middle-aged women whose parents, in the patriarchal Korean society of the 1960s and 70s, had never given them any opportunities to study. All interviewees shared various stories about how they and their university have successfully supported students who have disadvantaged backgrounds. In fact, most interviewees purposely chose to join the open university, influenced by the fact that its mandate aligned with their personal and political beliefs. Tom, who was on the original committee that constructed AU’s mission statement, for example, mentioned that when he joined AU in the early 1980s:

I was interested in making sure that people who never had the opportunity to do post-secondary education would be brought in for the first time—that includes prisoners. I taught at AU in the prison system for a while with maximum security ... it also includes First Nations. It would include women since historically women never had equal educational opportunities.

In the past, several teachers from both universities reflected the concept of being open was much simpler and more straightforward. However, some state that moving online or “doing 100% online” (Moon) has changed that situation, introducing different barriers to achieving openness. Tom continued:

How are we doing all those things? We’ve given up on the prison’s program . . . We used to share the cost with the federal government, we would provide all the course materials and they would provide the money to put an instructor. There is no government funding for prisons and AU do not produce printed course materials anymore. We do everything online but we have to have real instructors in class because the prisons may not allow prisoners to go onto computers, definitely not onto the Internet. So, we’ve given up.

One shared theme about the more recent situation in their open university is that “everyone talks about openness, but no one seems to be really bothered” (Cho). While terms such as open education, open courses, and open resources have gained popularity in the public domain, interviewees have noticed that the general public have gradually accepted DE as normal educational practice. Since the status of open universities has shifted from being an outlier HE institution towards being more normal, they no longer have to struggle to justify their existence: “it seems like everyone suddenly knows who we are!” (Bill). In addition, moving online, which is often equated in common discourse with being open by its very nature, has contributed to a growing sense of openness being taken for granted. Yet, this situation has its consequences. As Cho and Eva each said:

In the old days, we used to have lots of conversations about our identity. How are we different from other universities? Who are we serving? How can we serve them better? Many of us came out for drinks and enjoyed those serious debates. But now, it does not seem to happen anymore. We just know we are an open university. (Cho)

The people who started this university purposely went out to find every radical thinker they could find . . . a bunch of rebels. They are my age or older, they are on the way out, but they are the people who put this university together and that ethos about looking after every man, being the ordinary person’s university, going overboard for service for students. All those things are very

precious to people who have been here. I think that is still really important to us ideologically but on a pragmatic level as more and more traditional universities get into [DE] . . . it is maybe not necessarily going to be as important as it has been in the past. (Eva)

Tom, given that there is still a large number of the underserved students remaining in Canada, concluded:

We have continued to try to fulfil the mandate, but I am sure we are failing in certain ways . . . because our course fees are going up. Across the country, that means the working class and the poor can have less and less opportunity.

Such a conclusion clearly challenges the developmental view of the history of open university and open education more generally.

Technological Innovation: Moving Online and Long-Lasting Resistance

When it comes to the term “innovation,” the eight teachers’ stories of the past are divided very strongly. Half of the teachers have been pushing the adoption of online technologies and subsequent changes in institutional practices, while the rest have been (and to some extent are still) resisting the pedagogical changes introduced by these new forms of DE. First, there is Eva, a professor teaching a programme with a relatively “heavy media focus” in the social sciences. She said:

In 1996, I needed to use the Internet. And people were very, very resistant even to something like a discussion group, because they felt some students didn’t have computers and that was quite right. A lot of students didn’t . . . so, we’ve always allowed students to push us. So, as soon as we had enough students saying “I’d like to have a discussion board,” then we would lumber into movement and get a discussion board . . . but the university now has to jump over several phases of technological innovation to catch up. So, we are in a catch-up mode now, or always, rather than being ahead.

Her narrative clearly highlights the challenging nature of putting cutting-edge technologies in place without threatening the openness of established DE practices at open universities. Dan also shared his stories about leading a series of funded initiatives to move DE online began in 2001.

I think it was almost like house cleaning because a part of problem that I found was the people who were doing the print-based telephone tutoring . . . when you talk to them and say “let’s be innovative” then, they already think they are innovative because they were innovative for the 80s and 90s. Although people agreed, they had different ideas of what online was, what online discussions were. People said, “That’s not my job. I’d write a course and if they want to put it online, I will hand it over to whoever it is, they would make it online but that’s not why I am here.” So, to have people not just having their courses online but actually being tutors in an online teaching environment was very difficult. So, it was a people problem, technology was easy.

There are similar stories from the KNOU. Cho and Kim are the two who have been striving to introduce new technologies to their university. Cho says “it is also our responsibility and mission as a DE institution to use the most cutting-edge technologies for our educational practices. We need to make our education more effective.” Kim reflected on a challenging time he had when he and a few others

developed and introduced a digital library system in the mid-2000s, facing severe criticism from other members of the university for wasting budget—although the system was perceived as revolutionary in the general HE context. When interviewed, Kim still felt anger towards some of those opponents:

[Developing the digital library] we were the first in the world . . . in the world! After that, we had a university awayday . . . We were in the people's court. All of those faculty members, since they did not know anything about the digital library, fired off questions one after another to us. All of those questions were very negative and criticizing, since we spent the big budget. It was like a witch-hunt. It may be because we failed to have effective communications with other teachers. But, pioneers are always in such pain, facing the same dilemma. It takes too long to enlighten everyone and then, we lag behind . . . we are just hated.

These four pioneers tend to have a set of strong beliefs about technological innovation, namely that: a) using new technologies will improve the quality of learners' experiences, b) as a DE institution, it is part of the university's mission to lead technological innovations in education, and thus c) technological innovation is not a choice but a mandate.

While the innovators' stories are mainly concerned with general student perceptions and institutional reputations, the stories of resisters tend to be far more specific and deeply grounded in their own pedagogical beliefs and experiences. Bill, for example, avoided defining the term innovation by saying "of course, you can innovate but it depends what you are innovating for." Then, he continued:

I've been doing [online DE] now I think since 2002. And my general impression up to this point has been that it's very . . . it's inadequate for number of reasons. I think it is 2002 or 2003. The only reason why I started my course online was because we had course development frozen, but there were funds for online course development. So, I agreed to have my course developed online. It was an enormous struggle trying to figure out how to move.

Bill expressed the belief that some of the technological and pedagogical features that are offered (or imposed) by the specific online course platform, do not work for him and his students. He does not believe that students enjoy reading online because most of them simply print out the electronic materials. He adds that "the difference is, in the old days, we provided them with the print version but today, they have to pay themselves to print it off with inks and cartridges."

In the case of KNOU, its institutional decision to move from television-based DE to online DE was finally made in 2009: by then, the Internet had become a very common technology in South Korea and most students had Internet access at home. Both Won and Moon had previously been fighting against adopting online DE. However, by 2007 and 2008, they also realized that a number of newly established cyber universities were already providing online courses and successfully attracting many students, and that there were lots of students even in their own courses who wanted to do online DE. An interesting point here is that unlike the case of AU, since KNOU made its move—from television lectures with printed textbooks to online lectures with Web-based textbooks—there has been no serious resistance to doing things online. As Won, one of the original opponents to adopting online technologies, put it:

It is the same: watching lectures on television and watching lecture on the Internet. We do the same as well. We write our lecture notes and record our lectures in the broadcasting studio and

someone puts them online. I think it is good to have an online discussion board, so students can ask questions anytime they want. Our students like to study alone so no one asks any questions anyway. Nevertheless, it is good to give them opportunities.

However, a key question remains: to what extent has adopting online technologies actually innovated pedagogical practices? Such a question effectively challenges some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about how pedagogical innovation is led by technological innovation.

Teaching: Transactional Interactions and Feelings of Loneliness

All eight distance teachers said they feel the most fulfilled when they have personal/personalized interactions with students. One important pedagogical feature of KNOU, which distinguishes it from AU, is that most courses offer at least one face-to-face tutorial. The university has 13 regional colleges, which cover all of the residential areas in South Korea (a relatively small country compared to Canada). Each teacher visits those regional colleges over the course period to meet their students in person, which has been highly appreciated by both teachers and students as an innovative means to complement the perceived limitations of DE. Consequently, most of the meaningful teaching stories from the KNOU concern meeting students in person.

On the other hand, most of the courses at AU are fully online. Thus, the stories from AU are somewhat different in nature. As Dan said, early on:

I am hoping that some of my own personality comes through the courses and they are set up in the way that students will learn well. I've got good feedback from students and so I think I've been as effective as I could be with what I have. Like anyone who teaches, when you are working with students and they finally get something, they understand it and you get that sense . . . it's better than any other awards. You feel like you made it. Every once in a while, I run into the old students and "you were my professor and I remember you did that." AU students are everywhere. If I go to the airport and I have my AU luggage tag and go through the security and then "oh, you are from AU. I took a course there." So personal connection and feeling that you made a difference . . . just like any other teacher.

All interviewees were very clear about the distinctive characteristics of their students and the pedagogical restrictions caused by the open nature of their universities, which often allows students "unprepared for the university level of education" (Dan) to enter the university. Reflecting such pedagogical conditions, a rather altruistic attitude to teaching comes out very strongly from the interviewees' comments. For example, Tom said:

The first thing is to get to know the student as a "person" as best you can . . . some students are struggling, they have to struggle to get the time, they are single mothers with children and earning for a living. And sometimes, they need some recognition from us just how hard it is to become a student and to fulfil those requirements . . . and sometimes, it's difficult because one hand, I have to maintain a standard. If I receive a paper, which isn't written well, which has grammatical and compositional problems, it's my job to show that the student has problems but can overcome those problems. It's my job to show the student how to fulfil themselves to move beyond . . . in order to really begin the teaching process, there is a point of contact where you have to recognize

another human being on the other end of the relationship. With me, the best way is through a telephone call . . . I try to deal with students individually as a human to see what their resources are, what their experiences are, how they can use the experiences to fulfil the requirements in the course.

Tom expressed an awareness that the university, and many of his colleagues nowadays, believe that his teaching approach, which was appreciated in the early years of the institution, has become regarded as extremely inefficient and too costly. He has been asked to replace telephone tutoring with e-mail communication, which, to him, is not at all relational or dialogical but rather transactional and impersonal. His story has a sad ending: “loneliness . . . I am square peg in a round hole. That’s how I’ve felt at AU. But it’s true.”

Bill also stated a preference for telephone tutoring over other ways of communicating with students even though the student group that he tends to “phone up” seems different from that described by Tom:

I have students who read materials and ask me questions that I am struggling to answer because they get into the part of the text that I don’t cover . . . to respond to that student, I need some kind of immediate contact because it takes a while to figure out why this student is interested in this section . . . I have a number of students who do that like top 10% and it’s such a pleasure actually it’s what makes teaching really, really exciting and I had students I corresponded with and I am still corresponding with some of them after the course. They still say that my teaching changed their life.

Tom and Bill provided similar opinions about the nature of communication mediated by different Web-based communication tools, such as e-mail, stating that it tends to be transactional. They suggested that students’ e-mails include only brief information-seeking questions, and that meaningful dialogue rarely emerges via e-mail communications. Regarding Web-conferencing, Tom pointed out that “I don’t mind, but I am not sure how that is different from phoning-up. That is still one-to-one exchange. Costly . . . so university hates it. Telephone is so much [more] convenient anyway.” Bill also says “the [Internet] connection is often bad. Phone voice is much clearer.” Most of the interviewees stated their belief that facilitating group discussions in online courses with a large number of students is unrealistic, especially since many of their students do not have a good level of academic literacy.

These shared voices indicate that a) the participation rate for online discussion is very low, b) student postings foreground surface knowledge rather than deeper thoughts, and c) facilitation is too costly, if it is possible at all. Tom said:

Sometimes learning designers want me to put in chat rooms or conference sites, then my response is I don’t have the time to monitor posts that students put up . . . because there are three written assignments in this course and if I got 30 students in this course, I am gonna be busy just to mark their written assignments, answering phone calls, answering e-mails, and you want me really to coordinate the conference site or chat room? Plus, most students, if they don’t have to go on the chat room, if there is no grade given, they wouldn’t be bothered. They are not in it for socialization. Learning designers don’t like me because I am not enthusiastic about all those stuffs, but I still am unenthusiastic about it.

In addition, Bill suggested that the nature of humanities requires students to take time to read and think, rather than talking and discussing. He added that “the logical thinking and deep philosophical reasoning is an individual task.”

Discussion

The preceding section presented the intertwined voices of distance teachers, raising two important points to discuss further. First, there is a significant gap between general historical claims about online DE and the autobiographic narratives of distance teachers. Contrary to common belief about the increased openness in online DE contexts, the distance teachers in this study have felt a decreased sense of openness in their everyday practices. Our collaborative interpretation (i.e., the result of the autoethnographic interviews), is that in the midst of an excessive rhetoric of openness, the open universities have lost, or at least obscured, their original mission of serving the underserved. It is not merely the open universities’ wrong-doings but rather a mixture of internal and external factors that has shifted the original focus of the institutions. External factors identified during the interviews include (a) decreased government and public funding for open universities, (b) increased competition among DE providers, and (c) more general changes in the climate of HE—which is often conceptualized as subject to neoliberal movements (Giroux, 2014).

The interview results suggest that the most important task for open universities, in this time of uncertainty, is to start serious conversations about their mission and direction. Making the institutional focus clearer—possibly by retracing the earlier focus on openness—can facilitate those conversations and provide a practical ground for possible actions to address the current crises. Such conversations will also protect individual distance educators from being misled by rhetorical claims about openness. When it comes to DE research, there is a shared sense of urgency about developing realistic understandings of the contemporary underserved that have been (or need to be) served by open universities, and the extent to which open universities have effectively served their particular students, who may not be well-prepared for university-level study. These are empirical matters that need to be investigated—for example, by looking at real-life experiences of specific groups of underserved students. Doing so will demand considerable commitment from DE researchers (Lee, 2017).

Second, there is long-lasting tension related to technological innovation between devotees and opponents in open universities. The study shows that the way in which open universities have adopted online DE has caused a strong sense of bitterness in both groups. Innovation has been tightly bound by ideas of accessibility and affordability, and so has never been free from scrutiny about its necessity. In the pre-Internet era, the idea of adopting new technologies was organically connected to, and therefore supported by, the purposes of making DE more accessible (Lee, under review). However, the idea of adopting online technologies, from its outset, has been severely criticized by those opponents who perceive online DE as neither accessible nor affordable. In such a hostile atmosphere, meaningful pedagogical discussions on how to teach online were not facilitated. Only later, when reaching an apparent breaking-point as a result of online becoming necessary, was online DE pushed by fear of falling behind other competitors. That, in turn, created the common sense of technological imperative in open universities.

This study suggests that the lack of meaningful conversation has led to a failure to achieve the kind of technological innovation its advocates argue is needed to bring pedagogical innovations into open universities. In the current online DE era, is it too late to start the conversation and look into the old tensions again? This article argues that it is not. Perhaps this moment of crisis is the right time to bring distance teachers and their real-life stories into the foreground of academic discussions on the future of DE and open universities, rather than imposing abstract and theoretical ideals of online DE upon them (Lee, 2018). Distance teachers, like other teachers, value meaningful connections with their students and they are actually on the front line, interacting with distance students and supporting their learning. In that sense, it is rather disappointing that the actual voices of distance teachers have rarely been emphasized within DE research.

Therefore, one legitimate starting point for imagining the sustainable future of open universities may be to talk to different groups of distance teachers—not only those who are seemingly doing well but also those who are struggling. The moment calls for a collaborative re-imagination of the future of DE—focusing on how to support distance teaching in a more practical and specific sense.

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