Postgraduate education and open learning: anticipating a new order?

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Introduction: an emerging new order?

Traditionally the postgraduate experience has been seen as being the most intensive, personal and individual experience of education. By its very nature it has had a significant element of 'learner control', with much of the teaching involving mentoring rather than instructing. In an important sense it has been the ideal-typical form of higher education, which is characteristically most 'open', where openness is characterised in terms of Richard Johnson's (1990, p 4) widely used definition:

> Open learning is an approach rather than a system or technique; it is based on the needs of individual learners, not the interest of the teacher or the institution; it gives students as much control as possible over what and when and where and how they learn; it commonly uses the delivery methods of distance education and the facilities of educational technology; it changes the role of teacher from a source of knowledge to a manager of learning and a facilitator.

However, while postgraduate education might be seen as inherently 'open' in terms of student control and the role of teacher, it is clear that it is under pressure to become even more so, particularly in terms of delivery, as a result of the articulation of information and communication technologies with the more traditional practices of distance education.

The recent reports of the Senate Employment, Education and Training References (EETR) Committee (1995) on the Inquiry into the Development of Open Learning in Australia highlight increased expectations of open learning practices for education and pressure for all sectors of education to adopt those practices. These expectations are being supported "by its practitioners in ways that have bordered on missionary zeal" (Tait, 1994, p 27). While not a practitioner, Senator John Tierney, writing in the Introduction to Part 2 of the Senate EETR Committee report, observed that:

> To an extent, _open learning is symbolic of an emerging new order_ in education and training [my emphasis]. We can take it to 'stand for' all those features of flexibility, efficiency, effectiveness, service, national interest and so on which characterise the present debate (Senate EETR Committee, 1995, p 4).

He seems to be arguing that any pressure for reform is pressure for a 'new order' symbolised by open learning. Given the central role of government in developing the policy framework for the development of education and training in Australia, it seems reasonable to characterise this political pressure as overarching and all pervasive. In this paper I want to share some speculations about possible forms of postgraduate education, and roles and pedagogical relationships possible within those forms, as they evolve under such re-forming pressures. I do so from the perspective of someone who has developed open learning approaches for both on and off-campus students, and who is working in the area of academic staff development. In this role I am both supervising members of academic staff undertaking postgraduate studies and raising issues such as those discussed here within the wider university community.

Before turning to the issue of re-form, let me state a caveat for the discussion by making it clear that pressure for reform is not being directed towards (or away from) postgraduate education exclusively. Rather, it is a general pressure for the learning environment of all students, including those involved in postgraduate studies, to become more 'open'.

One way to make sense of the rapidly expanding literature, and the inconsistent use of the term 'open learning' within it, is to locate the advocates and discussants within groups whose membership is characterised in terms of organisational role. Those roles are, in some senses, incidental to the distinctions offered below, but they are useful signals of the focus of their views. I refer to three roles, namely: educational managers; educational technologists and courseware designers; and teachers. This listing is _not_ intended to signal or imply any hierarchical relationship between them. The categories reflect my reading of the voices that are heard, or not heard, in 'open learning' literature. I will distinguish each in terms of the focus of their discussions and the forms of open learning which they appear to be advocating. I will also comment on the nature of the pedagogical relationships between postgraduate students and academics which are likely to evolve and /or be sustained in the new order.

Educational management: the growth imperative

Those involved in management of education tend to focus on issues of efficiency, effectiveness, service, national interest, and see open learning in terms of administrative and delivery systems. Most of the submissions dealt with by the Senate Committee's report were derived from members of this group. Given their current role within the industry, it is understandable that occupants of this role would tend to seek both to influence and accommodate their political masters. What is of most concern here is the imperative to equate 'open' with 'distance', through the articulation of information and communication technologies with the more traditional practices of distance education, and the related foci on the development of 'educational products' rather than 'educational programs' and of 'postal' rather than 'educational' systems. Effective managers have quickly recognised that technological delivery systems may not be 'revenue neutral', because the front-end cost of this articulation requires large numbers of students to make that investment cost-effective. However, once a product is prepared the per-unit cost of delivery decreases with increasing numbers of students. The achievement of large numbers of students is relatively easy in the undergraduate area, but much less so in the postgraduate area. On the other hand, open learning modes offer an opportunity to 'grow the market' for postgraduate courses. What we have here is a scenario that lends itself to mass education and entrepreneurship.

According to Latchem and Pritchard[1] (1994), the 'unique Australian' response to this scenario has involved the establishment of Open Learning Australia (OLA):

> OLA is not an open university, setting its own curriculum and awarding its own degrees. It is a private company which acts as a brokerage agency, co-ordinating, marketing and promoting open learning offerings. This brokerage model means that students are effectively clients of the company rather than enrolled students of a particular university (Latchem and Pritchard, 1994, p 20).

The picture they paint of higher education is 'client focused', where 'universities' compete to provide courseware for 'the brokerage com-

pany'. This is consistent with related changes in the view of academic managers of universities as organisations. No academic could have failed to see the rapid emergence of a 'newspeak' which focuses on 'strategic and corporate interests', 'the global pedagogic market', and 'commercialisation'. The language, and the arguments which it informs, seems to ignore educational issues. Indeed, the motivation of the academic managers seems entirely focused on 'the bottom line'. While the impact of these aspects of the new order on the role and independence of universities warrants careful analysis, this paper is not the place for such an analysis. To reflect this commercial focus, I will use the term 'cli/dent' to represent the fusion of the concepts of client and student. I will also refer to teachers as mentors when I am using the term to refer to this element of an academic's job description.

A recent review of the OLA, discussed by Healy (1995) in *The Australian*, strongly endorsed the OLA initiative. Further into the same edition of *The Australian*, David Myers, a senior academic, argued that "[t]he best thing to happen educationally in Australia is open learning" because it "will replace boring 19th century lectures" (Myers, 1995, p 27). Presumably Myers was referring to the lectures given by others, not by him. In the context of the operation of OLA, however, it seems that not only might 'boring' lectures be replaced, but so too might some lecturers, whether they are 'boring' or not. The reasoning for such a possibility runs like this. If OLA expands its operations, as both the Senate Committee and the evaluation recommend, then the actual pool of academics required to develop the teaching programs for any particular subject area will be reduced, because the broadcast technology makes it possible for their work to be available to all potential cli/dents. Indeed, Latchem and Pritchard describe a system that is remarkably independent of academic support once the 'course unit materials' have been developed. This argument is very similar to one advanced by Janice Newson (1994, p 39), in which she concludes that

it has been an historical pattern that the adoption of new technologies has been associated with the elimination of long established, once believed to be unassailable, professions and occupations and their replacement with new ones.

But will the growth imperative have any lasting impact on postgraduate education? The answer is possibly affirmative, for a number of reasons. First, there is a rapidly changing view of the nature of postgraduate education. The move to re-form higher education (in the 'national interest'), into a system of mass education focused on the delivery of employment-related services to cli/dents whose prior learning has to be recognised, is a significant theme in the pressure for reform. Until recently, the effects of this move have been most visible in the undergraduate areas where participation rates have increased dramatically since the late 1980s. What we are now seeing is a blurring of the under- versus postgraduate distinctions, particularly in course-work programs. Increasingly the distinction is being represented in quantitative terms, with a Masters degree being seen as equivalent to a fifth year of higher education, rather than in qualitative terms. By this logic, references to qualitative distinctions are framed as a vestige of an ivory tower elitism.

Second, the move to mass education is seen as having particular institutional and 'market' consequences, as argued by Shattock (1995). His discussion points to increasing accountability requirements, such as quality audits, and bureaucratic intervention from governments as the size of their financial contribution to higher education goes up. That is, the move to mass education has meant that in real terms those contributions have increased, even though they have decreased on a per-student basis. The pressure to respond to government initiatives and priorities has also contributed to a homogenisation of expectations of universities—"[n]either governments, funding agencies nor students distinguish between one university or another" (Shattock, 1995, pp 158-159). Shattock (1995, pp 159) warns that this is leading to "the tendency to homogenise and bureaucratise that most critical of areas, the interface between university teachers and their students". Thus, in addition to the blurring of the distinction between under- and post-graduate qualifications, there is a blurring between institutions.

Third, the Federal Government has already established a postgraduate studies consortium—Professional Graduate Education Consortium (PAGE)—based at Wollongong University. Thus, the issue is not whether this growth imperative will have an impact, but how large that impact will be and at what disciplines it will be targeted. Sian Powell and Emma Moody (1995, p. 1) provide some hints on a possible scenario in their discussion of the then recently released Karpin taskforce report:

Mr Crean announced $1 million in seed funding over the next two years to develop course materials to suit the needs of small business managers who wanted tuition via Open Learning ...

I suspect that quite a few faculties, and not just in Business/ Administration, are desperately trying to re-form themselves as open learning deliverers of postgraduate work, in order to make their offerings less attractive as a target.

A fourth reason relates to the possible consequences of the competition between universities and 'brokers' as suppliers of higher education. I have suggested that such a competition is likely to reduce the number of academics available to undertake the supervision of research cli/dents within any one institution. Under those circumstances, we might see increased pressure to reduce the number of universities funded to offer postgraduate studies in any particular discipline. This is already the case in high-cost programs such as medicine and law. That is, the argument might be mounted that, rather than dilute the 'talent', it should be concentrated so as to achieve the critical mass needed to ensure both a vibrant scholastic environment and a viable pool of supervisors.

What of the roles of postgraduate cli/dents and academics? Managers' increasing interests in 'rates of progression', along with moves to quantify academic workloads in terms of either EFTSU or time allowances for supervision based on degree type, signal the end of an era in which enrolment in a research degree provided an entree to an "intensive, personal and individual experience of education", relatively untrammelled by more worldly concerns. For example, where in the past students tended to become part of the university community through their postgraduate studies, it is clear that cli/dents expect to remain within their existing communities, and have the educational 'product' delivered to them. However, they also expect to be able to access their university-based mentors (perhaps we should think of this as 'after sales service'). For mentors, this will require a significant change in their working hours, as cli/dents are not likely to be engaged in their studies at the very time that mentors have traditionally been available 'for consultation'. 'After hours' access will be expected, particularly where cli/dents are expected to make a financial contribution for the educational service.

It is clear that these new forms, accessed through open learning modes, will provide postgraduate cli/dents with more choice in terms of when and where they undertake their studies. What is also clear is that they will have less choice about what they study—'national interest' will be more important here. On the other hand, those who seek more personalised interactions will have less choice in terms of where and with whom those interactions will take place. It seems that some, including the Karpin taskforce, would want these interactions to be available on a full-fee paying basis. For academics, there will be some new employment opportunities, as hinted at by the earlier quote from Newson. There will be an increasing demand for those who have skills in authoring 'instructional materials' for the technologically enhanced postal system. For others, there will be significant opportunities for brokerage roles in the areas of negotiating for service provision at both course delivery and cli/dent advisement levels. There will also be opportunities to work in high-powered (scholastically speaking) communities. The down-side is that there will be fewer overall opportunities for employment, but this may be compensated for through the provision of larger remuneration packages for those who are able to position themselves to take advantage those opportunities.

Technologists: *world wide wishfulness*

Those whose work in the area of educational technology focus on issues of technological mediation. Associated with this group are those who are involved in the design of open learning resources ('courseware'). There seems to be an exponential growth in journals that publish articles related to these issues. Alternatively, there may be an exponential growth in subscriptions by information service centres—the name that seems to be used for re-formed libraries. Whatever the cause, the majority of papers published in these journals tends to address issues of technological mediation and courseware design as technologies separate from the actual learning they are used to support. That separation includes a tendency to ignore aspects of context such as the discipline area and the related enthusiasm of the lecturers and cli/dents for that technology. This enthusiasm for the "disembodiment" of pedagogy (McWilliam, 1995) is commented on by both Newson (1994) and Tait (1994). The subtext seems to be that for the reform to succeed, there is a need to capture the pedagogical practices of the best lecturers, and then use technology to replicate those practices. Clearly even the `best' practitioners might well have a limited academic career in terms of their pedagogical skills.

Courseware designers pay considerable attention to the form of course content while technologists focus on issues related to its transmission and manipulation. On the other hand, the latter seem relatively unconcerned with issues of cost-effectiveness or particular administrative systems, and this may frustrate some educational managers. While their undergraduate education applications tend to focus on interactive multimedia, that is, interaction with very high quality information storage devices, postgraduate applications seem more focused on the use of technology to network and possibly interact with other cli/dents and their mentors. Their work gives the impression of a vision of postgraduate education predicated on accessing the World Wide Web (WWW) or more local networking technologies. In turn, the WWW as a technological system facilitates the locating of as much information as possible in forms which are accessible from as many sites as possible.

Within these environments, cli/dents will have very significant roles as consumers of educational services through increased options in terms of the providers of those services. Their capacity to use technology to locate sites which provide the information they need, together with the opportunity to interact with individuals beyond their course-designated mentors, will allow them considerable opportunities to take control of their own learning. On the other hand, the opportunity to choose service providers and navigate the Web requires new capacities. While the young may have few apprehensions about that challenge, it is not at all clear that those who are currently making most use of the OLA, according to the recent review referred to previously, are similarly confident. Indeed, the demands for open learning participation of the type referred to in discussions of postgraduate education may make considerably more demands on students in terms of both skills and access to technology than is the case for students serviced by OLA. The last statement applies equally to academics in terms of their contributions to courseware development or mentoring.

Teachers: invisible in the process?

Finally, I turn to those who are involved in the actual delivery of open education—the teachers—who in their contributions to discussions of open learning tend to focus on learners' perceptions of and responses to open learning delivery practices. I note here that both the term and the discussion itself tend to ignore the teacher and pedagogy. This invisibility is not a new phenomenon—Lusted (1986), for example, commented on it in his response to the question 'why pedagogy' a decade ago. While critics argue that teaching is overly teacher-centred, this group of discussants of open learning can be seen as overly cli/dent-centred. Where discussions have identified concerns with open learning, such as in the Senate Committee report, those concerns have tended to focus on the lack of access to the necessary technology and loss of opportunities for face-to-face interaction.

What seems to be missing is any sustained attention to the experiences and concerns of either undergraduate or postgraduate teachers. Those who are researching open learning practices tend to be representative of what Tait, in the earlier quote, referred to as the "missionaries". Again, this is no new phenomenon—there is a long tradition of the 'colonists' speaking on behalf of themselves and those who they have 'colonised'. This raises a central concern: the failure to address the issue of reform itself as a process, as well as those whose practices are central to that process. Historical perspectives on attempts to achieve educational reform indicate very clearly that those attempts have tended to fail, and suggest that they will continue to do so until they "confront the cultural and pedagogical traditions and beliefs that underlie current practices and organizational arrangements" (Goodman, 1995, 2).

Where teaching has been studied, the reports tend to focus on the need to re-develop pedagogical skills and strategies. Those reports fail to acknowledge that pedagogy has moral and ethical dimensions in addition to these technical ones. They also ignore issues of teaching discipline, and cli/dent expectations. In my role in academic staff development, I am being asked to provide the skills development required so that those who I work with will be better able to perform in the new order. The view of learning implicit in that expectation is deeply flawed. That is, it implies that the practice of education involves only the exercise of particular sets of skills. It ignores the relationship between practice and context at both the inter- and intra-personal levels. Thus, it ignores the issues that Goodman raises. Myopically, it ignores the values that motivate teachers. Education, even in open learning modes, cannot be value-free in its practice. It is in the exercise of these dimensions that teachers may exert their power, and appropriately resist being re-formed (Newson, 1994; Radnofsky, 1994). However, if teachers do resist, their very arguments are likely to be seen as justifications for the dismantling of their cultures and traditions, as exemplified in the current writing of Peter Coaldrake. On the other hand, if they embrace the new order, they risk losing the very cultures and traditions that drew them to teaching.

Conclusion

What I am arguing is that, while increased 'openness' may achieve some elements of the reform agenda, it is clear that it is unlikely to lead to fundamental reform for a number of reasons, principal amongst which is the failure of its advocates to address the actual process of reform. John Goodlad (1992, p. 238) captures a sense of this failure thus:

Top-down, politically driven education reform movements are addressed primarily to restructuring the educational system. They have little to say about educating. Grassroots reform efforts, on the other hand, have little to say about restructuring.

Attention to that issue would lead to a focus on the congruence between "cultural and pedagogical traditions" and the new demands associated with open learning. However, those at 'the grassroots' need to identify and analyse their "pedagogical traditions". To simply declare that such traditions exist is unlikely to deflect or accommodate the concerns of the 'politicians'. We must research postgraduate pedagogy as a set of practices and develop ways of advocating for them which are responsive to those concerns.

Authors like Goodlad, Goodman, and Radnofsky are writing about reform in the context of the primary and secondary sectors of education. While their work needs to be given much more attention by those who are analysing and advocating reform in the higher education sector, the possibilities of a 'new order' symbolised by open learning adds a sense of urgency to that analysis and advocacy. As discussed earlier, open learning offers the possibility of a qualitatively different 'new order' to the current one (see also Newson, 1994). This paper has identified some of those possibilities. The urgency arises in the context of the massive financial investment in the technological infrastructure currently under way in Australia. Once that investment has been made, academics may find that they have a reduced capacity to influence the direction or the pace of reform. We need more discussion of postgradu-

ate pedagogy, certainly, but there is a more urgent need to locate those discussions within a context which acknowledges, and responds to, current political and management agendas, and technological and courseware design potentials.

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Footnote

1. Tony Pritchard was identified in that paper as the Executive Director of Open Learning Australia.