

## Changing Concepts of the Boundaries within ODL

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### Summary

This paper takes as its starting point the work of such authors as John Coffey (1977), who distinguishes between the removal of educational and/or administrative constraints to learning, and Richard Boot and Vivien Hodgson, (1987) who describe two main orientations to open learning, a dissemination orientation and a development orientation. The assumption is that like most conventional education ODL has, until now, taken a primarily dissemination orientation and has been concerned with the removal of mostly the administrative constraints that learners are often confronted with in conventional classroom based educational provision. It is, however, recognised that in recent times there has been a growing interest in so called constructionist approaches to education, which, together with the development of ever more information and media rich learning environments has led to a greater concern in removing educational as well as administrative constraints to learning. This has led to a much greater examination of the role of both teachers and learners, as well as examining in more detail the boundaries created due to such aspects as cultural and language differences, existing educational traditions and from gender and racial biases in educational practices.

The paper examines the work of primarily three ODL Socrates projects that will present as part of a focus group on changing concepts of the boundaries within ODL.

### Introduction

In an early definition of open learning provided by John Coffey (1977), he said that open learning was the removal of both administrative and educational constraints to learning. By administrative constraints he meant such things as time, space, duration and cost and by educational constraints he meant such things as objectives, method, sequencing, entry qualifications and assessment. In a somewhat later analysis of different orientations to open learning Richard Boot and myself (Boot and Hodgson, 1987) claimed that there was two main orientations to open learning, a dissemination orientation and a development orientation. Figure 1 summaries what we felt to be the main differences in assumptions and approaches characteristic of these two different orientations to open learning.

Fig. 1: DISSIMINATION AND DEVELOPMENT ORIENTATIONS TO OPEN LEARNING

<b>ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT KNOWLEDGE</b>	Knowledge as <i>valuable commodity</i> existing independently of people. Can be stored and transmitted.	Knowing as <i>process</i> of engaging with and attributing meaning to the world, including self in it.
<b>ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING</b>	<i>Acquisition and addition</i> of facts, concepts and skills	<i>Elaboration and change</i> of the meaning-making processes. Enhancement of personal competence
<b>PURPOSE OF EDUCATION</b>	<i>Dissemination</i> of stored knowledge	<i>Development</i> of the whole person
<b>MEANING OF INDEPENDENCE</b>	<i>Individualism</i>	<i>Autonomy</i>
<b>BASIS OF LEARNER CHOICE</b>	<i>Cafeteria</i> Selection from a set range of carefully prepared dishes	<i>Self-catering</i> Planning menu's, deciding raw materials required and experimenting with ways of preparing
<b>COURSE STRUCTURE</b>	<i>Based on syllabus</i> The organisation and sequencing of course materials	<i>Based on process</i> of planning, deciding and experimenting
<b>CONCERNS FOR RELEVANCE</b>	Consideration given to problems of <i>application and transfer</i>	Participants <i>own working lives</i> regarded as prime source of learning material
<b>TO ENGAGE SUCCESSFULLY WITH COURSE</b>	Students encouraged to improve <i>study skills</i>	Participants encouraged to <i>learn to learn</i>
<b>THE SOCIAL ELEMENT</b>	Other people seen as source of <i>moral support</i> , encouragement and comparison for individualised learning task	Other people seen as <i>inherent part of learning</i> venture, providing challenge and collaboration in construction of personal meaning
<b>TUTOR'S ROLE</b>	<i>Subject expert</i> Guardian of knowledge Responsible for teaching or instructing May delegate to course media and materials	<i>Facilitator</i> , resource person and co-learner. Meanings he/she attributes to events no more valid than anyone else's
<b>ASSESSMENT</b>	Measure of proficiency against <i>externally recognised standard</i> Tutor as subject expert best person to judge quality of work	Part of learning process Based on <i>collaborative</i> assessment against <i>mutually agreed criteria</i>

It could be argued that ODL has, until now, taken a primarily dissemination orientation and has been concerned with the removal of mostly the administrative constraints that learners are most often confronted with in conventional classroom based educational provision. This has been largely as a consequence of, on the one hand, the dominant educational philosophy in most

countries having been one of didactic instruction and the dissemination/delivery of an accepted body of knowledge and, on the other hand, the available 'distant' technologies having been largely text and print based, supplemented in a few cases by video or broadcast. The German word for distant learning, 'Fernunterricht', meaning distribution of knowledge, reflects well the educational philosophy that is most frequently associated with ODL.

Over the last few years, however, there have been changes in both the technologies available to support ODL and in views about the preferred educational philosophy for supporting teaching and learning. The so-called active/constructionist paradigm of learning has become much more prominent in educational literature and espoused educational theory. These changes have led to a greater concern and interest in removing the educational as well as the administrative constraints to learning. Whether this has led to a move from dissemination to development orientations to open learning is perhaps a debatable point. It is also worth noting that whilst removing all constraints to learning, might at first sight appear desirable, it would in practice leave no educational provision at all. That is education of the formal kind, which is supported by public funding and seen as a political and social responsibility of governments. Consequently, from at least a formal view and perspective of education, the issue is more of one of the extent that formal education provision does or should, 'bound' learning.

#### **Boundary crossing in ODL Socrates projects**

The notion of boundaries in education is a very relevant and real one to educational projects funded by the Socrates programme of the European Commission. All of the projects that have been funded since 1995 under the ODL part of the Socrates programme have had to, by definition, work across geographical boundaries and with the consequent cultural and language differences and understandings that this creates. Cultural and language differences directly impact upon the boundaries that are associated with the nature and status of knowledge. The nature and status of knowledge has in recent times become an area that has increasingly been considered to be contentious and to be the result of social interaction and processes. Henri Giroux in his book, 'Border Crossings', (Giroux, 1992) examines the relationship between the emergence, or, to be more precise, the recognition of different knowledge communities and critical pedagogy. And several authors, in recent years, have examined the relationship and impact of technological development upon the nature and status of knowledge and the educational process. (e.g. Lyotard, 1991, Hynka and Belland, 1991, Levy, 1994, Spender, 1995 and Castells, 1997).

Technology and educational thinking have developed enormously over the last 5- 10 years. Educational practice, however, has been much slower to change and to adapt to the changes in ideas about the status and nature of knowledge and the access to information/knowledge resulting from the advances in information and communications technology. There are many reasons why this is the case. Prominent amongst these has to be the lack of experience, training and understanding about the use of active/constructivist approaches to teaching and learning within the constraints imposed by conventional educational institutions or situations. Equally significant is the lack of experience, training and understanding of ways to use new technology to support such approaches to learning.

It is only relatively recently that educational practitioners have begun to use the advances in information and communications technology to assist them in working across some of the more difficult 'boundaries' encountered in the educational process. It is probably an accurate reflection to say that for many more it is a case of 'they would if they could.'

Almost inevitably many of the first ODL Socrates projects, like the Distant Universities before them, used advances in technology to help them remove administrative constraints to learning but not educational ones. The educational institutions involved in the projects, for the most part, not only remained clearly responsible for determining objectives, content, method and assessment criteria but also continued to follow a largely instructional, dissemination of knowledge educational philosophy of teaching and learning. More recently, however, as educationalists have become more aware of the potential of information and communications technology to support the process of working across some of the more difficult 'boundaries' encountered in education and in learning there has been an increase in projects seeking support from the Commission to explore new ways of teaching and learning and to use technology to assist them in 'boundary crossing'.

It is the work of some of these projects that I would like to examine and discuss because they offer useful nascent examples and demonstrators of how and what geographical, and more importantly, educational boundaries can be crossed, through the imaginative and collaborative use of new technology. The projects are all real life examples of ODL working across boundaries, and as such, reflect the problems, issues and constraints that this generates, as well as the power and potential of new technology to support open learning. These ODL projects each act as examples of theory and practice and thus each provide insights and understanding of the issues and the potential of technology to support open learning that aspires to the removal of some of the educational as well as the administrative constraints upon both individual learners and individual groups of learners. In this paper and focus group three specific projects are examined and discussed. These are the Learn-nett project (c.f. paper by Bernadette Charlier Joel Bonamy and Murray Saunders) which is a Higher Education project, SocraTESS, (c.f. paper by Ole Hansen and Pia Guttrum) which is a teacher education project that focuses on special needs education. Also considered is EVA and C3 (c.f. paper by Christoph Hamischmacher and Ulrich Rauter) which are two projects that have been concerned with the development of a technology based educational model/environment that supports the authors work with disadvantaged learners. Further details about each of these projects and other Socrates ODL projects can be obtained at, <http://siu.no/isoc/>

The work and ideas generated by the three projects are described in detail in the three project related papers prepared for this conference and focus group session. My intention here is to attempt an update to the ideas that Richard Boot and myself produced through an initial analysis of the key assumptions and ideas that are discussed in the three papers. And, thus, begin the process of identifying what kinds of assumptions are being made by projects, such as the Socrates ODL projects, that are attempting to work across some of the more difficult and potentially more developmental educational boundaries

### **Changing concepts of the boundaries**

If we begin then with the framework described in figure 1, we see that the different kinds of assumptions that are described are about knowledge, about learning, the purpose of education, the meaning of independence, the basis of learner choice, the course structure, the nature of the concerns for relevance, about how to engage successfully with the course, the importance attributed to the social element, the tutors role and the role and purpose of assessment.

Interestingly, examination of the ideas and concepts discussed by the three Socrates ODL projects reflect many of the concerns that we identified and described in our earlier work, for example, assumptions about knowledge, the learning process, the purpose of education, the social element and the tutor role. Although, as shown in figure 2 below the actual assumptions made are not,

necessarily, the same as those that we identified at that time. Some others aspects, however, such as assessment, are not discussed very much whilst yet others that did not figure in our original framework are now quite prominent in the language and assumptions of the three projects. Examples are the concepts of communities of practice, the situated nature of learning and the significance of reflection.

**Fig. 2 Contrasting Development and Constructionist Orientations to Open Learning**

<b>ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT KNOWLEDGE</b>	Knowing as <i>process</i> of engaging with and attributing meaning to the world, including self in it.	Knowing as <i>process</i> of engaging with and attributing meaning to the world, including ones own position in it.
<b>ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING</b>	<i>Elaboration and change</i> of the meaning-making processes. Enhancement of personal competence	Knowledge is <i>created</i> by learners reflecting upon and adopting new practices and learning is the <i>enhancement</i> of personal effectiveness
<b>PURPOSE OF EDUCATION</b>	<i>Development</i> of the whole person	<i>Development of personal knowledge and practice</i> and sense of self worth
<b>MEANING OF INDEPENDENCE</b>	<i>Autonomy</i>	<i>Autonomous authors</i> and creators of own learning/knowledge
<b>BASIS OF LEARNER CHOICE</b>	<i>Self-catering</i> Planning menu's, deciding raw materials required and experimenting with ways of preparing	
<b>COURSE STRUCTURE</b>	<i>Based on process</i> of planning, deciding and experimenting Participants <i>own working lives</i> regarded as prime source of learning material	
<b>CONCERNS FOR RELEVANCE TO ENGAGE SUCCESSFULLY WITH COURSE</b>	Participants encouraged to <i>learn to learn</i> Other people seen as <i>inherent part of learning</i> venture, providing challenge and collaboration in construction of personal meaning <i>Facilitator</i> , resource person and co-learner. Meanings he/she attributes to events no more valid than anyone else's	
<b>THE SOCIAL ELEMENT</b>		Social context/situation is paramount importance. <i>Shared construction</i> achieved through dialogue and discussion
<b>TUTOR'S ROLE</b>		<i>Facilitator</i> who offers personal and social assistance, support and encouragement
<b>ASSESSMENT</b>	Part of learning process Based on <i>collaborative</i> assessment against <i>mutually agreed criteria</i>	

The importance of critical reflection is implicitly and/or explicitly referred to by all three of the projects. The importance of the situated nature of learning is referred to by all the projects whether this is by reference to what I prefer to call learning communities or to communities of young storytellers and or new communities of practice. The areas that are given the least explicit attention are, as already mentioned, assessment, (although referred to by Learn-nett as a key process or component in any educational activity or programme) the basis of learner choice, course structure and concerns for relevance.

A key and interesting aspect described by the three projects is the significance and importance of confronting states of uncertainty when working across boundaries, be they geographical, technological or pedagogical. The need to come to terms with and accept complexity and diversity when and if working across boundaries is perhaps the key idea/issue to emerge from examination of these three projects.

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