

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY — COMMENTS OF AN INTERESTED OBSERVER

Introduction

In setting down these comments on The Open University I am drawing on experience gained during three months of study leave spent at that institution. I make no claim for comprehensiveness, but rather would have my comments seen as impressions derived from attendance at numerous course planning and faculty meetings, and discussions with academics, administrators, tutors, course assistants, research assistants, and students. I have also drawn upon a series of articles written by Professor Brian Lewis, of the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology, which provides an excellent overview of basic procedures (Lewis, 1971a,b,c).

Teaching methods at the Open University(OU)

Many educators, both within the United Kingdom and outside that country, see the Open University as possibly the most important innovation in higher education of the past half-century. One of the factors contributing to this view is embodied in the name of the University, for, in many quarters, the philosophy of openness has proven particularly acceptable. All who are capable of a university level education, irrespective of age or previous academic qualifications, may benefit. Frequently The Open University is referred to in terms of a 'second chance'. That is, thousands of adults who, constrained by traditional university entrance requirements, would have had no chance of higher education, are given the opportunity of studying for a degree.

This has been achieved through the use of multi-media distance teaching methods rather than the conventional face-to-face contact of staff and students at a particular place designated as the learning environment. Perhaps the most striking feature of these distance teaching methods is their variety, for a wide range of activities is encompassed by the approach, justifying the claim that "...The Open University (is) the first full-scale multi-media system of higher education." (Lewis, 1971b,p.111). The correspondence text is the main teaching channel. It contains a number of individual units, each one involving approximately a week's work, accompanied by study notes and self-administered tests. A clear statement of objectives is included in this study package for it is considered essential that students know exactly what is expected of them. Further, they are advised on how they might best achieve the objectives which have been set. Ancillary text containing selected readings may often accompany the cor-

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respondence units to provide both essential and enrichment material, while most courses also require reading from 'set books' which students are expected to buy. Science courses, though they may make use of such reading, are more likely to include specially designed home kits enabling students to perform various experiments.

Although these study packages comprise the core materials of the course, special "support" activities are also provided as integral elements. These may include weekly broadcasts on radio and television which have been integrated with the correspondence units to provide the multi-media approach mentioned earlier. Their role is primarily one of reinforcement and amplification of the printed materials, though occasionally a more open discussion type programme may be included.

Support of a different kind involving people rather than media is offered through study centres which are distributed on a regional basis. Physically these consist of rooms provided by local authorities which the Open University normally equips with radio and television receivers. Supplementary equipment such as tape recorders, projectors and computer terminals for the use of mathematics students may also be provided. Class Tutors and Counsellors, comparable in some ways to Australian Adult Education tutors, visit the study centres to conduct discussion groups and to provide individual guidance. They are part-time appointees, usually holding positions in local colleges, but their work is co-ordinated by full-time Open University staff in the form of Senior Tutors and Senior Counsellors.

A more intensive activity, again involving face-to-face staff-student contact, takes place for a week over the summer when residential schools are held in many of the courses. These are sited in Universities all over the United Kingdom and involve several hundred students. Concentrated effort seems to be the dominant theme of the summer schools with great emphasis on fieldwork, experimentation, special projects and demonstrations. The "coming together" of staff and students on such an intensive basis, even for as short a period as a single week, can do a lot towards alleviating the loneliness of the long-distance student. There are Australian antecedents for this practice at the Universities of New England and Queensland, where such external studies short-term residential schools have been conducted for many years.

During the year, the sense of aloneness may also be modified to some extent through written contact with the tutor responsible for marking the students' assignments. Although this marking can, and sometimes is, carried on in a formal, impersonal way, it may also serve as a vehicle for friendly interchange and comment. Over the duration of the course, a certain warmth of feeling between student and tutor may develop which adds to the enjoyment of the student activity. Less personally enhancing are the computer marked assignments which also comprise part of the programme.

Course Production

Because its courses are exposed to scrutiny by academics and the general public alike, the Open University goes to great lengths to produce high quality materials. The amount of time and care devoted to this task is tremendous, quite overwhelming in fact for someone like myself steeped in the course production processes of traditional universities. Yet, to be realistic, the Open University academics are in a position to devote most of their time to course design, undistracted by the necessity to teach their students in formally scheduled lectures, tutorials and seminars. Similarly, they are largely relieved of the marking burden, with tutors fulfilling this function. Having said this, though, I was greatly impressed with the importance attached to the production of courses from which students could learn. Great effort was expended in designing materials which would facilitate student learning and, although this was not always successfully achieved, the results were generally positive.

Of course, as occurs in more traditional universities, the temptation is always there to include too much material in a course and so overload the student. Academics tend to think of the subject matter they teach as indispensable, so that students would be really handicapped in some way unless it was presented to them in its entirety. Accordingly, not only do lecturers include too much material, they also tend to set too many exercises and assignments based on it. A more realistic approach is to see a course as only one sample of the courses it would be possible to give on the same topic and realize that what is to be presented must therefore be severely limited.

Through the Open University academics are just as prone to this error of course overloading as are those of us working in traditional universities, their mistakes are likely to have more serious repercussions. Most of us operate within the confines of our own private little worlds, with only our own students privy to the materials we present. No so in the Open University. Their courses are open to criticism by academics all over the world as well as anyone else interested enough to read them. Though this openness may have certain disadvan-

tages in terms of increased pressure on the course designers, it also carries with it a great stimulus to produce high quality materials. If the traditional academic produces a poor course, only his students grumble about it, and he is able to go on using it year after year to different classes. Not so with the Open University course. A poor course would probably come under such heavy fire that upgrading would be virtually forced upon its designers.

The use of the plural term, designers, is particularly apposite in its present context. Courses in higher education are usually the products of a single academic, but to design an Open University course, a dozen or so academics work as a team under the direction of a Course Team Chairman. In addition to the academic members, the team would normally include an education technologist to advise on the structuring of the teaching materials and on assessment procedures; at least one BBC producer; an editor; at least one technician if home experimental kits or summer school practical work is involved; staff tutors; a member of the regional academic staff; and a course assistant.

Much of my information about the functioning of the Open University came from the course assistants, who seemed very much in touch with the materials produced and the students responses to these. They were the people who, it seemed to me, kept the teams functioning, doing the "dogsbody" work with which the central academics didn't want to be bothered. Originally the post of course assistant was to be of a temporary nature, perhaps two to three years in duration, with the most likely occupant being someone doing a post-graduate degree. However, with an ever constricting job market, there seems nowhere else for these people to go, and the position of course assistant has tended to become a permanent one. This seems to have resulted in an underuse of ability with well-qualified academics performing essentially lower grade unacademic activities. Not, as I've previously pointed out, that the role they play is unimportant. Quite the contrary. It is more the nature of the work they are called upon to do which represents a misuse of talent.

Some Course Production Problems

The team approach to course production draws on a wide range of expertise, both from within and without the Open University. This is a great advantage and is one very important reason for the high quality of the courses. There are also disadvantages however, perhaps the most vital being the difficulty of dovetailing units into an integrated course package. As Lewis has pointed out (1971c,p.193):

If each member of staff were free to teach his own subject in his own way, life would be a lot easier. However, each member of staff is obliged to accom-

moderate to the requirements of colleagues who are busy producing other bits of the same course. In the interests of 'good continuity' . . . each staff member must keep a watchful eye on what his colleagues are writing and on what they say they are proposing to write. Since nobody can be entirely sure what his colleagues are going to write, and since everybody tends to shift ground as soon as the serious business of writing begins, the whole operation is imbued with a somewhat maddening indeterminacy of purpose.

Team members attempt to combat this indeterminacy of purpose by circulating rough drafts for comment by colleagues, discussing these comments with them, rewriting and then repeating the process. Formation of small working groups of two to four members facilitates this mode of operation. One member of this sub-group has the primary responsibility for producing certain materials while the others function mainly as advisors. As the various working groups overlap, each academic serves both as a material producer and as an advisor on the work of others. Where this system works well, with unit authors receiving feedback on their efforts from many sources, it seems to produce excellent results. Much of the comment I heard while attending course team meetings was very open, honest and helpful. It led to definite improvement in the written and visual material. However, it is a very time consuming process, and as deadlines draw near, staff members become increasingly disenchanted with the tasks of reading and commenting upon the efforts of their colleagues. Their interest in the BBC programmes and the computer-marked assignments also weakens considerably as their efforts are, naturally enough, focused on completing their own material. Time pressure, then, often precludes the extensive re-writing of units which, on theoretical grounds, is considered so desirable.

There are other course production problems too. Basically these are a function of the necessity for Open University courses to be taught at a distance, rather than in a face-to-face context. As the academics writing correspondence material are unavailable to answer student questions and to clarify misunderstandings, they must ensure that their units are complete in themselves, able to "stand" alone without further explanation. This is not easy to achieve, particularly as many of the academics writing the material may be uncertain as to the appropriate difficulty level their students can manage. At traditional universities this is a common problem, with lecturers basing their expectations on their own ability level rather than that of their students. With little change for corrective feedback the Open University lecturer is far more likely to commit their error. In my discussions with course assistants, tutors and students, I did gain the impression that academics producing courses were often quite insensitive to student needs. This usually took the form of communicating at an inap-

propriate level in a rather patronizing way. Contact with students at summer schools should act as a corrective to such an attitude but, unfortunately, not all course designers participate in this activity.

An alternative way of coping with the problem is through developmental testing. This is one of the functions of the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) and involves the use of a small sample of students who work through the learning materials to ascertain how effective they are. On the basis of such information, the course may go into production unchanged or may be subjected to modification, sometimes of a drastic nature. Although this approach is both practical and commendable for the written materials, it is very difficult to apply to TV programmes where changes are often too expensive to be considered. This is most unfortunate for developmental testing seems essential in a situation where courses are being produced without any form of student involvement.

The Role of the Institute of Educational Technology

Developmental testing is only one aspect of IET's work. In many ways, the role it plays is comparable to that of the various Staff Development Centres and Units found in Australian universities. As my own interest lies in this area I was particularly concerned to discover how IET staff viewed their position in the University and how other academics reacted to their presence.

The work undertaken by IET is quite varied in terms of its original charter to assist faculties in course development and to carry out a programme of social research in the Open University. The first of these functions occupies the largest group of IET academic staff. Ideally, every course team has an IET academic as a member. The role he plays is to provide advice on the clarification of course objectives, the structuring of the learning materials to more effectively realize these objectives, and the design of assessment procedures. Practice does not always reflect the ideal and as the total number of OU courses has increased, IET has not had the staff resources to service them all. Being spread too thinly in this way, individual staff members may have to provide assistance to three or four course teams at the same time, and are obviously unable to devote the time needed for detailed analysis of the material produced by the course teams. What is now occurring with increased frequency is for IET staff to concentrate on problems common to more than one course team, assessment policy for example, and to reduce the number of teams to which they contribute.

This trend is not altogether unacceptable to the rest of the academic staff. Although the initial role played by IET seemed to be greatly appreciated, as the Open University has grown and the number of

its courses increased, many academics see little use for its services. Once an academic has gone through one course team experience with an IET advisor, he may feel he knows all about course design principles and needs no further guidance in such matters. He may be right, of course, but from my observations I would seriously doubt it. The parallel with Australian universities is strong, the problems encountered in this way being very similar in nature. Basically, the situation is that Staff Development Centres, whose task is primarily that of assisting academics to establish better learning conditions for their students, are often in a position of offering help to people who see no need for such help. This is the big question really. Is there a need in universities for staff development?

Many academics would answer this question in the negative. They already know how to teach well, and require no one else to offer further suggestions. Some of the lecturers who react in this way may be quite correct. Others may not be so accurate in their estimation of their own teaching ability. Fundamentally, I think this issue of acceptance or non-acceptance of help from Staff Development Centres is really one of openness. Are academics willing to accept the notion that they, too, can continue to learn about the teaching process? As the ancient Chinese proverb puts it:

He who is dissatisfied with himself will grow; he who is not sure of his correctness will learn many things.

However, to return to the IET at the Open University, as I mentioned earlier, their role is not purely advisory but is also one of providing empirical data bearing on the conditions under which learning at a distance may be optimized. This involves considerable research into the students themselves, their needs, study methods and problems. It also embraces investigation of the audio-visual media used in courses, the actual format of the correspondence texts themselves, and the ways in which the tutorial and counselling services operate. Although this function of IET's operation is quite acceptable to the academic community as a whole, I did sense a certain feeling among IET staff that the data they provided exerted little influence in the area of academic and administrative decision making. This would indicate that the role played by IET staff members is being questioned, not only by their fellow academics, but also by themselves.

Perhaps it would not be overstating the case to suggest that a certain lack of morale may be suffer-

ing among the staff developers. As one example, it seems most unfortunate that the names of IET staff members do not appear as team advisors when courses are published. Only the names of the academics who actually wrote the units are given and no acknowledgement of IET assistance seems to appear in any form whatsoever. This may be seen as trivial, though as human beings, we like to receive recognition of our efforts. Without such recognition and appreciation, there is little incentive to continue such efforts and morale is likely to suffer. Perhaps there is a lesson here for Australian universities.

Conclusion

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, I write as an outsider to the Open University environment and my comments are necessarily biased by my own background in traditional universities. Perhaps I exaggerate both the strengths and weaknesses I found in the methods of teaching university level courses at a distance. However, taking a general view, I was very impressed with the work being done. Providing a facilitative learning environment through constant improvement of the correspondence material and its accompanying media, and through efforts to upgrade tutorial and counselling assistance, bespeak genuine commitment to the concept of good teaching. Teaching is important at the Open University. Academics talk about it a lot and try to contribute to its improvement. Such an orientation was one I found most appealing. Appealing, too, was the philosophy of openness, of the recognition that academic aptitude is but one element in successful university level study. The recognition that motivation, persistence and maturity may be equally as important, was refreshing to someone raised in an atmosphere where intelligence, as measured by academic school success, is seen as the predictor of university success. There are some important lessons to be learned from the success of the Open University. I hope we in Australia may be able to profit from them.

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