

Foreword

I am very pleased to be asked to write a Foreword to this volume on such an important subject. It is interesting to reflect on why the ethical issues in distance learning are currently becoming more of a priority in the eyes of practitioners, as evidenced in this volume and elsewhere (e.g., in the special issue of the journal *Open Learning* that appeared in 2007).

There is, of course, the general issue of the rise of ethical concerns in business and indeed in public life, with some well known scandals at the highest levels in both. This gives us our first clue as to why those who work in the field of distance learning are taking time at present to stand back and ask about the ethical bases of their own and their organisations' practice. Distance learning had a stance in its first modern phase—say in the 1970s and 1980s—of challenging power. Despite the fact that the major institutions at that time were the state established open universities in one form or another, the ethos was of challenging a conventional higher education system that was inadequate in its capacity and in its thinking to want to expand opportunity to those who were marginalised and excluded, and hostile to innovation in technology supported learning. These institutions were accompanied in this endeavour by some NGOs and a wider range of institutions that took on the dual mode identity and practice, as for example, in Australia. At the heart of the endeavour from an ethical point of view lay what we would now call social justice. This term has a wide variety of meanings from the soft end of simply opening up opportunity (and that is no bad thing, of course), to more radical notions of challenging power structures and elites. At its heart lies the notion that all in our societies are full citizens, with the same needs, rights, expectations and obligations.

Since that period the world has changed very substantially, and more neo-liberal policies have driven competition into an international educational landscape, and have also adopted the human capacity theories that demonstrate the core role of an educated and skilled population in international economic survival. The distances within and between our populations, in terms of economic and social well being, have become greater. How we balance livelihoods, personal preferences and sustainability in the environment have come to be overwhelmingly important questions, the failure to resolve which threatens the survival of humanity in very large parts of the world. And how we do this through democratic participation and consent when wealth has accumulated in major international corporations to the extent that many of them run larger budgets than small nations has become more of a challenge than ever before.

Distance learning has through the 1990s been widely adopted as a means of institutional expansion in a competitive institutional landscape, and comprehensively supported by governments as a means of improving the skills of the population at scale to manage in an internationally competitive environment. It is in this context I suggest that practitioners in distance learning who find themselves serving rather than opposing dominant ideologies of the day find the need to stand back and examine the practices they work within. Some do this from the perspective of the “golden age:” They observe that change has taken place, regret it, and wish for the past to come back. This does not of course help, and the task

which has been taken up so ably by the contributors to this volume is to examine the ethical challenges of practice for distance learning in a contemporary world.

There is, however, a continuity that I suggest is both possible and desirable. And that is to attempt to steer by the core notion of social justice, which while by no means a precise term does, demand the explicit making account of how distance learning seeks to include the excluded, challenge the elites, and seek through the “open” concept that is so often associated with distance learning to regard all of society as full citizens. Core questions for consideration in this context would include:

- How do we ensure that the needs for organisational survival in a competitive landscape do not obscure but can be brought to serve the ethos of social justice?
- How do we respond to the need for curriculum to serve a population that has to find a sustainable livelihood in a competitive world?
- How do we place sustainability and environmental concern at the heart of our educational practices?
- How do we examine what openness and inclusion means in our varied societies, and how do we articulate explicitly our understandings of this?

Distance learning through its flexibility and its commitment to innovation has the potential to engage with these core ethical issues effectively in my view, which revolve at heart around the issues of sustainable livelihoods for us all. In particular, in the higher education sector where so much of distance learning still takes place, we need to ensure that organisational purposes framed within ethical understandings are not suborned by the interests of those who work in them: a danger of course in all organisations.

I commend this volume to readers as an important contribution to maintaining the core activity of reflecting on why and how we do things. That remains an obligation for us all.

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