A synthesis of open, distance and student centred learning

In this article David Kember and David Murphy of Hong Kong Polytechnic revisit the concepts of open and distance learning and question two existing explanations of the relationship between the terms. The authors introduce the further term student centred learning, and juxtapose practice in a progressive primary school with that usually thought of as open and distance learning. They suggest that the primary school has more 'open' characteristics than much of Australian distance education, and offer their own synthesis with a 'Student Centred Open Learning Diagram'.

David Kember and David Murphy

We have held a number of workshops and seminars for academics with little or no exposure to open learning or distance education. The sessions have usually started with explanations of the characteristics of the two forms of education. In our presentation, we quote Keegan's definition of distance education. To characterise open learning we cite the table by Lewis and Spencer subsequently reprinted in Open Learning. The table asks a number of questions about learning schemes and provides for each a spectrum of response from open to closed.

During the sessions, we have asserted that some distance education courses are at the open end of most scales whereas others show few open characteristics. Further there are many open learning courses which are clearly not distance learning courses.

Our interpretation of the definitions of open learning and distance education could be represented graphically as shown in Figure 1.

Recently we have begun to think that we might be the only ones marching in step, as we have encountered more and more instances of use of the terms which are counter to our interpretation. The alternative interpretations can be divided into two categories. The first uses the terms open and distance learning interchangeably, so presumably equates the two. The second regards distance education as a subset of open learning.

Equating open and distance learning

There seems to be no justification for treating the terms distance education and open learning as synonymous. There are schemes, such as flexistudy or learning at appointment centres, which clearly fail to meet the definition of distance education yet are widely accepted as being open in nature.
Erecting open and distance learning is not supported in the literature. Lewis and Spencer (op. cit.) believe it is a misconception which needs to be dispelled. Nor do Thorpe and Grugeon\textsuperscript{4} believe that distance learning is open learning.

Drawing heavily on the experience of OU staff and students, raises the question of whether distance learning is open learning, to which we would answer that distance learning is surely a subset of open learning - not synonymous with it, but a particular example of one type. 'Open learning' is an umbrella which refers to a whole series of varied educational initiatives and provision.'

Thorpe and Grugeon are not the only ones who see distance education (or learning) as a subset of open learning. In commenting on the misconception that open and distance learning are one and the same, Lewis and Spencer (op. cit.) state that 'distance learning is a sub-category of open learning'. Manwaring\textsuperscript{5} believes that: 'Open learning is an umbrella term covering various different methods and approaches such as distance learning, flexistudy, learning by appointment, resource-based training, negotiation of curricula and study circles.'

Fay\textsuperscript{6} puts it less kindly, describing open learning as 'a rag-bag or portmanteau term'.

The views of these authors appears best represented graphically as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Open learning interpreted as an umbrella term

Flexibilities

To examine the relationship between distance and open learning we used Manwaring's (op. cit.) 'Flexibilities' simulation. Players of the simulation determine desired degrees of flexibility for 11 aspects of openness or flexibility. The simulation is designed to point out the resource implications of introducing different elements of flexibility. We attempted to examine the flexibility or openness of two examples (a typical Australian distance education course and a primary school classroom) against the aspects of flexibility in Manwaring's simulation. The 11 aspects are clearly related to or derived from the table by Lewis and Spencer (op. cit.).}

**Australian distance education**

Braithwaite and Batt\textsuperscript{7} include external studies at the University of Queensland, the University of New England, Macquarie University and the Western Australian Institute of Technology as case studies of open learning in Australia. In our analysis, against the 11 aspects of flexibility, no specific course is examined but an impressionistic overall view is taken.

1 flexible sequence

Usually flexibility is restricted as there are limited choices of subjects within a course due to resource constraints.

2 negotiated objectives and content

The curriculum is designed and validated by the institution. Limited options within course.

3 negotiated learning method

Learning method prescribed in the study package.

4 open entry

As courses are offered in dual internal/external mode, formal entry qualifications are stated. Normal requirements may be waived for some courses for mature students.

5 negotiated assessment

Assessment prescribed in the study package.
The learner is free to choose a place of study, though many courses do have compulsory residential schools. Fixed starting time, once a year. Fixed finishing time. If tutorials are offered, they are at fixed times. Tutors can be contacted by telephone or mail at reasonable times. Tutorials and residential schools are at fixed times. No choice offered by the institution.

Only the 'study anywhere' flexibility can confidently be placed towards the open end. Even this assessment has to contain a rider because many courses have compulsory residential school requirements. The only other scales which could justifiably be placed far from the closed end would be 4 and 9.

No doubt some readers will question our overall assessment of Australian distance education or be able to cite courses which are more open. What matters for the purpose of our argument is that there are some distance education courses which are far from open.

A primary school classroom

To take this argument a little further, consider now the example of a primary school classroom, which would most usually be classified as 'closed'. The son of one of the authors attends a primary school in Hong Kong. It resembles many schools in Australia or the UK, in that children do not sit at individual desks facing the front. They are put in groups and placed at tables, where they work either individually or collectively at assigned or selected tasks. For some parts of the curriculum, a thematic approach is used, wherein students are either given or negotiate a theme for a class, group or individual project. The children are encouraged to gather resources from wherever possible, which is usually the school or home, but can include a variety of other agencies. A theme topic may last for only a few days (the Olympics is an example), but the perceptive teacher who finds that a theme has struck a strong chord with the children may allow it to continue for some months. The outcomes of such projects come in many forms, select portions of which are hung from ceilings or stuck on walls to be viewed by other students and the parents on Open Day.

How, then, does such a situation line up with the list of flexibilities?

1 flexible sequence The route through the curriculum is variable. Most of the choice is made by the teacher, but the students do have some input.

2 negotiated objectives and content General objectives are set. The content and specific objectives are matched to students needs, abilities and interests. Students may choose a topic to pursue. Should a student become bored with a reading scheme, he or she may negotiate with the teacher to try a different series of books.

3 negotiated learning method Learning methods vary, but are not often negotiated in advance. However, should a method prove unsuccessful, a change is quickly made to prevent chaos in the classroom.

4 open entry This is not a feature of the typical primary classroom.
Assessment varies in the primary school. For some of the curriculum, there may be standardised tests (for example, mathematics), while for other areas (such as project work) the student may negotiate the assessment (for example, the choice of work to be displayed on Open Day).

The study location is quite fixed for primary education. The starting date for the primary school is fixed, though parts of the curriculum will have varying commencement dates.

The end of the school year is fixed, though some activities, such as projects can have negotiated variable completion dates.

The primary school year is quite firmly timetabled, so teacher availability time is fixed. However, primary students tend to make learning demands to whoever is currently available, most usually a parent when out of school hours.

Attendance time at primary school is fixed. As noted in item 9, students can select from a variety of support systems, though this is most usually either teacher or parent.

Examination of the above assessment reveals that five of the items (numbers 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10) show the primary classroom to have closed features, while the other six each have at least a measure of openness.

Open and student centred learning

A reasonable case could therefore be made for classifying the analysed primary classroom as an open learning system. It certainly shows openness on more dimensions than some Australian distance education courses.

Yet, intuitively, the primary school classroom does not fit under the open learning umbrella. Certainly the teachers did not base their teaching methods on any models or theories of open learning. Rather the teaching method would have been derived from educational theories which might be labelled student centred learning. Fay (op. cit.) describes student centred learning as:

"...a concentration of the ideas of humanist philosophy and psychology which recognises the integrity and freedom of the individual and attempts to convert the teaching/learning process accordingly - running from Socratic method through Dewey to Rogers."

The definition problems, which we have pointed out, appear to have arisen because Lewis and Spencer's table (op. cit.) subsumes in open learning elements of student centred learning. Fay (op. cit.) has already pointed out that there are crucial distinctions between open learning and student centred learning which are often glossed over. Open learning has largely resulted from social and political pressures, so has concentrated on removing participation barriers. Student centred learning resulted from educational models or philosophies, so has striven to increase freedom and student initiative within classrooms.

Student Centred Open Learning Diagram (SCOLD)

The two movements may well be related so are perhaps best regarded as distinct rather than discrete. The model by Lewis and Spencer (op. cit.) is one dimensional, along an open to closed axis. To recognise the
distinct nature of student centred learning we propose a two dimensional model, illustrated in Figure 3, which we have called a Student Centred Open Learning Diagram (SCOLD).

The aspects of ‘open learning’ in the flexibilities chart can then be assigned to the two dimensions of student centred learning and open learning. Aspects assigned to the student centred learning dimension are those derived from its associated educational philosophies. Aspects assigned to the open learning dimension are those which deal with restrictions on participation. Once aspects of flexibility have been assigned to the two dimensional model the result is Figure 4.

The 11 aspects of flexibility may still be examined individually. After examining the 11 aspects the results may be combined to evaluate a course along student centred learning and open learning dimensions, and the results plotted on the SCOLD grid.

Figure 5 shows the plotted results for the two examples that we have examined in detail. For each example, judgements are made for the 11 aspects of flexibility, and points plotted on the 11 lines. The five which relate to student-centred learning are then averaged onto the relevant axis. The same process was used for the open learning grid. If some aspects are considered more important than others the scales could be weighted before averaging onto the relevant axes.

The judgements and resultant plotting of points are obviously subjective. However, we believe that the model is both useful and discriminatory, in that it allows for greater categorisation, avoiding some of the confusion associated with the one-dimensional model of open learning.

To further illustrate the power of the model, we have used it to examine various examples:
- a typical Australian distance education course
- an Open University course
- the primary school classroom we described
- a conservative school, and
- a learning resource centre.

The assessments, shown in Figure 6, are clearly open to debate. What is encouraging, though, is that the problem cases we raised can be interpreted by the model. Distance education courses can be regarded as open learning courses even if they show no evidence whatever of being student centred. The student centred primary school

Open Learning, June 1990
Student Centred Learning

• primary classroom
• learning resource centre
• Open University

Figure 6 Various examples plotted on the SCOLD classroom find a place within the model even though it is not recognised as open learning.

References