Recalibrating institutional choreographies for future focused universities, pedagogical models, qualifications and accreditation

Som Naidu, PhD; D. Litt. (Honoris Causa)
Pro-Vice Chancellor and Director, Center for Flexible Learning,
The University of the South Pacific, Laucala Campus, Suva, Fiji Islands
Email: sommnaidu@gmail.com; som.naidu@usp.ac.fj
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/som-naidu-phd-d-litt-346a7199/

Introduction

A changing student demographic with growing access to affordable connectivity is empowering larger numbers of tertiary educational institutions to engage with increasingly open, flexible, and technology enhanced learning and teaching. These institutions include those that have a strong pedigree in such non-traditional approaches, as well as others who do not, and who are attracted to these educational forms for various reasons, especially the opportunity to promote their brand and tap into new markets. Other reasons include the educational opportunities that non-traditional approaches to learning affords such as temporal flexibility, as well as flexibility in terms of choices learners can have in the selection of learning activities, assessment and feedback strategies.

Open, flexible and distance elearning (hereafter simply, OFDel) grew out of the need to address a socio-economic and political agenda, and largely because conventional campus-based educational practices could not meet the increasing demand for access to educational opportunity. As an alternative educational solution therefore, it was always compared with, and judged along criteria that favored conventional campus-based learning and teaching practices such as the nature and degree of opportunities for student-teacher, student-student, and student-content interaction in it. This comparison was obviously based on the assumption that the greater the interaction, the better the educational experience. And because of limited opportunities for such interaction in it, OFDel struggled to achieve comparable parity of esteem with its more established counterparts.

Increasing access to information and communications technologies is altering this imbalance somewhat, as these technologies are enabling greater opportunities for integrating interactivity in OFDel and improving its viability as an effective and efficient educational form. As a result, OFDel methods are becoming attractive in a much wider set of circumstances, especially in conventional campus-based educational settings which are seeing opportunities in it for extending their reach and promoting their brand.

Recent initiatives such as the establishment of the Global Learning Council (GLC) and Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) Online Education Policy Initiative (OEPI) capture some of the developments along these lines. The GLC is a grouping of prominent educational leaders led by Carnegie Mellon University (see GLC, 2016), and the OEPI is an initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Note that neither of these initiatives has any significant background in the practice of OFDel methods, nor any reasonable representation in it by those with such experience (Baggaley, 2016). Yet in their eagerness to claim leadership in open educational practices, including OFDel more generally, many of these newcomers to the field are ignoring significant advances that have been made and the wealth of experience of pioneers in the field for more than a century, blissfully in the belief that OFDel began with the emergence of the Internet and Web (see Willcox, Sarma, & Lippel, 2016), and boldly proclaiming that not much is known about this new and promising mode of learning and teaching (see O’Neill, 2013).
So as we look forward to the nature of universities of the future, their pedagogical models and the qualifications they will offer, it seems appropriate that we take this time to reflect upon the contributions of pioneering influences in the field, the extensive body of research and experience that exists on various aspects of OFDeL, and our various journeys in the field in order to clearly define the critical issues, identify the challenges that confront us today, and explore the opportunities that lie ahead for policy development and how best to spend our energies and resources now and in the future. After all the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE) is not simply concerned with technology enhanced learning. It is concerned with a lot more than that.

I propose to do this with the help of six lenses into the form and function of OFDeL. These lenses have been derived from the reflections of practitioner in the field, as well as contemporary developments that have the potential to influence the direction the field might take in the future. They are as follows: (1) living on the fringes; (2) learning with an organization; (3) learning through mediation; (4) learning to connect and communicate; (5) distributed learning; and (6) disaggregated learning.

**Living on the fringes**

**Issues.** Open, flexible and distance elearning grew out of the need to meet the educational needs of those who could not be in the same place and time with the teacher, and the basic premise that if learners couldn’t get to where formal education was being offered, then that kind of education needed to go to them. As such, OFDeL was a response to a socio-economic and political agenda (see Lewis, 1986; Rowntree, 1992). And rightly so, because no government could afford to be neglecting to provide educational opportunities to its constituents because of some disadvantage.

That is how OFDeL began in the United Kingdom, Russia, the Unites States of America, India, Africa, China, Australia and elsewhere in the world, countries in which large sections of the population could not afford to, or were unable to access its conventional educational opportunities (see Blainey, 1966; Northcott, 1984; Stacey, 2005; White, 1982; http://bit.ly/1n2w72]). The value proposition of the adoption of OFDeL practices, was and has been, that education is a basic need which should be accessible to all, and as Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen reminded us, an instrument of change, and the path to real freedom because it is education that opens up doors to meaningful choices that are so essential for social and economic development (Sen, 1999).

Open educational practice comprises a lot more than free and open access to educational resources, although that is an important part of it (https://policylib.usp.ac.fj/form.readdoc.php?id=736). Open education is best seen as an omnibus term that has many dimensions including:

1) **Open access:** Inclusive and equal access to educational opportunities without barriers such as entry qualifications and ability to pay. **Value principle:** All lives have equal value.

2) **Open learning:** Ability to study and learn at anytime, anywhere and at any pace. **Value principle:** Freedom and the flexibility to choose the mode, medium, time, place and pace of study.

3) **Open scholarship:** Releasing educational resources under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others. **Value principle:** Education is a basic need that should be accessible to all, if we were to achieve education for all towards a path to real freedom, justice and equality (see Sen, 1999).

**Challenges.** But despite being a liberating force which was geared towards addressing issues around access to educational opportunity and improving the quality of life of the not so privileged members of our society, OFDeL was seen as “learning at the back door”, which was not quite the same as learning through the “front door” (Wedemeyer, 1981). Because no matter how bad the classroom learning and teaching transaction is, and we know that some of it is bad, it is still considered the gold standard and largely because of the mere presence of teachers and learners in the same place, and at
the same time. As a latecomer to educational provision therefore, OFDeL was, and is still being compared to what was there before, and asked if it is better than, let alone as good as what happened in the conventional classroom, always struggling to attract the comparable kudos that face-to-face learning and teaching methods have been able to attract.

And so it has been for a very long time, and in the minds of some even today OFDeL is not quite good enough and confined to living on the fringes of conventional campus-based educational practice, no matter how good it is, or how hard it tried. The assumption is that learners need structure and guidance as well as close supervision to be able to learn effectively and efficiently. This perception is based on the premise that there is a body of subject matter knowledge that has to be taught and learned, and that one group of people, i.e., the teachers have it and another group of people, i.e., the learners who do not have that knowledge, and they have to be taught it as efficiently as possible. Obviously, the most cost-effective and efficient way of doing that is to have a teacher teach learners that subject matter in the most direct manner that is possible.

**Opportunities.** But perceptions change and our perceptions of the robustness of OFDeL methods changed over time as OFDeL methods got better and in many cases, better than conventional campus-based education. OFDeL could not be simply discarded as ineffective or inefficient and not as good enough. Because even if OFDeL was not the most robust form of learning and teaching, it was offering educational opportunities to populations who had no other alternative. So something was better than nothing for these learners. And for that reason alone, it was worth doing, and worth doing perhaps not that well (Chesterton, 2007).

A key sticking point with OFDeL is always the relative lack of structure and guidance in it, due largely to the physical absence of the teacher from the learning context. And this attribute is always proclaimed as a key strength of conventional campus-based education by defenders of it as a superior form of learning and teaching. Yet ironically, the absence of the teacher from the learning context, and the lack of at least adequate structure and guidance in learning from models of learning such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and other forms of online learning that are currently being embraced and promoted by those from the mainstream, is now being seen as a strength and an opportunity for open, and flexible learning rather than a weakness or a sticking point.

Which begs the question, what do you think structure and guidance is about and what is its role in learning and teaching? How much structure and guidance is necessary for effective, efficient and engaging learning and teaching to take place (see Anderson, 2003)? How is that kind of structure and guidance best provided? Is the teacher the best, and the only source of it? These are key questions at the heart of our perceptions of teaching and learning in any mode, i.e., what we think it is about.

So after more than a century of OFDeL provision, would you still consider its practice less robust, and OFDeL as fringe dwellers? And if so, then living on the fringes of what? Where do you think are the fringes of learning and teaching these days, and where is the center, but more importantly, what is at that center? Is face-to-face campus-based education some kind of gold standard, and at the center? If so then when, where and why? And if it is not then when, where and why not, and what are its limitations? More importantly, how helpful is it to compare and contrast modes of learning and teaching? What are the implications of these considerations for institutions in the development of their goals, policies and processes around modes of learning and teaching in order to prevent the development of perceptions of relative superiority or inferiority among them?

**Learning with an organization**
Issues. The kinds of OFDeL operations that we are talking about here are uniquely identifiable by their organized nature. These kinds of OFDeL operations comprise forms of formal educational practice that are managed and operated under the auspices of an educational institution (see Keegan, 1980). They could be either public in nature such as universities, schools and colleges, or private organizations such as professional bodies, industries, or commercial service providers. They are not to be confused with other kinds of independent and self-study, informal and non-formal educational forms, that we as humans, are always engaged with, and all the time, as there are lessons to be learned always and everywhere (see Brookfield, 1981).

Pioneering initiatives in this regard went by various labels such as extramural studies, external studies, off-campus studies, continuing education, open, correspondence, and OFDeL of course. While these labels were all subtly different, their adoption and use by different institutions depended very much on their educational tradition and the culture of that institution i.e., the way they perceived their role in educational provision. For instance, the use of the term open learning is intended to suggest that learners will have the ability and opportunity to study and learn at anytime, anywhere and at any pace, and not just on a physical campus and at specified times and locations. The value proposition of this affordance is that learners ought to have the freedom and the flexibility to choose the mode, medium, time, place and pace of their study (Lewis, 1986; Naidu, 2016; Rowntree, 1992). The terms extension, extramural and correspondence studies suggested efforts and initiatives which sought to extend learning and teaching opportunities beyond the conventional boundaries of an educational institution, and with the help and use of media and technology (Bewley, 1972).

Challenges. While the role of the educational institution was, and remains a defining characteristic of these kinds of educational opportunities, each one of these labels has been interrogated over time as adequate descriptors of their relevant operations. These questions have been raised partly because of our changing perceptions of what we were on about, but largely by emerging and changing media (see Paine, 1989). For instance, as the print medium and the postal mail service started to be superseded by multimedia and electronic mail, the concept of written correspondence via the postal service was no longer an adequate descriptor of the educational transaction that was taking place.

Hence the emergence of the term OFDeL. But that too had issues as an accurate descriptor, as the concept of distance implied a physical separation, when that was not always the case. There were learners who would be living in situ, and on campus but for various reasons opting to study in the OFDeL mode. Some of these reasons had to do with being able to take on electives which might not have been offered at the time that students needed to, or wanted to take them. Other reasons included the opportunity to take on additional units and in doing so speeding up the duration of their study programs. And then there was the opportunity to take advantage of the far better set of study materials that was becoming symptomatic of OFDeL courses, largely because of its adoption of instructional design principles and rigorous course team processes.

As more and more choices became available to learners and teachers, and as students began to take advantage of the opportunities that these choices afforded, the nature of the educational transaction changed. This was better reflected by labels such as flexible learning, blended learning, distributed learning, disaggregated learning, online learning and elearning. These labels were not exactly designed to replace the tired old terms for the same operation i.e., extramural studies, external studies, off-campus studies, continuing education, open, correspondence, and OFDeL. No, these were, and in many ways, different terms and they suggested different processes and things. But this kind of flexibility does not end there. For learners, flexibility in learning may include choices in relation to entry and exit points, selection of learning activities, assessment tasks and educational resources in return for different kinds of credit and costs. And for the teachers it can involve choices in relation to the allocation of their time and the mode and methods of communication with learners as well as the
educational institution. As such flexible learning, in itself, is not a mode of study. It is a value principle, like diversity or equality are in education and society more broadly. Flexibility in learning and teaching is relevant in any mode of study including campus-based face-to-face education.

The determination of the nature and levels of flexibility in learning and teaching in a given context depends on several interacting variables, such as the nature of the subject matter, the level of study, location of students and teachers, and their readiness for flexible learning including their access to technologies and the necessary infrastructure. One size or approach to flexible learning does not, and will not fit all learners, teachers or disciplines. There is a need for different approaches to learning and teaching, with different levels of flexibility, structure and guidance for different cohorts and learning contexts, while the threshold principles of all approaches remain the same. And these principles are about open and equitable access to learning opportunities, flexible approaches to learning and teaching, and the adoption of open scholarship in its education practices (see Naidu, 2016).

A useful approach to embedding flexibility is to consider it in relation to how, and to what extent it is being integrated in leveraging key dimensions of learning and teaching, and these are as follows:

1. **Learning experience design:** This is about the design and development of productive learning experiences so that each learner is able to make most of the learning opportunities they afford.
2. **Learner-content engagement:** This is about learners’ engagement and interaction with the subject matter in ways that suit individuals, their styles and approaches to studying and its time, place and pace.
3. **Learner-teacher engagement:** This is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their teachers and tutors.
4. **Learner-learner engagement:** This is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their peers in small and large groups, and in offline and online educational settings.
5. **Learner engagement with the learning environment:** This is about adaptable access, interaction and engagement with the learning environment (such as with mobile devices, Wi-Fi access and innovative use of study space).
6. **Learner engagement with assessment activities:** This is about choices learners have in relation to the fulfillment of their assessment requirements.
7. **Learner engagement with feedback:** This is about choices learners have in relation to access to feedback on their learning and assessment activities.
8. **Learner engagement with the institution:** This is about choices learners have in relation to their engagement with the services of the educational institution.

**Opportunities.** While the influence and sponsorship of an educational institution remains the single most identifiable feature of OFDeL operations, the form and function of this defining attribute of OFDeL is undergoing considerable change. A very wide variety of educational institutions are starting to adopt and engage with OFDeL processes, and for a variety of reasons. These institutions include the conventional single mode OFDeL providers such as the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU), the University of South Africa (UNISA), Indira Gandhi Open University (IGNOU), and many such others.

Then there are mixed-mode providers as well, such as several in Australia and New Zealand including the University of Southern Queensland, and the University of New England in Australia, and Massey University in New Zealand which offer both OFDeL and face-to-face residential educational opportunities for its learners. And with growing interest in and the prevalence of online learning, many other players, both from the public and private sectors are getting into this learning and teaching space as well. These include Ivy leave institutions such as Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University and Carnegie Melon University in the United States of America, as
well private provides such as the University of Phoenix, and various other commercial and public sector agencies.

There is an explosion of interest in all forms of open, flexible, and distance learning opportunities (Gallagher, & Garrett, 2013). A wide variety of players are emerging on the educational scene to offer learning opportunities wherever it is needed, and in ways that meet the needs of the students wherever they might be located. As such the nature of the educational institution is undergoing change, and there is no sign of that abating anytime soon.

While the time of study, as in full-time and part-time and its asynchronous nature, is touted as a strength of flexible approaches to learning and teaching, flexibility with time is often an ideal. In fact, time is a finite resource, scarce and in constant negotiation with critical others as is the case for most adult learners and growing numbers of freshmen who combine full-time study with part-time work.

The proposition that technological affordances will enable education of the future to be better, faster and accessible to anyone, anytime and anywhere will require recalibration of existing learning and teaching choreographies. And this is the most potent of all challenges facing enterprise-wide adoption of open and flexible learning on campuses and especially those without a strong pedigree in the field.

In these institutions, regardless of their brand and Ivy League status, open and flexible learning sits on the periphery of its core business without institutional impact, but as an opportunity to promote its existing brand and tap into new markets for new students and additional revenue streams. This is a classic case of technology driving the educational transaction. And it is arguable that the situation may not be much better in institutions that have a strong open and flexible learning pedigree. These institutions are attracted to the affordances of open, flexible and online models of learning, and are willing to experiment with it in parallel with their conventional learning and teaching practices, but not at the expense of it.

A rethink and recalibration of conventional subject and content-focused learning and teaching choreographies is required for the successful adoption and integration of non-traditional educational practices. This will have to involve influencing the behavior of teachers, their beliefs about learning and teaching and their instructional methods. Such as recalibration of conventional learning and teaching choreographies will require careful scaffolding and orchestration of newer learning experiences including the scaffolding and orchestration of self-monitoring strategies with time management and motivation, in learners’ engagement with digital resources and their learning experience, and especially for those learners with demonstrated lower levels of oral proficiency.

What do you think the educational organisation of the future will look like? Can educational provision be seen as the right or responsibility of a particular type of organization, of some and not others? How critical is the role of an institution or organization in teaching and learning, even though that has been seen as a hallmark feature of OFDeL? How viable and credible do you think is a concept like the OER university (OERu), an institution that is defined by the type of learning resources it chooses to use (https://oeru.org/)? What are the implications of this for governments and educational institutions in relation to policy development around accreditation, credit transfer and the award of qualifications?

**Learning through mediation**

**Issues.** However, learning at home and away from the educational institution has its challenges. Something was required to bridge the gap created by the separation of the learner from the teacher and the teaching institution without anyone of the two parties moving physically. In the early days of the emergence of OFDeL, the printed study materials and the postal services served the purpose of
bridging this divide between the learners and the teachers. In the best of circumstances, these printed study materials comprised an information booklet which carried an introduction to the course and the assessment tasks, a book of essential reading articles, and a study guide that would talk the students through the subject matter. When carefully crafted this was expected to be the entire study package for the subject and all that a student would need to complete all the assessment requirements for it. The study guide would be written in a conversational and interactive style such that, instead of lecturing learners about the subject matter, it would talk them through it. And when this was the case, learning at a distance took the form of a guided didactic conversation between the learner and the teacher (see Holmberg, 1983). It would be a guided and personalised conversation, the best form of teaching you could possibly have. The printed study materials were ideally suited for reuniting the distance learners from their teachers and for carrying the educational content to where the learners needed them. They afforded a great deal of flexibility and independence to the distance learners to enable them to study at their own place and pace.

**Challenges.** But despite these significant affordances, the printed form had its limitations in terms of its readability for those challenged by poor reading and writing skills, and in relation to the level of support that could be provided by the print medium. Many of these study packages were very poorly designed and developed, and as such they failed to offer the structure and guidance that learners needed without much direct instruction. Learning and teaching at a distance was always hard but especially challenging when it was stripped of the wide range of support services that are usually available to learners and teachers in campus-based educational settings. These would include informal and formal peer-group support, library services, and dedicated learning and teaching times and spaces for quiet and concentrated study. When out of sight and out of their minds, many distance educators also held somewhat lacklustre dispositions of their distance learners, giving them less time and attention than they would give their on-campus students who were there and in their face.

So despite the laudable intentions of OFDel for being able to reach unreachable cohorts, distance learners were justified in feeling that they were receiving a second rate education with substandard study materials and support in their learning from their teachers and the teaching institution, especially when these opportunities were devoid of many of the support services that are readily available in campus-based educational settings. OFDel was beginning to suffer from a parity of esteem with conventional campus-based education (Jevons, 1987; Smith, 1984). Distance learners hungered for more support and interaction with their peers and their teachers, just as distance educators were becoming increasingly frustrated by their inability to do more to keep them engaged with their studies and help avoid procrastination and attrition (Lim, 2016; Klingseier, Fries, Horz, & Hofer, 2012). Being able to visit the educational institution for the occasional residential school for intensive periods of teaching and hands-on work despite its costs, was a special privilege, and students as well as their teachers looked forward to these rare opportunities.

Something had to give to save OFDel from its challenges and declining popularity. The increasing availability of other means of mediation such as audio and video conferencing, and multimedia technologies helped as they offered opportunities for supplementing the printed study materials with voice and pictures. These technologies would go a long way towards addressing the deficit in the printed study materials for supporting the conversation between learners and teachers. The appearance of the Internet and the web which followed soon, offered additional opportunities to “unite the teacher and learner and carry the educational content”, as Keegan (1980, p. 33) had put it, and bridge the divide caused by the separation of learners from their teachers.

But many of the solutions that were being adopted to address the void created by the separation of learners from their teachers and their teaching institution were in fact, making the OFDel experience look more and more like conventional campus-based education. These strategies which included more
face-to-face contact, more interaction, both synchronous and asynchronous, and less flexibility with time and pace of study were not in the spirit of OFDeL provision. The use of many of these advanced technologies such as audio and video-conferencing, and the Internet and the web, actually further alienated an already disenfranchised group of learners, and those it was meant to empower, turning OFDeL into an elitist educational provision that was accessible to the privileged few and not the masses for whom it was intended (see Baggaley, 2008).

Large numbers of learners, especially those in developing contexts, who needed OFDeL opportunities the most, were now being denied access to these learning opportunities because of their lack of access to reliable electricity supply. Initiatives such as online learning, elearning, cloud-based learning, and the incessant push for the adoption of open educational resources all negated the promises and principles of OFDeL because many of these tools and resources were available and accessible only in electronic forms (Cooper, 2013). The printed study materials, however poorly designed it may have been, did not exclude anyone who was willing and eager to study, but the newer more advanced educational technologies did.

Opportunities. This begs the question -- is it possible to suggest OFDeL was and is still, misguided in its assumptions about the degree of structure and guidance that is necessary for effective, efficient and engaging learning and teaching to take place? If that were not the case, then clearly one size does not fit all, and that there ought to be room and place for different models of OFDeL operations for different distance learners and learning contexts (see Baggaley, 2008). Models of OFDeL, and methods of mediation that might be suited for a resource rich and developed educational setting will not suit a resource poor and developing educational context. And models that might suit the learning of one type of subject matter may not work for others. Therefore, is it possible that different models of OFDeL provision are required for different kinds of educational settings as well as different kinds of subject matter content.

And there must be some fundamental threshold principles to which OFDeL must adhere without compromising its integrity. What are these threshold principles and how can we ensure that these are not compromised in our eagerness to meet the demand in whichever way we can? What are the implications of upholding these principles for institutions in relation to policy development around the design and development of distance learners’ learning experiences, and the continuing professional development of distance educators?

Learning to connect and communicate

Issues. The opportunity to connect and communicate with peers, experts and other resource persons regardless of the educational mode, is one of those critical threshold principles of any educational transaction. And it is especially crucial in OFDeL contexts to counter issues around delay, procrastination and attrition from the programme that are due to alienation caused by the separation of the learners from their teachers and the teaching institution. During the pioneering days, this kind of communication between learners and their teachers was sustained through the written letter. The written letter had many advantages. In the early days it might have been hand written, and therefore it could be personalised to meet the very specific needs of an individual learner. But this kind of letter writing couldn’t be sustained as student numbers grew and resources shrank for such personalised correspondence. And even though contemporary word processing has made writing much easier, and the postal services have significantly improved its delivery, personalised letter writing remains a resource intensive activity that is unsustainable in the best of circumstances.

The arrival of the electronic mail, instant messaging and various social media tools, provided students had access to them, revolutionised modes of communication between students and teachers and
among students themselves. Along with modern day word-processing programs, it made the ability of teachers to offer feedback and support to learners so much easier. And when combined with the affordances of the Internet and the web, email led to the emergence of innovative modes of communication for learning and teaching. These included computer supported collaborative learning, i.e., CSCL (see Stahl, 2002; 2006), connectivism and connective knowledge building (see Downes, 2012; Siemens, 2008; Siemens & Downes, 2011) and massive open and online courses, i.e., MOOCs (see Baggaley, 2014a; 2014b; Granger, 2013; Jona, & Naidu, 2014). Computer supported collaborative learning is simply about collaborative learning in an electronically networked environment, while connectivism suggests that knowledge building is best achieved through connection, communication and the sharing of ideas. And MOOCs are an artefact of that process of shared knowledge building.

Challenges. Yet these innovative learning and teaching practices are only possible in the context of an electronically networked educational environment. Neither computer supported collaborative learning, connectivism, connective knowledge building, nor massive open and online courses, would work without access to requisite educational technologies. These models of education are suitable only in contexts that have reliable access to networked communication technologies and they will exclude all those who do not have access to reliable and affordable sources of electricity, and connectivity to the Internet and the web. Yet these are the people who are likely to be living in the least developed regions of the world and who are most in need of educational opportunities, and who OFDeL, as an educational solution was intended to serve and empower.

Opportunities. How can connection and communication, which is seen as crucial to the development of knowledge and understanding, be supported in models of OFDeL and in settings without reliable access to networked communications technologies? Or is it arguable that connection and communication are counterintuitive principles and counterproductive in OFDeL because of their time, place and pace implications, and where heutagogy, i.e., independence and self-study is valued, nurtured and promoted (see Hülsmann, & Shabalala, 2016). If so then, is OFDeL an impoverished form of learning and teaching and its value diminished somewhat in educational settings where it might be arguable that there should be little or no need at all to connect and communicate with student peers and teachers? And if not then why not?

Connection and communication between students and teachers, and among students themselves has cost implications for both, students and the educational institution. For students, it means paying for reliable and regular access to networking technologies and infrastructure from their place of study. And for the educational institution, it means access to the technological infrastructure along with the costs for nurturing, moderating and assessing this form of communication among students, and students and teachers. What are the implications of these cost considerations for distance learners, and for institutions in relation to policy development around widespread adoption of online learning and teaching strategies and their resourcing in OFDeL institutions?

Distributed learning

Issues. A result of ubiquitous connectivity is distributed learning which is learning and teaching that is feasible from any place, at any time and at any pace, characteristics that are also endemic to OFDeL operations. But there are a few essential differences between distributed and distance learning. Whereas in distance learning contexts, the teachers and the teaching institution continue to retain a level of control over the learning content and the context, in distributed learning such control is not centralized nor under anyone’s control or direction (see Saltzberg, & Polyson, 1995). In these educational settings any kind of instructional control is dispersed and as such distributed, such that learners, teachers and their learning resources could be located anywhere and be accessible at any time and from anywhere. All that would be required for distributed learning to work effectively and
efficiently would be reliable access to networked communications technologies (see Dede, 2004). As this kind of technological infrastructure became more widely available and accessible in OFDeL settings, distributed learning, as a term, seemed a more accurate descriptor of what was going on (see Vrasidas, & Glass, 2002). In these educational contexts, learners and teachers could be located anywhere and accessing educational resources from anywhere and at any time in the cloud via web-enabled tools and services, hence the term cloud-based learning.

**Challenges.** While distributed learning may seem like a more accurate descriptor of the learning and teaching transaction in a cloud-based learning environment, it is not a replacement for the term OFDeL. True, the term distributed learning has many of the same characteristics of OFDeL such as the separation of learners from their teachers, the possibility of learning anytime, from anywhere and at any pace, and use of technology to mediate the learning and teaching transaction. But its viability and success was dependent on the availability of a robust and reliable networked infrastructure, in the absence of which it would fall apart completely. This is where it differs from conventional perceptions of OFDeL, as OFDeL is designed to be inclusive, and not exclusive based on accessibility.

**Opportunities.** In being inclusive, it is arguable that OFDeL is a minimalist educational provision and for good reason too. Because the mission of OFDeL is to reach the previously unreachable, and the more independent it is, the better. The more complexity one adds to it, in terms of human resources and infrastructure requirements, greater student-teacher, student-student and student-content interaction, along with its constraints around time, place and pace of study, the more exclusive, costly and elitist it becomes (see Hülsmann, & Shabalala, 2016).

Is this a risk OFDeL can afford to take? Should it take such a risk? If so then why and in which circumstances, and if not, then why not? What indeed, is and ought to be the mission of OFDeL? Is that up for discussion, review and reformulation? Do you think contemporary OFDeL has gone wrong, and against its own grain (see Baggaley, 2008; Cooper, 2013)? If so, then where and how? Or is it arguable that more than one model of OFDeL is required? Why can’t we have a range of models of OFDeL? Why can’t we have models of OFDeL that are suitable for the resource rich educational contexts, and others for resource poor contexts? What would be the policy imperatives of this suggestion for educational institutions? What would be the implications of this for learners in terms of their choice of modes of OFDeL?

**Disaggregated learning**

**Issues.** Regardless of its form and function, there is one thing that is clear about OFDeL. And that is its disaggregated nature. In the early days of its development, Otto Peters likened its form to industrial processes, suggesting that OFDeL was an industrialized form of education (see Peters, 1983; 2010). This seemed like so, not only because of its use of media to support learning and teaching, but the division of labor that it involved from different groups of people with specialist skills, in relation to the production of study materials, its delivery to students, and the provision of learning support to students. In this regard OFDeL was, and remains a very different operation from conventional campus-based and face-to-face learning and teaching.

In conventional campus-based learning, the teacher is the aggregate of all teaching activities. It includes the design and development of a course, selection of its content, teaching it to students, assessing their learning outcomes and providing them with feedback. In OFDeL contexts these functions are disaggregated and carried out by different people with specialist skills, and possibly in different locations and times, and attract alternative digital credentials (see Rosenbloom, 2011).
Alternative digital credentials (ADCs) also known as micro credentials may take various forms. The key drivers of this is the growth in learning opportunities from unconventional sources and the non-formal sector. Other reasons for this interest have to do with a demand from employers for more and different kinds of information about learning achievement that is provided on the usual qualifications certification and transcripts. They also include the affordances of digital technologies for capturing such information and disseminating them reliably across platforms and domains.

ADCs are designed to contain a lot more information on a person’s competencies than what is often available in a graduation diploma or a transcript. This kind of information will include such things as products of one’s activities, critical reflections on their learning experiences, and testimonials from others. The idea of ADCs and micro-credentials is not new. We have known of this idea as portfolios, always sitting alongside one’s formal academic certificate and transcript. What is new about ADCs, as we know them now is their digital nature and what is possible to capture in this format, and allow it to be shared widely. ADCs also enable credentialing of smaller chunks of work unlike a certificate or transcript which is awarded only after completion of a larger program of study.

In an age when learning is possible in a much larger arena that extends far beyond the conventional houses of learning, ADCs provide a useful way of capturing these learning opportunities for submission to formal learning arrangements and recognition of prior learning. Herein lies the greatest benefit of ADCs, micro-credentials and badges for open learning systems.

For open educational institutions, ADCs and micro credentials offer possibilities for recognizing and rewarding learning from a wider variety of sources, and in so doing helping them achieve the goals and aspirations of the education for all agenda. The challenge is how to capture this kind of learning so that a valid record of it can be created, reliably shared and honored among stakeholders. Blockchain technology offers some promise. Think of blockchain as an electronic spreadsheet, a ledger or database of sorts which allows for the permanent and immutable record of anything of value such as your academic qualification or profile, sitting on multiple computers on the internet.

That’s how the technology works, but that’s not the whole story. Whatever is stored and shared on this giant distributed electronic ledger needs verifiable criteria and standards. In relation to ADCs and micro-credentials, these will include a definition of the form and function of this record; types of information it will carry; how these records or badges are compared if they happened to vary and carry different kinds of information; and how will we guarantee their security in a digital environment. And oh, they have to be digital. But bear in mind that more than half the population of planet earth does not (and will not for a long time yet) have access to digital and networked technologies. They couldn’t be part of this network if this record were to be digital only (see Naidu, 2019).

Challenges. There are many advantages of disaggregating teaching functions and having it carried out by dedicated and specialist staff. Foremost, it releases the subject matter experts from carrying out functions that they are not skilled at performing. And enabling academic staff, especially those in higher education settings, to concentrate on other scholarly activities that are also part of their role as teachers and scholars (Gallagher, & Garrett, 2013). This is becoming more of an imperative with the increasing complexity of the media and technology that is becoming symptomatic of the contemporary learning and teaching space. Subject matter experts will have content knowledge of course, but they cannot be assumed to be having comparable pedagogical as well as technological knowledge. Yet all three kinds of knowledge, i.e., content, pedagogical and technological knowledge are essential for effective, efficient and engaging teaching and learning (see Mishra, & Koehler, 2006; Chai, Koh, & Tsai, 2013). Allocating roles related to the provision of pedagogical and technological expertise to other specialist staff means a different approach to course design and development, and one with which many educators and subject matter specialists are not very familiar.
Another advantage of disaggregating teaching functions to specialist staff is to be able to rationalise teaching tasks such that some of these functions need not be performed all the time and every time there is a change in teaching staff. Course materials developed once by teams of people can be developed once and used a number of times before reaching a point where they need to be revised. This is advisable not only from the point of ensuring rigour in the design of the study materials but also guard against undue influences of individual teacher bias in the selection of a body of subject matter content, and in its teaching to students, which can be problematic in some discipline areas.

But disaggregating teaching functions and distributing these to specialist groups requires a shift in mindsets of staff, students and institutions about what it means to teach and who is responsible for what in it. Distance educators will be the first to recognize the problems with course team processes and with the complexity of relationships between subject matter specialists themselves and between subject matter specialists and educational designers about design principles for teaching and learning.

Opportunities. It is arguable that in a distributed and disaggregated learning and teaching space, the subject matter expert will have to relinquish some of their control over content knowledge as well as how it is taught and learned to other experts with pedagogical and technological knowledge, especially about the form and function of mediation in this learning and teaching space. Will this be necessary, and if not, then to what extent is it important for teachers to possess technological and pedagogical competencies along with their knowledge of the subject matter content? And what would be the implications of this requirement for their training and accreditation to become teachers? But if this were necessary, and a prerequisite, then what would be the policy implications of this requirement for the recruitment of teachers to the academy, the criteria for their promotion, and their continuing professional development in terms of the content and coverage of such programs. What does the teacher in this new educational space look like? What are their competencies, and how does one acquire them and from where (Moore-Adams, Monty Jones, & Cohen, 2016)?

Race to the center and parity of esteem, but can the center hold?

Notwithstanding all of the above, it is arguable that OFDel in its various forms is here to stay. Because methods of teaching and learning that were pioneered as a part of OFDel are now increasingly being adopted by the most conventional and established forms of educational practices. Some of this shift has been an outcome of the proliferation of various kinds of educational technologies for mediating the teaching and learning process, especially the Internet and the World Wide Web as viable platforms for teaching and learning. Other reasons are related to the appeal of OFDel methods for a changing student population which includes a whole variety of learners as opposed to the typical high school leavers group.

Online learning technologies are fast becoming standard features of the campus-based educational experience, and lectures focused on the delivery of the subject matter content are becoming less relevant and less useful, and not only because subject matter content can be sourced from a variety of places and in numerous other ways. The lecture which was once at the center and the mainstay of conventional campus-based experience is fast becoming an accompaniment, and in so doing, flipping over the conventional campus-based experience with the study of the more declarative content devoted to private study, and time for synchronous and asynchronous communication spent on active learning and for student-teacher and student-student interaction (see Baggaley, 2015; Sams, 2010).

Furthermore, notions of openness which were previously focused on open access to learning are now being extended to include the adoption of open educational resources and the practice of open scholarship (see Naidu, 2016; Naidu, 2017). So much so, that many would venture to argue that
contemporary forms of OFDeL have achieved that elusive parity of esteem that it has been seeking with conventional campus-based learning and teaching, though it might seem now that OFDeL has achieved more than mere parity of esteem, for OFDeL is no longer hovering around at the fringes and “looking in from the backdoor” (see Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Wallet, Fiset, & Huang, 2004). Methods of teaching and learning pioneered by OFDeL are becoming part of mainstream educational provision, as they replace outdated campus-based educational practices such as fixed time, place and pace of study.

There are compelling reasons for engaging with open and flexible learning, but they are undermined by fundamental weaknesses. Primarily, these include a failure to rethink and recalibrate existing learning and teaching choreographies so that they are appropriately aligned with the opportunities and promises of openness and flexibility. This involves letting technological affordances drive educational innovations, instead of leading off with the design of productive learning and teaching transactions that make most of the opportunities that technologies afford. Open and flexible learning is attractive, but are we ready for it?

Do you think open, flexible and distance learning has achieved that parity of esteem with its more established forms? Does it compare favorably with campus-based educational practices? Do you think OFDeL is inside and at the center? But then, where is the center and, what is at the center, and is it likely to change in the future? Can the center hold? With these final questions, I leave you to ponder upon the apocalyptic words of William Butler Yates in his prophetic poem “The Second Coming” (http://www.potw.org/archive/potw351.html), especially its first stanza made more famous by the great Chinua Achebe in the epigraph of his novel “Things Fall Apart” (see http://bit.ly/2bq7bAy).

Turning and turning in the widening gyre;  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Although, this is not to suggest that the integrity of OFDeL as a field of practice is under any serious threat from more conventional forms of educational practices, and in danger of falling apart. In fact, the reverse is true. Conventional campus-based forms of learning and teaching are under the threat of change from methods and tools developed and fine-tuned by OFDeL. It is the center that is in turmoil and in danger of falling apart. Can the center hold? Will it hold?

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