

Empire State College at 50: Connections to the Open University

The ESC SUNY Ernest Boyer memorial lecture 2021

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1 Ernest Boyer

I want to begin by acknowledging Ernest Boyer in whose name this lecture is given. Clearly remarkable man, who quickly in his life saw how he could achieve most through educational administration, and did so with access and inclusion high in his list of priorities. I used his report on scholarship on a number of occasions in working out how you can construct a research, or better put a research and scholarship agenda for universities that are teaching focused like the Open University UK, and perhaps Empire State College, a comparison of which is my topic for today. Boyer's clear thinking made it possible to disembed so many of the false statements about how universities must or should position research at the expense of teaching, and much more productively how agendas for scholarship should be constructed on a multi-dimensional framework that is so much more than just discipline based. That agenda for scholarship is an area where Empire State College and the Open University UK have similar concerns and priorities, but not what I want to talk about today.

2 How well do radicals age?

My theme for today could be summarised as how well do radicals age? This is a matter of personal as well as scholarly interest, as it may be for some of you too. Is radicalism a youthful phase for Empire State College and the Open University, essential as you push your way into an institutional landscape, but once success has been achieved to be left behind? Or can radical challenge to established social and institutional assumptions on behalf of new audiences that challenge what a university is, what it does, and who it teaches, in other words radical challenges to the purposes of a university remain active in the DNA of a university even 50 years after its establishment? And if we examine the challenges of today in terms of social justice and equality does it need to be?

I am not the first to reflect on his. I have here a volume by James Hall, your first and long serving president and a close associate of Ernest Boyer when he was in leadership positions in the SUNY system. In his 1991 volume *Access through Innovation, new colleges for new students*, Hall reviews a range of innovative colleges and universities primarily in the USA but including the OUUK which he visited more than once – finding time to inscribe my own copy of his book with a kind word of support to a very junior colleague. So I am indebted to the work of James Hall – I always called him Jim but now I look back with some embarrassment at the over familiarity of youth. If he is listening today greetings to you Dr Hall.

Now we have in this talk a very non interactive approach to learning and teaching. While I know the OUUK, I hope I can say well, despite my relative familiarity with Empire State over some 35

years I cannot ever know the SUNY system, or American society as well as you. So I want to propose a form of interaction by creating an internal conversation for you, as I move back and forth from the OU UK to Empire State College, and you test my ideas against your understanding of your own radical University. So close your eyes perhaps while I talk from 3500 miles away in Cambridge England and reflect on whether what I say corresponds to your own understanding.

So what do the two universities have in common, and at least as interesting what divides them?

2 Innovation at OU

There are a number of historical developments that help set out the context for the establishment of the Open University U.K. in 1969. The first is that in 1960 the continuation rate from school to university in the UK lay at approximately 5% only, ending that decade doubling to some 10% following major expansion with around 23 new universities. Almost all the places in the newly expanded Higher Education sector were however taken up by school leavers, with the adult part-time learner served almost entirely in evening classes by Birkbeck College in London, and the University of London itself with External degrees freely available more widely throughout the U.K. and indeed the world. Higher Education was primarily an opportunity for the elite and middle classes, dominated by children from private and selective schools, and more by men than women. Both the historical backlog and the continuing injustice in life opportunity constrained by social class, gender and ethnic heritage provided one stream in the Labour Party Prime Minister Harold Wilson's first proposal in 1963 that an additional new university but of a new kind should be established to address such inequities.

So the primary driver for a new university like the Open University was about who could be a student, and it is fair to say that for UK society the Open University has changed that. The idea that adults in general were worthy entrants to and participants in Higher Education, as against High school leavers, met considerable scepticism, with unkind remarks of an ageist and snobbish nature about how worthwhile this was. Secondly, the OU brought new entrants into university study from the socio-economic perspective, and from the dimension of gender, including women in greater numbers than other universities then, and including people with disability in ways that had never been done before.

The implications of how a university should function if it is to serve adult learners however took us on different paths. But I will come back to that.

The second stream of the Prime Minister's concern was that the possibilities of broadcasting had not been optimally deployed for formal educational purposes, and he thus placed the use of technology for education at the heart of what was to become the Open University institutional model, which he named 'The University of the Air'. Wilson entrusted the still embryonic idea to his Minister for the Arts Jenny Lee, who is widely given the credit for making a reality of it, and in doing so adapting the original vision in some very important ways.

Jenny Lee worked with the Open University Planning Committee which examined the available range of options on a global basis which might provide concrete help in inventing the organisational form for a radically new university. None of these provided a blueprint, but all contributed elements of innovation that made up the new whole.

A number of key characteristics of how universities were understood to function, and for whom, were disrupted, not to say upended by the Open University UK. They have had an impact world-wide. The first of these is that the Open University UK, as the latest of the 1960's new universities

designed to move the UK from an elite to a mass Higher Education system, decided to have no entry qualifications for undergraduate admissions. This at a stroke changed something hitherto fundamental to the functioning and character of Higher Education, that the university chose its students, as happened through competitive entry and selective interview at all other universities. However at the OU U.K. the students chose the university. There were for the first 20 years or more applications to the Open University than there were places, as there were for the more selective universities, but the Open University used a first come first served queuing system to manage its admissions, not selection. The Open University UK has stuck to this fundamental reversal of the power relationship between student and institution for more than 50 years.

It is this radical approach to student admission that has changed the understanding of who could go to university, from the stereotypical but not misleading picture of 18 or 19 year old middle class young person, more often a boy than a girl, almost always white, to a university of adults in all sorts of occupations, and with a more or less equal proportion of women to men. The predominant characteristics of the OU student was not of someone who had had no post-school education, but of someone who had had some but wanted more. The picture is one of individuals already in a process of social mobility not so much those for whom this was the first step. However we should not overlook the large numbers of women home workers, for whom the Open University provided a route for study flexible enough to accommodate the demands of parenting and home management, and the smaller but until the recent period important number of people who had retired and were studying more or less exclusively for reasons of personal fulfilment rather than vocational advancement. Finally there were a number of student audiences who had never been served adequately by the university sector. First and foremost were students with disability, and to this day the Open University UK supports more students with disability than all the other universities in the UK put together, and can fairly be said to have pioneered the recognition that students with a range of functional disabilities could and should be supported to study, and how this can be done. Other groups have had their study facilitated by the flexible and student centred nature of Open University operations and systems, including students in prison and in the military.

The foundation of the Open University as laid out here was driven by educational and social mission, built primarily on ideas of social justice, of sharing the goods in society more widely, and remediating past exclusive practices. I believe the OU UK has had a great deal in common with Empire State in its changing society's understanding of who could go to university.

The Open University put in place a range of approaches to learning, teaching and student support to make that openness as reality and not just a revolving door. These included learning materials that for the first year at least created a ramp into Higher Education that supported those with minimal or less than minimal High School leaving qualifications, highly developed tutorial support on an individual basis focused on student work for continuous assessment; and a modular course structure that allows students to plan degrees.

3 Innovation at ESC

Empire State College, founded almost contemporaneously with the OU UK, took the same central imperative as its sister university, that is to say that there were significant populations who could and should enjoy Higher Education and who had had no opportunity to do so. And that to serve them most effectively and appropriately you needed to look to radical innovation in learning and teaching. It was primarily a lifelong learning mission, that is to say for the adult learner who had had a break from the familiar trajectory of High School to college and who had worked or cared

for a family or both. They were in many cases fractured trajectories, that is to say individual students whose path on that High School to College trajectory had never been imagined or permitted by family, or had been interrupted by lack of resources, health crises, caring duties etc. We were familiar with these students too.

But Empire State led by Ernest Boyer, James Hall and other senior founding administrators crafted from a range of small scale existing innovations in the USA, a bricolage practice of innovation shared in method with the OU UK, crafted a home based study system that built from the adult learner up, using the resources of the State wide system, centrally supported by the mentor who would guide through a form of Socratic dialogue, a practice well described by Hermann and Mandell, both friends and colleagues from whom I have learned so much, in their book entitled "From teaching to mentoring", entitled I would say provocatively if I did not know how gentle Distinguished Professor Mandell is. The core ideas at Empire State's foundation as I understand were more radical than anything we had conceived in the UK, that is to say that the individual learner creates her or his own programme of study rather than engaging with a curriculum designed by faculty and inherited from others. This was indeed courageous. It was to refuse the power that the university hitherto had assumed as its prerogative by definition. In addition, the knowledge that the adult learner had gained outside the academy, not only in terms of credit from other universities, but also from life and work experience, could through its expression through a portfolio be given academic credit. This was equally radical I suggest, as it recognised that knowledge and understanding generated from outside the academy was worthy of recognition within the currency of academic awards.

4 What has changed at OUUK and ESC?

So where are we now in terms of these aging radicals?

I see some common patterns between us both. Firstly with the OU while the initial qualifications offered for the first 20 years or so were unnamed in the sense that they were BA Open and only a BA Open, and composed through free choice by the student not according to a pattern designed by discipline based academics, and in this the OU UK made a significant nod to the openness of curriculum that Empire State pioneered, it was the OU students through their own association which has membership of the University Senate who drove change towards permitting so called named degrees, that is to say a preselected series of modules that deliver a BA or BSc in a subject area. Some academics at the OU, I remember that Senate debate, defended what they thought was a key element of the OU's radicalism and opposed what they saw as the creep of conventionalism into the university. But the majority listened to the student demands for easier social recognition of their degree titles that society and employers more easily understood, and agreed to the change.

Equally as I understand it through conversations with your colleagues and looking at your webpages, Empire State too has expanded the modes of study to include online degrees made up of conventional courses, as well individually planned and negotiated study plans for credit supported by mentoring, and retains the inclusion of experiential learning, or indeed a particular strength which is apparent, a combination of all three modes

My assessment for both universities is that these changes have strengthened our ability to include a wider range of students and to innovate in how these students are supported. There is nothing so damaging as founding father syndrome, if I can term it that, where any change from the original vision is regarded as treason. As Empire State's Emerita Professor Elana Michelson, friend and

colleague of many years, proposed in an article last year we should ‘resist a more-of-the-same defensiveness that can keep us stuck in what we already do.’ That has emerged as for me the crucial theme of this talk.

And nothing has tested the mission and organisational structures and processes than the digital revolution of the last 30 years which I come to next.

5 The digital revolution

In the early 1990’s or so the digital revolution made its challenging entry, for myself first in the form of desktop computers for email and managing text, although elsewhere in the university it began to transform student records and logistics. By that time, the educational radicals of the Open University U.K. were in many cases in their 40’s and 50’s. And it seems to be true that while the technologies we grow up with, and perhaps up to the age of 40, are seen as part of the natural world, those that come later in our lives for some at least intrude as a personal challenge and an unwelcome one at that.

But I remember when the first desktop, just one, was installed, with its black screen and winking green text. And I sent the first email in my life, which was as it happens to a colleague in Australia. It could hardly have travelled further. And some 5 minutes later I received a reply. I couldn’t believe it. I think literally as well as metaphorically my mouth dropped open. Suddenly the world changed shape, and some dimensions of geographical distance, of time, and of communicating, sharing and working with others, were changed forever.

Sceptics

But those who were armoured against new technological innovations, over and above the ones we had worked with for the last 20 years, represented themselves as weary sceptics in the face of naive tech enthusiasts who had no understanding of ‘real’ communication, ‘real’ relationships’, or ‘real’ learning. And for an innovative technology supported university just 20 or so years old in the 1990’s, there were a surprising number of such conservatives who refused to model continued innovation, and who gradually became more and more forlorn and unhappy voices. It became so difficult to distinguish a new conservatism from a legitimate protection of the educational mission, indeed a continuing challenge.

6 Anti commoditisation practices

So where is innovation most strong now?

Open versus commercial practice

Of great interest is the reaction to the high levels of commoditisation that the digital revolution has brought – above all of our personal data – in the form of a push back with anti-commodification practices in fields such as open software, open publishing and open educational resources. If it is true that every force engenders resistance, nowhere has this been seen so strongly as in the open publishing movement of the last 20 years. I will be fascinated to see where the next moment of stasis comes in the field of open versus commercial publishing. As for Open Educational Resources I remain wedded to the idea that courses can be more speedily, cheaply and equitably produced if we are able to share and adapt, facilitated by digital systems. But apart from the valuable open source production of some textbooks in North America where textbook prices are very high, I have personally seen less than enough evidence of Open Educational

Practice, that is OER's actually in use in the production of learning resources and courses rather than lying unexamined in unvisited repositories. I hope to be proved wrong!

7 Informal learning

Informal learning

On the other hand the use of OER's for informal learning has had more success, for example with the Open Learn site of the Open University U.K., which makes freely available discontinued courses and fractions of current courses, and is used by millions of informal learners. As well as sites like this there are a million blogs, curated collections of resources on every subject under the sun, and spaces for association and discussion. The digital age has produced an extraordinary creativity based on informal learning and ease of communication. We can see it happening in front of our eyes as people stare at their screens in every sitting room at home, every café, on every bus, train or airplane. Is it here, not only in the study of but the production and curation of resources, that the spirit of innovation in learning might burn most fiercely in the current period? And are educational institutions still fit for purpose with their architectures of learning still in analogue form in terms of lengthy programmes of study and credit systems, and able to support the informal learning that is going on all around them, for the most part ignored, unrecognised and unvalued? I suggest that the microcredential agenda has now far more potential than the early days of badges of competency for IT companies might have suggested.

8 It has not worked

But to conclude with an overall challenge to ESC and the OUUK

If we are to be critical, and I include self-critical, I would want to ask if the notion of openness, while an advance on the notion of opportunity to learn being a privilege granted by others, is in itself an adequate basis for social justice, and what the widely promoted rationale for a university like the OU UK of social mobility really means. I draw on the work firstly of Michael Young on meritocracy, and of Selina Todd, and in particular her recent book 'Snakes and ladders, the great British Social Mobility myth'.

Michael Young, an innovator in ideas in education as well as other sectors, and influential on the founding ideas of the OUUK, wrote a satire as long ago as 1958 using the neologism of meritocracy as descriptive of a dystopian society where the able minority rule for their own benefit a less able majority, and extend these benefits to their own family only, and have in the notion of meritocracy a set of beliefs that make this entirely defensible. Young was profoundly disappointed however that meritocracy became a term of approbation rather than understood as he intended as a satirical account of new forms of privilege and the justification of hierarchy that it supports. So I think it is fair to ask if the OU UK, and perhaps Empire State, while we have widened slightly the terms on which people may move in society, have unwittingly failed to critique the social mobility that we support. To strengthen the urgency of this question I turn to Selina Todd's recent work. She writes that 'By 2010 40% of London's children lived in poor households, ...London had become the most socially polarised city in Britain, but researchers found that a similar inequality of both wealth and opportunity characterised the largest provincial cities too.. She adds that we 'saw social mobility strategies as replacement for social policies that were designed to prevent or minimise poverty and inequality (pp328-329).

In other words, it has not worked. If the original founding vision of our two universities was a commitment to improving social justice, that is to say diminishing the gaps between the richest and the poorest, and supporting social mobility, that is to say creating more opportunities for secure employment and housing, and health outcomes to be available to a larger and larger proportion of the population, it has not happened. The gaps are greater, the poor are relatively poorer, the richer are relatively richer, decent housing is more and more of a challenge, according to the Pew Research Centre which reports on the US, and also in the UK according to the Equality Trust. This makes for a sobering moment. The very challenges that we were established to meet have in fact over 50 years developed into worsening problems rather than improved life outcomes for the majority, notwithstanding the millions of students whose life trajectories we have supported. How do we contribute then in the light of that? Do we continue in the same way? Or do we recognise that the hopes of 1971 have in some ways gone backwards and that we have to rethink how we deliver our missions?

I would like to focus in my own answer to those questions, which are the questions I hope to leave you with, on whether our understanding of social justice and in particular social mobility is adequate. I think they are not. Firstly it is all too usually implicit, not thought through. In order to renew our mission statements, which have not succeeded overall in embedding change for the better in our societies, despite the many achievements of our students, we need to discuss and debate what we mean by social justice and social mobility, and then plan again how we can better deliver on those ambitions, better that is to say than we have done so far.

Secondly, I think the very strength we thought we had in supporting the individual learner may also be a weakness. It is not that it is wrong rather it is inadequate. While we thought we were mitigating the most damaging characteristics in our societies perhaps we were too often reflecting and reproducing their individualism? There is a clue I think in that both universities have been pulled back from 'open curriculum' being the sole programme offering, to complement the mentor supported curriculum planning process in the case of Empire State and the Open Degree in the case of the OUUK, to qualifications that are built round the principles of established fields of knowledge with names that are immediately recognisable in communities and by employers, that is to say a BSc in Economics or a BA in Literature.

And while the open curriculum continues to engage many, about half until recently at the OUUK, at least half of our students perhaps in their decision to take named Degrees in subject areas implicitly express the notion that they are not just individuals, they are or want to be part of wider communities defined by knowledge area. In other words the truism that human beings are social animals not just individuals is being expressed in its own ways by our students.

Relatedly, can we do anything about the very long established notion that social mobility is an individual's farewell to her or his own community, for admission to another community or social class? This individualistic notion of social mobility is impoverishing for the community left behind, as those most able and energetic members of the community are encouraged to get up and go, and at the same time negates broader notions of social solidarity that have contributed so much to the fragmentation and anomie that we can recognise in the UK and perhaps, it is for you to say, in the US.

So let's celebrate at 50 years the many many lives of individual students whom our universities have supported in their life trajectories, and whom no one else chose to notice. But let us also reflect on the challenge that the injustices in our societies which we were established to mitigate have in fact got worse. Let me return to the question as to how well radicals age. The task before

us, I propose, lies in our capacity to draw on the radical courage of SUNY leaders Ernest Boyer and James Hall and in the UK Government Minister Jenny Lee, and as young and old alike renew the moral challenge to our societies today to reinvent our universities in order to support a fairer more just society, just as our founding mothers and fathers did 50 years ago. In other words we still have work to do!