



Reclaiming the Territory University Change: a Personal Reflection

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Abstract

A brief exploration of a thousand years of Higher Educational Institutions in Europe considers the key intentions that lie behind the physical campuses and their powerful symbolism. The networked and digital 21st century has given us approaches to all aspects of university life and learning outside the confines of a physical place, through the Internet, broadcast and many mobile technologies. The question for the teachers and academics of the 21st Century is: can we embrace new opportunities for knowledge and learning or will we constantly creep back to our libraries and lecture theatres?

It's important not to romanticise academia, nor slip into nostalgia for a time that never was. Instead let's break the component down and see how many are truly dependent on location!

Universities arose from the need for seekers and sharers of knowledge to gather to ensure access to scholars and books. In the 21st century, do students still need to go to and be at a university to study and achieve?

The first universities educated clergy and monks. They evolved during the Middle Ages from the «*studia generale*», which taught – in Latin – the seven liberal arts of grammar, logic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music. The earliest example was Bologna, founded in the 11th century to teach law. Discussion and exploration of questions was the key method of developing the quest for knowledge. The term «university» meant the entire group of persons engaged, in a certain place, in jointly pursuing learning and knowledge-generating activities. So, from the very start, we have universities as about: dialogue, communities, about scholarly pursuits ... but in buildings, usually in a significant city.

The newer ideal of rational and objective intellectual enquiry – that is, scientific research – started in the 17th century. At this time local languages began to be used. Halle, in Germany, was the first of such modern universities in 1694. Universities founded in the later 18th and 19th centuries, gradually shifted towards secular learning and research, following the German model. They start to sound familiar at this point! Now we've added: scientific research as well as teaching, and accessible language.

There was a tradition of supported independent study. The big advantage for students, teachers and researchers, of being on a university campus, was access to a whole range of real physical resources. Libraries have always been important. We still say «she is *reading* medicine» or «he is *reading* history». At my university, in Leicester in the UK, as our major new e-learning strategy is widely accepted and takes a hold in organisational life, we are creating a fully «blended» library. Of course, the new library needs more physical space on campus! Other kinds of physical resources can be crucial, too, such as museums and art collections. And for science education, universities provide laboratories and equipment for experiments. Many of these are substantial, innovative and much admired. So now we add to the essentials of university life: artefacts in museums and art galleries, books in libraries, and equipment and laboratories.

Universities have always been places for gatherings. Students learnt not only about the disciplines but also how to question and build their knowledge by creating and extending arguments. Dialogue and criticism between teachers and learners and between learners and visitors is a key part of university life. Some say that they distinguish a university from other kinds of education. We value finding like-minded others for understanding, reinforcement and application of our ideas, but also new challenges and diversity, sometimes through uncomfortable truths.

Therefore, at this point we include: the lecture theatre, the seminar room, the clubs, the bar, the refectory, and the concept of value and challenge in diversity.

In 1867, Cambridge University began extension studies, moving outside their walls. Degree programmes appeared in the local community, leading to the setting up of extra-mural studies departments and to programmes of continuing education. From the early 1970s, UK The Open University (OU) took these ideas further by demolishing the walls entirely to offer degree courses any time and any place, using a variety of media and technologies as they became available. The UK OU spawned as many as 40 other open and distance universities around the world along similar lines. However, even at the OU, until 1992 students were supposed to be resident in the UK.

Can you see why so many people find it is so difficult, even in 2005, to imagine a university without a real physical place that you can walk around in? But, in practice, in «reality», learning and knowledge construction happens in people's *heads!*

The networked and digital 21st century has given us approaches to all aspects of university life and learning outside the confines of a physical place, through the Internet, broadcast and many mobile technologies. The Internet offers us new opportunities for interactivity. The key difference between place based learning and the Internet is its ability to enable us to find like-minded others and have wide always available, easily accessible information previously denied. Some of these processes may be less grand than those handsome campus buildings and structures, but they are more accessible. Online components may be less «in your face» and more «in your hand» or «on your screen». They may not bring such kudos to the university or be likely to last for centuries. They may even be harder to explain and unfamiliar to those of us born in the 20th century. But they are available now, wherever and whenever we wish. We can access more resources online than our predecessors could in a lifetime of travel. We can communicate with many more people than ever before.

And what of the University lecturers, professors, academics and teachers in this time?

In the beginning, the plucky e-pioneers, were treated as heretics in our universities. Reports of our experiments were greeted with disbelief, even panic, by many colleagues, who believed we were disturbing the mysteries of knowledge and teaching itself.

Then, closing years of the last Century, offered us playpens the like of which no generation of educators had seen before. At the height of the dot.com bandwagon, online universities were proliferating. MIT made its materials available over the web- well it still does. Sadly, the roof caved in on those universities that entered the online game early, typically in alliances, with announcements and fanfares. Some fingers have been pointed, much money lost and its fashionable to consider

the e-revolution as stalled. Management guru Peter Drucker would probably not want to be reminded of his predication that campus universities will be «relics» in 30 years. The big differences between the organisational cultures of the academic and business worlds explain in part the failures of the joint ventures. Research interests, decision making and time scales differ considerably. In practice, we found that universities as organisations change more slowly and more quietly than the technology does.

Rather more quietly though, individuals in universities were permitted to experiment. Some of us travelled as prospectors, building pipelines through cyberspace. But for a little while, the mantras became technological «solutions» and the naïve hype of large scale online universities. As the Millennium sparks tore apart the early predications of glory, some of our carefully nurtured projects rapidly fell into the abyss. Only a few of us survived with our dignity, (but not our funding), intact.

But stealthily, slowly, we ceased to be pariahs and are seen instead as perceptive people who have a view of the future. We need to tap into ancient wisdoms and we still require rather more than promise and the hand of fate from our technology partners. Some of our projects have become principles. Those of us who were there at the first stirrings feel privilege at the growth of seeds we had tentatively propagated. We recognize that the impact of links and networks has the power to redefine the roles of teachers and learners. It is insufficient to stand by and allow trivialisation by «content providers» or consider that new elites and measurements stay our hands. Instead our concepts and practice must embrace the World Wide Web and other new media into education. A new pedagogical ethos suggests that as educators we do need to rethink our approaches and let our insistence on a terrestrial view of universities go...

I'm of the school that agrees that the impact of networked and digital technologies on Higher Education is likely to be less in the short term and but greater in the long term than the original naïve predications. Somewhere between prescriptive management and decentralization, lies a balance with agreed educational objectives to the fore, and an action research approach to enable the territory to be reclaimed with confidence. We need vision with delegation, collaboration, & flexibility ... and maybe reward? Colleagues let's get in there – use it understand it, experiment with it. Reclaiming any territory needs courage & valor ... please take up the challenge.

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