放送大学研究年報 第30号(2012)85-91頁 Journal of The Open University of Japan, No. 30(2012)pp. 85-91

# Passing It On:

ODL, ICT and the Plight of Liberal Arts Education

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## 伝えるということ

一公開遠隔教育、ICT、そして教養教育の苦境一

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to explore the significance of what is called liberal arts education at open and distance learning institutions. Universities all over the world are sounding the death knell for the liberal arts education, including language and literature education, owing to the cultural climate in which all the disciplines, including the humanities, are required to produce quantifiable results. Drawing on the play *The History Boys* (2004), written by the British playwright Alan Bennett, I would like to argue that despite the recent trend in higher education to utilise Information and Communication Technology (ICT), those engaged in liberal arts education in open and distance education should not give up attempting to pass on knowledge well rather than efficiently.

## 要旨

公開遠隔教育機関における教養教育の意義とは何だろうか。人文学を含め、あらゆる学問分野が量的に計測可能な結果を生み出すことを求められる現在のような文化的風土においては、世界中の大学が言語教育や文学教育等を含む教養教育に弔鐘を鳴らしている。アラン・ベネットの戯曲『ヒストリー・ボーイズ』を出発点として、ICTを利用することがもはや慣例となっている公開遠隔教育においても、「よりよく伝える」ことが「効果的に伝える」ことよりも重要であり、そのためには教養教育の果たす役割は大きいと論じる。

# I. The Unquantifiability of Liberal Arts Education

In Alan Bennett's 2004 play *The History Boys*, which is set in a Northern England six form college in the 1980s and revolves around a group of clever yet unruly students, the headmaster launches into an angry and frustrated tirade against the English teacher Hector:

HEADMASTER: Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher? It isn't that he doesn't produce results. He does. But they are unpredict-

able and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He may well be doing his job, but there is no method that I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing.

There is inspiration, certainly, but how do I quantify that? And he has no notion of boundaries. A few weeks ago I caught him teaching French, French!<sup>1)</sup>

The headmaster's ranting is not unreasonable, for Hector's method of teaching is certainly 'unquantifiable' and 'unpredictable': he has his students memorise literary quotations, recite poems and stage vignettes from either famous films (such as *Brief Encounter*)

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## 写真非表示(著作権のため)

The History Boys (2006) ©Fox Searchlight/Kobal/PPS 通信社

or extemporaneously. In one of the students' words, his educational programme is intended to 'make [them] more rounded human beings' by inducing them to read and know as much and widely as possible. It is true that no one is going to be examined on these things in the university entrance examination. But what is so wrong about it? Why is the headmaster so worked up about teaching what he deems useless? The answer: the headmaster is desperately trying to get the students into the two ancient academic institutions in Britain: Oxford and Cambridge.

As the head of a mediocre secondary educational institution, there is hardly anything he wants more than his students getting places and scholarships at those prestigious universities that will no doubt heighten the reputation of his six form college, improving the school's place in the league table. For the headmaster, there is no room for 'inspiration'; all he values is the number, i.e. how many students are admitted to these two universities. No wonder he cannot allow pedagogic enterprises which it is hard to predict will produce stable results.

Even though the play, made into a film in 2006, is a fictitious, comical representation that satirises the secondary education in Britain, the pedagogical dilemma that *The History Boys* enacts is quite familiar to many of us who are involved with distance education, especially to those who teach what is called 'liberal arts' or 'the humanities' subjects. Most of us are teaching in a cultural climate where we are expected to produce 'results'. But what is a 'result'?

In most cases, results have to be represented in figures, graphs, and charts. One has to be able to measure one's educational method and academic achievements by numbers. Although there are occasional attacks on this attempt to quantify education, the general trend has now irrevocably been set: if you cannot raise the average of the exam grades significantly, you are a failure; if you cannot prove that your research does not benefit society in a visible way (in most cases economically), you are regarded as wasting the tax; and if your students claim, despite the huge amount of effort on your part, that what they have learned is absolutely no use to them in landing a job, you are a swindler. What we are witnessing here is the marketization and bureaucratization of education, and every single university in the world is confronting more or less the same situation. Even open and distance education, which are relatively free from the requirements of the job market and intensive research projects funded by gigantic multinational corporations, is inextricably implicated in monetary, utilitarian concerns.

In this paper, I would like to address the age-old question of what could be the significance of liberal arts education at the university, especially at distance learning institutions. I for my part teach mainly the English language and literature, specialising as I do in medieval English religious literature. Much as I love my own research subject, I would not dare to claim that the study of Middle English literature *per se* is lucrative in monetary terms. The point of teaching most

liberal arts subjects is that it *is* impossible to calculate or monetize in any objective or satisfactory way the reward that it might bring in the foreseeable future. That makes it even more germane for each of us to ponder a little about what kind of potential liberal arts or the humanities education has in the present world.

For instance, humanities scholars have traditionally invoked John Henry Newman's The Idea of a University (1852) in order to uphold the value of the humanities disciplines which they perceived to be in danger.4 More recently, the American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum makes a strong case that we are now in urgent need of the humanities in order to safeguard democracy,50 a claim which I wholeheartedly support. What I intend to do here, however, is not to provide such grand, theoretical generalization as Newman's or Nussbaum's; nor am I going to present any useful method or prescription for salvaging the slowly decaying humanities education, or to provide reliable sociological data. Musing about what lies beyond the quantifiable is precisely the aim of my paper. Utterly useless though it might sound, I hope to lay bare some of the tacit understanding and assumptions of those engaged in open and distance education. Anyone who has taught at an open university would doubtless agree with the literary critic George Steiner, who recalls:

I have never had more demanding, more original students than those in my evening classes at New York University. The multiracial mix around the table, of women and men from the most diverse social background, of both young and old, of the retired and of those in various professions, made for an implosive cast. The joy of discovery -'Dostoevsky is simply wonderful!' — intellectual and emotional surprise, the resistance to the merely official and magisterial, the raw vehemence of debate, illustrated the best of the American story. I would pitch some of these students and auditors against any élite. Even that which made a doctoral seminar at Stanford and certain tutorials at Cambridge occasions on which I learned far more than I could aspire to teach. Even when compared with my more or less continuous seminar in comparative literature and intellectual history over a quarter of a century at the university of Geneva or an unforgettable audience in Gerona. But these are provisional impressions, inaccessible to quantified analysis. Remembrance is never more than a flashbulb.<sup>6)</sup>

This homage to lifelong education is all the more

convincing because it is uttered by someone who has taught numerous students in a number of countries. And here the guide for my discussion has appeared once again: *quantifiability*. This is an age-old conundrum for the teachers and those who attempt to assess the quality of their teaching. Is there room in open and distance education for the kind of educational experience that is beneficial to both the teacher and the student and is 'inaccessible to quantified analysis'?

## II. Liberal Arts and the University

Before we continue further to consider the state of the current humanities education, however, we need to confront a paradox: it was not the university that gave birth to the humanities that are studied and researched at modern universities. It is therefore preposterous to attempt to justify the existence of the humanities course in the university curricula by tracing the origin of the humanities back to the embryonic phase of the university in the Middle Ages. A casual glance at the history of the university will reveal that the medieval university was rather hostile to the study of the *studia humanitatis*. A character from J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* succinctly summarizes this point:

The university did not give birth to humane studies, nor, when the university eventually accepted humane studies in its scholarly ambit, did it provide a particularly nurturing home to them. On the contrary, the university embraced humane studies only in an arid, narrowed form. That narrowed form was textual scholarship; the history of humane studies in the university from the fifteenth century onwards is so tightly bound up with the history of textual scholarship that they may as well be called the same thing.<sup>8)</sup>

Working as I am on a very 'narrow' field of 'textual scholarship', this very brief summary of the history of the humanities humbles me. If this account of the persecution of the humanities by the highest academic institution is true — and I believe it is largely true — then it is virtually impossible to lend support to the humanities by harkening back to its long tradition in Western intellectual culture.

What we mean nowadays by 'the humanities' is of course much broader than textual scholarship: it includes disciplines as varied as historiography, philosophy, literary criticism, sociology, economics, archaeology, anthropology, to name just a few. However, at the dawn of the humanities in the fifteenth century,

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the study of the humanities, or 'the humane subjects', was intimately related to how to discover the 'true' meaning of ancient texts, and the ancient text which textual scholarship vigorously studied from the fifteenth century onwards, apart from Latin and Greek classical masterpieces, was the Bible. This means that the humanities were theologically and evangelically motivated from the outset, making it impossible for us to link the present, more or less secular humanities scholarship and education with the humanism that was about to emerge and develop in the fifteenth century.

It is rather the university after the nineteenth-century reform movement initiated by the German scholar and polymath Wilhelm von Humboldt on which the modern universities around the world were modelled; the ideals of the humanities adumbrated back then still strongly inform the universities now. Partly because of this break with the past, the modern university is having immense difficulty providing the humanities or liberal arts with the appropriate place in the current curriculum. It is therefore necessary, especially for those who work on the humanities subjects, to recognise the discontinuity of the current humanities from the medieval counterpart.

## II. The Mixed Blessing of ICT

But where does this recognition leave us? Are we to discard the traditional method of teaching textual analysis face-to-face and go for modern solutions, most notably employing digital resources and instructing students online? Apparently so, and many of us have actually started to do so since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Open and distance learning institutions have been particularly perceptive to the demand of effective education through e-learning on account of the temporal and geographical constraints of the students. Today, universities lacking so-called ICT (Information and Communication Technology) infrastructure will never go far in reaching many students.

Here, however, I would like to take issue with the recent trend in distance learning to digitize teaching materials and methods. This trend has of course largely been a blessing for most of us. ICT has enabled us to maximize the opportunities of the students and to minimize the time and cost of the teachers. I draw heavily on Microsoft Office, digital resources found on the web, Internet conference systems, and so on. At the Open University of Japan where I teach, more and more broadcast course materials are going online, making it virtually unnecessary for the stu-

dents to leave their home. This is of course what is happening at virtually all the open universities in the world.

It is hardly surprising, then, that since as early as the 1990s a huge amount of scholarly effort has been devoted to discovering just how effectively one can carry out education through ICT, 11) and that countless articles and books investigating every aspect of it are now being produced annually. Armed with all kinds of technological innovation, teachers and students are now able to share knowledge and information even if they live in places as far apart as Madagascar and Mexico. As many critics point out, this is indeed 'the democratization of knowledge' - who in academia has not benefited from Wikipedia? - and as one of those who earnestly hope to reach as large an audience as possible, I cannot but wish further development in the so-called digital literacy of both teachers and students who find themselves involved in distance learning institutions. 12)

However, here we face yet another paradox: while ICT does broaden the horizons of education for most of those who aspire to learn, it has also the possibility to narrow the potential of learning as well. Here I am referring to a recent claim, or a concern, whereby the Internet might be drastically changing the structure of our brain: according to a number of studies, reports Nicholas Carr, our brain is observed to be mutating in such a way that it can accommodate a plethora of information that has become available to us owing to the recent revolutionary development of technologies: simply put, our attention span is becoming shorter and shorter, its capacity to dwell on one topic getting weaker and weaker. 13) If this finding is correct — and Carr is not alone in suspecting it is — what it implies to those involved in liberal arts education is certainly not favourable: liberal arts subjects would appeal much less to the students than ever before. 14)

Moreover, it should be noted that even though searching engines such as Google have now made it possible for us to acquire a profusion of information in less than a second, there are bound to be biases in such online searches: we are increasingly circumscribed by 'the world according to Google'. The kind of information which is not easily searchable on the World Wide Web — the biographical details of a little known Brazilian author, for instance — might not suit the current intellectual climate, in which it is assumed that every single bit of information should be readily available online, and that there is nothing that cannot be searched instantaneously.

Such a dire situation prompts us to consider the role of liberal arts education at open and distance learning institutions. Liberal arts education at the Open University of Japan is not performing any practical or utilitarian role; although it does teach a wide range of the humanities courses, it does not have a career support centre. As a result, the humanities education at the OUJ might be accused of being no more than trimmings or icing on the cake. Are we allowed to go on teaching liberal arts subjects as if nothing is really wrong? With even the humanities scholars so diffident, there is small wonder that ICT and statistical evidence hold sway in the humanities.

My view on ICT might sound quite reactionary and retrograde in an age when having recourse to quantitative evidence is a firmly established method in the humanities, especially in disciplines such as psychology, economics, sociology and linguistics. Even literary studies, which has been regarded as least amenable to quantitative research, has started to be subjected to it during the last couple of decades. Why not go with the flow and feast on the emerging trend? Furthermore, considering the budget cuts for higher education that are threatening universities around the world, it is only reasonable for open universities to lower the cost of education by implementing digital technologies.

However, the concern with the limited utility of elearning seems to have been long acknowledged.<sup>17)</sup> From my own experience of teaching liberal arts courses at the Open University of Japan, I also came to realise the potential of face-to-face tutorials, where students can express themselves, communicate and interact with the other students and the teachers more easily and confidently. Of course, students can always ask us questions by post or email regarding the content of broadcast learning materials, but these reactions are usually more sporadic and subdued compared to the lively discussion and debate that we enter in face-to-face lectures. By arguing this way, I am by no means denying the possibility of education based on digital resources. Rather, I am saying that in our desperate attempt to develop the students' information literacy, we tend to forget that digital technology does not supplant face-to-face, viva voce courses; it only supplements them. One might counter this rather naive claim by saying that it is possible to have face-to-face tutorials online, too. However, the living presence of the teacher and the students is vital to the students who want to speak out what has come up in their minds, and ask — however hesitantly and diffidently — questions that are seemingly simple and trivial and yet of profound importance on closer inspection; it is also vital to heated discussion, and to appreciating poetry affectively using physical senses as well as intellect.

As Walter Benjamin once argued concerning works of art, the aura that was supposed to shroud the teacher in the classroom in the old days is no longer visible: we live in an era when information can infinitely be replicated and students can garner information from everywhere, be it in the classroom, the library or on the World Wide Web. 18) However, I still believe that the raison d'être of open universities is to produce an almost chemical transformation among learners. In the British film Educating Rita, the female protagonist Rita goes through a radical metamorphosis, becoming a totally different person as a result of studying literature at the Open University. Even if one's aim is not so grand as self-reformation, one could at least hope for something spiritual from, say, reading W. H. Auden's poems or thinking metaphysically about whether time exists or not. Indeed, what is at the kernel of liberal arts education is encapsulated in the following scene from The History Boys, in which the above-mentioned teacher Hector and one of his students Timms talk about the intelligibility and utility of poetry:

TIMMS: Sir, I don't always understand poetry.

HECTOR: You don't always understand it? Timms, I never understand it. But learn it now know it now and you'll understand it whenever.

TIMMS: I don't see how we can understand it. Most of the stuff poetry's about hasn't happened to us yet.

HECTOR: But it will, Timms. It will. And then you will have the antidote ready! Grief. Happiness. Even when you're dying.

We're making your deathbeds here, boys.

LOOKWOOD: Fucking Ada.

HECTOR: Poetry is the trailer! Forthcoming attractions! <sup>19)</sup>

If something is quantifiable at all, it has at least to be recognizable and comprehensible; otherwise one could not measure it in such a way that is understood by anyone and everyone. However, as anyone who has taught literature and poetry knows, it is well-nigh impossible to expound one's comprehension of a piece of literary work in any quantifiable way. An astonishing array of technological inventions has certainly made education accessible to a much wider range of students than ever dreamt of; but still there always remains something that is communicated only through the living presence of the teacher and the students in the same place, especially when it comes to the teaching of the humanities. Teachers in the twenty-first

century will never be able to get away by saying that by teaching their subjects they are 'making the students' deathbeds', but those who dare to teach the humanities subjects will always have to rely on the tacit understanding on the part of society that learning these subjects is inextricably related to a considerable degree to 'making one's deathbeds', meaning, they are not meant for the present and certainly not for the job market. Hector in *The History Boys*, teaching as he was in the 1980s, was able to maintain firm faith in the usefulness of liberal arts education; today, even though many of us still do believe in it, very few would be so optimistic and confident as he is. To quote one last time from the last scene of *The History Boys*:

IRWIN: He [Hector] was a good man but I do not think there is time for his kind of teaching any more.

SCRIPPS: No. Love apart, it is the only education worth having.

HECTOR: Pass the parcel.

That's sometimes all you can do.

Take it, feel it and pass it on.

Not for me, not for you, but for someone, somewhere, one day.

Pass it on, boys.

That's the game I wanted you to learn.

Pass it on.20)

Thanks to information technology we can now 'pass it on' on an unprecedented scale. However, it is urgent, I contend, for us to think seriously about *how well* to 'pass it on', all the more because we live in an age when such an overabundance of knowledge and information can be passed on in the blink of an eye. We will of course have to stay away from the idealised, idyllic, and mythical idea of the humanities, in which the humanities education tends to be conceived as a refuge from the onslaught of technology; turning our backs on technology will be as absurd as holding on to geocentricism. Here, however, it is good to recall What Hermann Hesse said about technology as early as in the 1950s:

The more the need for entertainment and mainstream education can be met by new inventions, the more the book will recover its dignity and authority. We have not yet quite reached the point where young competitors, such as radio, cinema, etc., have taken over functions from the book that it can't afford to lose.<sup>21)</sup>

The same can be said about liberal arts education:

ICT has taken nothing from liberal arts education that it cannot afford to lose. There should be a number of ways open to us so that we do not have to make the deathbed of the humanities, at least at open and distance learning institutions.<sup>22)</sup>

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### Notes

- 1) Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 67.
- 2) Ibid. p. 38.
- 3) See, for example, Peter Scott, 'Higher Education: Not Everything Can Be Measured', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 5 April 2011; and one of the most vociferous complaints about the quantification trend in academia, Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).
- 4) John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. by Frank M. Turner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996). As Stefan Collini notes, Newman's celebrated, oft-quoted treatise, however, 'began life as a collection of occasional pieces written to justify the creation of a new [Catholic] institution which was somewhat marginal to English social and cultural traditions and which proved to be for he most part a failure' (Collini, p. 43).
- 5) Martha C. Nussbaum, Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 121-43. 'Education based mainly on profitability in the global market', Nussbaum says in this manifesto book, 'produc[es] a greedy obtuseness and a technically trained docility that threaten the very life of democracy itself, and that certainly impede the creation of a decent world culture' (p. 142).
- 6) George Steiner, 'School Terms', in *idem, My Unwritten Books* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), pp. 117-53 (at p. 122).
- 7) For a concise history of the development of the medieval university, see Ian F. McNeely with Lisa Wolverton, *Reinventing Knowledge: From Alexandria to the Internet* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2008), pp. 79-117.
- 8) J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 120.
- 9) For Wilhelm von Humbolt's contribution to the German university system, see McNeely with Wolverton, pp. 192-4; and Shunya Yoshimi, *What is the University?* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2011), pp. 78-90.
- 10) See, for instance, Matthew K. Gold, ed., *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- 11) See an early example by Robin Mason, 'The Impact of Telecommunications', in *Higher Education Through Open and Distance Learning*, ed. by Keith Harry,

- Wold Review of Distance Education and Open Learning, 1 (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 32–47.
- 12) For the democratization of knowledge, see Peter Burke, A Social History of Knowledge, vol. II: From Encyclopédie to Wikipedia (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), pp. 271-5
- 13) See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010), pp. 121-6 et passim.
- 14) Adriaan van der Weel, Changing Our Textual Minds: Towards a Digital Order of Knowledge (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 202-4.
- 15) For the so-called 'Googlization of the world', see the illuminating account by Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).
- 16) Some notable examples include, for example, researches conducted by Franco Moretti, *Graphs*, *Maps*, *Trees* (London and New York: Verso 2005); and *idem*, 'Network Theory, Plot Analysis', *New Left Review*, 68 (2011), 80-102.
- 17) See Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, 6th edn, revised and updated with Philip W. Sutton (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 875-7.
- 18) Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production', *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, and intro. by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211-44.
- 19) Bennett, p. 30.
- 20) Ibid. p. 109.
- 21) Quoted in Jean Claude Carrière and Umberto Eco, This Is Not the End of the Book: A Conversation Curated by Jean-Philippe de Tonnac, trans. by Polly McLean (London: Havrvill Secker, 2011), p. 7.
- 22) An earlier version of this paper was presented under the title 'Liberal Arts Education at Open and Distance Learning Institutions: What Does It Matter?' at the 24th International Conference on Open and Distance Learning, held at the University of Terbuka, Indonesia, in October 2011. I heartily thank the participants for insightful questions and comments.

(2012年11月6日受理)