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Συνέντευξη με τον καθηγητή Mark Brown

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Interview with Mark Brown



Professor Mark Brown is Ireland's first Chair in Digital Learning and Director of the National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL). At the start of 2014, he was Director of the National Centre for Teaching and Learning as well as Director of the Distance Education and Learning Futures Alliance (DELFA) at Massey University, New Zealand. In addition, he had responsibility for oversight of the Central Hub of Ako Aotearoa - National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence.

He is currently Chair of the Innovation in Teaching and Learning Steering Committee for the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) and is a member of the Executive Committee of European Distance and e-Learning Network (EDEN). In 2016, Mark Brown was also appointed as a representative of the Irish Universities Association on the Board of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Additionally, he works closely with Epigeum, a subsidiary of Oxford University Press, in the development of online professional development programmes for university staff and is currently Lead Advisor for a course in the area of Blended Learning.

His main research interests are in the areas of digital learning, blended learning, online learning including MOOCs, learning design, effective pedagogy, academic development, higher education, quality enhancement, the nature of the student learning experience, and educational policy. He helps to coordinate the Digital Learning Research Network and leads the Policy and Strategy Expert Group as part of the EMPOWER project, and is an active member of both the HOME and Score2020 European funded projects. In 2015, he was a co-author of the report funded by the international Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) on Quality Models in Online and Open Education Around the Globe.

The interview was taken during the International Symposium “The Future Is Now: Open & Distance Universities in Europe” on the 5-6 November, 2015 in Athens by Vasiliki (Sylvie) Ioakimidou, a Ph.D. candidate at the Hellenic Open University.

You come from New Zealand, as you said yesterday, but you work in Dublin City University and you are teaching distance education?

I'm not teaching, I am more leading the teaching. So my role is the Director of the National Institute for Digital Learning, which is for promoting the use of new technologies, online, blended, digital learning both within Dublin University but also across all of Ireland.

So you offer support to teachers?

Yes. We have a unit within the National Institute, that's responsible for teaching enhancement, we call it.

Yesterday in your presentation I was left with the impression that you have an idea of what might be the future of open universities.

Well I think there is a future firstly! (laughing) A bit of state of fate. One thing we need to appreciate is based on OECD predictions. OECD. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation.

Yes, yes...

The world set a body and they predict that by the year 2025 there will be demand for higher education in the world will have reached 200.000.000 students. At the moment it's about 180.000.000. So despite the pressures we face in our respected countries the growth of higher education is just going to continue and in fact it's impossible to build enough physical universities to meet that demand. So really one of that if not the only solution is to invest more heavily into more alternative and flexible models, online models. Having said that I think what we will see is where online increasingly becomes just one of several ways that we provide flexible learning and interestingly we may continue to still have not necessarily study centers but approaches where we meet the needs of our learners as co-watchers, groups of learners where we go to them as well as they come to us electronically. So I don't see it as just online and to give you an example of my own university, we provide a business degree to a women's university in South Arabia, Princess Dora, and that's done in a way which we do some on the campus, but some is done electronically. So I think that the way we did it online and summersticks becomes least important, not the mode of delivery but how we connect with our learners.

But how do you make the differentiation between traditional and open universities, because now online learning exists in traditional universities too. Right?

Yes.

We often see now that traditional universities offer online courses.

So I think the great challenge for open universities is that they've had their die, and the question is will their die continue? Because they served a particular need for...

When you say they had their die?

They had their die... They had their time. So when they were first developed, first established, there was a particular need. Now what we have is many universities including some of the very traditional elite universities providing online programmes, so the question is what role do open universities really have. I think for me we have to make sure they understand who their clients are, who their students are, who they serve. So we serve, open universities, very different types of students than those who are attracted to the elite universities. So deep in the DNA, if you understand what I mean, in an open university is a commitment to access, a commitment to people perhaps who might not ordinarily get a chance to have education, higher education, and those are the people we need to keep in mind.

The needs for education for those people will not change; this will just grow given the population growth. And I think we have to be very careful, we don't try to compete with the other universities except in order to sustain and continue in a wider way open universities, I think we have to tell the story that these universities, the need and the contribution they make to society to our countries even more globally. We have to tell that story much more loudly, much more clearly to our politicians, to our policy makers and to our communities.

Things are more difficult now that “massive” is an advantage adopted even by MOOCs. So the elite universities may advocate that they have a more “democratic” profile as they offer massive courses.

Well I guess that the truth is, from the research is that the people who are currently doing MOOCs or at least completing the MOOCs by and large the vast majority already have qualifications. So they are also not coming from the developing countries, they are coming from the established developed countries. I think this again shows that the mission that they are serving is very different than the mission traditionally of open universities. But at the same time it is a great challenge. I think MOOCs can be provided by open universities and what will emerge is some form of credit being offered. But there are big differences. Differences around the way we support the learners. The way we understand what their needs are and bridge perhaps their readiness for higher education for those learners. So again I just need to emphasize the importance of targeting who does and making it clear who we target.

So you propose a model of MOOCs very oriented to specific target groups, maybe not the academic elite. So open universities should design and develop MOOCs targeting different people than the academic elite?

Yes. Short answer. To target more specifically which groups we are supporting in my own university is about to embark on offering a MOOC, which is targeting students who are coming back to study, to support their readiness. It's particularly trying to position the learning and the language in a world of the learner and to understand the needs that they have and to help them bridge the gap between them when they study, because as we've heard over the last day or so, when they study formally at a university some of the knowledge some of the skills they have, many do not have those skills. So because we do have the problem of the retention or the drop out that some people call at the threat of the student's success, we have an obligation to make sure we make it very clear for the learner what's expected of them and to prepare them before they even become unofficial students. So this is one example of a place where a MOOC can play a role. Another example is we have particularly in parts of the developing world a huge shortage of teachers. So MOOCs maybe can play a role if not in teacher education more formally to give those who are parading acting in a teaching role, maybe a teaching support role, better understandings of how to be teacher. And that may bridge them to go on formally as a teacher.

Let me connect the conversation that we have with one of your works that you mentioned yesterday in your presentation “Quality models in online an open education around the globe: State of the art and recommendations”. So you were talking about quality and the question what kind of quality do we need when we are coming to teaching and learning in open and distance education?

The issue of quality strikes at the core of some of the challenges confronting us and it depends who is defining quality and for what purpose. Quality for the learner is very different to what quality might be for the regulatory body for the government agency, even for the institution might define. So there different definitions, we need to understand those different definitions. There is also a tension between a focus on quality assurance as opposed to quality enhancement. So my particular interest more in quality is around enhancement, around creating a culture of quality where quality is a continuing journey to continue to improve, always striving to do better. An example of how quality might look like in an institution that's committed to enhancement I would be looking at developing a process, a framework for peer review. We accept that peer review for research is very important to enhance the quality. Well peer review where our teachers share their teaching and in an online way even sharing their courses with each other, to get feedback in a constructive formative way. Not in a measuring or in order in a way that's policing the quality but to create this quality culture. Ofcourse we do need quality insurance, guidelines and standards, but for me the quality culture is much more important.

Yesterday you also mentioned the different interested in education groups, the various stakeholders who use their own language about the quality in order to legitimize their own agenda. So do you think that students but also teachers should have a voice raised in this effort to form a common notion of what quality is and how quality can be achieved?

Absolutely. So even if I used the example of peer review, one of the reviewers should be the students. Past learners can tell us about how to improve our courses and in many cases when we evaluate the courses, as we've had actually in the last day and sometimes only a very small number of students actually give us that feedback. So we need to hear the voice of other learners. In my own case I've been evolved in some research which I lead where we asked the first time online and distance learners to use a video diary. Their experience where each week they give us a diary. We gave them a scaffold with some questions to reflect on and what we've learned from those video diaries was what we've thought their experience was like was completely different to what they have experienced. And so those kinds of insights and getting the voices of the people that we don't normally hear about, but most importantly closing the feedback loop, as it's called. So often when we evaluate with our students, we very rarely give the data back to the learner to say "Here is what you see about discourse and here's what we are going to do to improve it. Thanks for your feedback". So that's a very important aspect and in fact unless we do that, it's not surprising we have low response rates. Because the students don't know how we are using that information.

Maybe they think it's lost data...

Yes.

So you say we have to show them what we are doing with what we are getting.

Exactly, cause otherwise why would they do this? Ofcourse they are not going personally to be affected, because they've already done the course. But we show that their feedback will help other learners in the future years.

Are we really gaining something out from all these data, especially now that we have the opportunity to have many data, big data with learning analytics for example. And what are we doing with all that, is another question. Isn't it?

I'm a little cautious about learning analytics. Because I think we've already got a lot of data and I'm not sure we need that much more to identify with some of the challenges and problems. We could have data but lucking with the wisdom of what to do. So I think if we get too much, we may finally just can't make it far more complex and for me I don't need too much to know whether the course is affective. It would be helpful if this is an online environment to know if the learner is leaded in, that's logging in on a regular basis, just knowing that. Just like if I know they are coming to class. When the students are not coming to class, that's an indicator to me. So I think some of those broad indicators might be enough for us to act quickly to intervene. Ofcourse as we've seen in the symposium you can mine and go much deeper than that we may learn more. But I think at it very broadly, we can still learn something and act on that. Most importantly with learning analytics, unless we take some action all we are doing is just collecting more data.

So you prefer the idea of mapping the more general learning experience.

Yes.

Ok. Is there anything else you'd like to add before ending this conversation?

Probably the last thing I'll say is thank you for the experience for the opportunity to be here. I've learnt a lot about the challenges, the opportunities that exist here. I think in Greece in particularly you have a great opportunity given the current situation, because education is one of the big solutions for transforming lives, transforming communities and societies not just economically but culturally, socially even environmentally. So as I said yesterday for me humanity is the future. The future of a population depends on an investment in education and not seeing it as a cost.