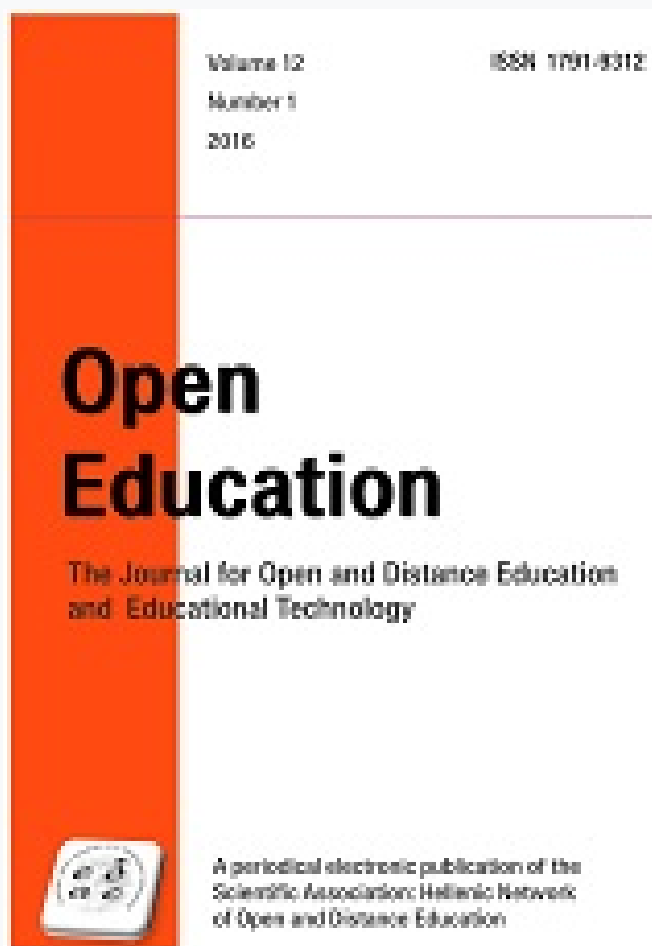


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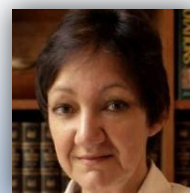
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Interview with Diana Laurillard



Diana Laurillard is Professor of Learning with Digital Technologies at the London Knowledge Lab, UCL Institute of Education, leading externally-funded research projects on: a) developing a learning design support environment for teachers, and b) developing software interventions for learners with low numeracy and dyscalculia. This work relates closely to her role as Pro Director for Open Mode learning, and as a founder member of the Planning Board for the cross-institutional Centre for Educational Neuroscience (IOE, Birkbeck, UCL). Previous roles include: Head of the e-Learning Strategy Unit at the Department for Education and Skills, where she developed the first cross-sector e-learning strategy on; Harnessing Technology; Pro-Vice-Chancellor for learning technologies and teaching at The Open University, Visiting Committee on IT at Harvard University and previously worked on the Technology Enhanced Language Learning programme. Current roles include: Royal Society Working Group on Educational Neuroscience, Boards of the Observatory for Borderless

HE, Supervisory Council for Fern Universitaet in Hagen, Governing Board of the UNESCO Institute for IT in Education. She has given many international keynote addresses, published in many academic journals and books, and her book *Rethinking University Teaching: A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies* (2002, Routledge Falmer) is one of the most widely cited in the field.

The questions included in the following interview were posed during the 8th International Conference in Open and Distance Learning 2015 in Athens by Vasiliki (Sylvie) Ioakimidou, a Ph.D. candidate at the Hellenic Open University.

How do students in a university learn today almost a decade and a half after your book “Understanding university teaching” was published?

I think it’s broadly the same in terms of what most students are doing most of the time are very similar. Digital technology has made a difference because students are much more likely to be in a social place online. So students are very often in facebook and

in twitter. I see what's happening with my students outside of my class. They are discussing together in facebook in a way they used to discuss in a café or in a pub or something like that. I don't feel that I have any specific role to play there but I think that's fine. That's where they exchange their ideas developing understanding and so on and that could make a difference because it's online to how much they can do, because as I said before when your time is constrained when you are face to face you don't have the opportunity to say as much. If you are meeting online to discuss the lecture you've had this morning, you've got more time to exchange those ideas. That could be very good. On the other hand one of the great difficulties about spending a lot of time with your laptop, tablet or whatever is that there are thousands of other things to do in that environment. So how much time do you really spend? You know even if you start looking for something on Google, let' say, go to Google scholar start looking around that makes you look two other things and then you find a youtube video and there's a lot of other beautiful youtube videos to go look at. So there's endless opportunity for destruction and... I do have a PhD student who's doing some work on multitasking and this issue of potential destruction does keep coming up a lot and I think it's something to content with, so I think, as I said, broadly speaking students are studying in a very similar way, but there are all the other opportunities which they are taking and that could be good and it could be bad.

There is this idea about digital natives and digital immigrants, I'm sure you've heard about this, so is there a new way of learning? Some may argue that this multitasking that you mentioned may be another way of looking at things.

Yes, but I think that people who are saying that have already thought about that and reflected it and some have done some research. Because what it takes to learn something, if you start from there, what it takes to learn a difficult idea and education is about difficult ideas, you know. It's not about your take on the world; it's about someone else very clever who spent years and years of their life thinking about this issue. You know, take Newton or Einstein or Cambridge or whatever kind, whoever your guru is. They spent a life time talking about this stuff. And it's difficult. So you are not gonna carry it just like that. You've got to spend time working at what this idea means and how you apply it in these different situations whatever subject area you are in. I spent a lot of time today talking about art history and then moving into science and the computer science. Whatever subject area you are in, it's hard. It's the nature of education to help people to understand these things. So I don't think what it takes to learn in the context of formal education trains us at all. I think it's always about getting into groups with difficult ideas and develop high level skills of analysis, synthesis, argumentation and so on. That doesn't change. The way we help students do is what changes us and that just changes.

You said that you don't intervene in students' discussions, so what do you think the role of the teacher is in such an environment?

I do intervene in students' discussions when I set up those discussions. So when I teach online and we use Moodle for example then I will set up some kind of exercise they do individually and then set up an exercise where they work in a small group and do something which they then present to the larger group and they then look at each others' and then they discuss the relative merits of what they've done and I join in those discussions because I've set that up. Or I might set up the whole class and

there's about fifty students in that class. I might set up some particular current debate. One of our ministers has talked about the importance of educating people when they are in prison for example. Fantastic! That's wonderful. Now let's think about what we can do with technology for that. And so just off that question the discussion goes and I join that discussion. But they set up their own facebook discussions and I don't join that because I shouldn't. That's theirs. And it would be like if they go together to a pub or go together to each others' houses and then suddenly you burst up on the scene and you say "Hello. Can I join you?". Well maybe not. They want to discuss on themselves.

Ok, but how do you make sure that this is an educational discussion, if we can say that?

I can't. I can't make sure that that is. But whatever they are doing they've got to produce something for me at the end of that week or in the next forum that I set up or whatever. And that's when I check. So there's lots of things they are doing, the discussions that I've set up I see what they are saying, the exercises I've set up I see what they do, the assignments that I've marked and so on. That's how I see what they are doing. So maybe the discussion in that pub feeds into that and maybe they've got the entirely wrong idea. Ok, that's where I correct it, in the discussions that I've set up.

Ok. So...

Well, you seem really unconvinced...

No, no, no... I'm just doing some reflection on that...

Fair enough.

You see I'm dealing with this idea of the teacher being the facilitator, even the supporter of informal learning

Ok, but join me in the distinction between formal learning that I am responsible for informal learning which the individual learner is responsible for. I can't be everywhere with them. It's impossible. And the teacher shouldn't try to be. I am responsible for what they learn in the context of the formal learning that I set up and where the end point is that they understand this idea in this way. And there's not two ways, they can't choose. It is this. And they have to understand it in a very particular way. Now if they want to take themselves off into some other area, that's informal learning. And that's fine. They check themselves there. I have no business telling them whether they've got it right or wrong. That's their journey, personal journey. My responsibility is the accreditation they've agreed I am to help them acquire. I have to stick with that.

What about the trip arriving to that destination?

Well I tell them what the destination is. I tell them what the learning outcomes are.

You don't facilitate their trip?

Yeah, yeah, yeah! That's the whole point of everything I do, every lecture, every video, every forum, every exercise, every assignment. That's all part of that journey, but that's the formal learning and what they do in the pub or together or the search they do on the web, that's up to them.

I very much like the idea of responsibility. Each stakeholder carries his own responsibility. The teacher has the responsibility for creating and organizing the context and the student on the other hand has the responsibility for doing something within this context.

Yes, exactly, very much so.

What would you say are some key points in quality learning and quality teaching? The very first things that come to your mind.

The first thing that comes to my mind is the quality of teaching as entirely depended on the quality of learning. You can think you are the best teacher of the world, but if they haven't learned anything or they are at the wrong end of the stick, they misunderstood, then the teaching is not good. So it all depends on how the learners experience it, what they can make out of it and that's how we judge the quality of teaching. So we have to give ourselves the chance to see what have students learned from this. So for me in the seminar today for example if I'd talked for forty-five minutes or something and we've had ten – fifteen minutes for questions, I would not have had time to understand where people were out, they would not have time to let me see their thinking. So by having those little discussions which prompt lots of questions as the seminar was going along I got a sense of the way people were thinking and I can adjust to them a bit and they are much more likely to ask questions, have a lots of questions. If I just waited and say now it's time for questions there would be silence for a long time and not many people would ask questions but they've already rehearsed what they think with somebody else and actually this is quite a sensible idea, I can put my hand up and say this. That's very important. So we have to put ourselves in the way of hearing from our students. Listen to what they say and that tells us a lot. So it's not just the exam at the end of the course, that's too late, or the survey that you do at the end of the course, that's too late, that may benefit the next years' students but you've got to be understanding to how they are thinking now. So that's the quality that we have to build into our teaching to make sure that the quality of the learning is as good as it can be.

Yesterday we saw some data about a certain module in the Hellenic Open University where only eight per cent of the students manage to get a degree. Does that tell us something about the quality of teaching?

No. I think it doesn't, because you don't know what the students were aiming for and very often in an open university context they are there to learn something and they are not there necessarily to demonstrate they've learned something. So I remember especially at the Open University when we first started teaching French there was a high drop out. Everybody had completed the entire course but many, twenty per cent took the exams or something like that, so there was a big worry, what happened. And

the evaluation study found that very high proportion students were only interested in being able to speak French. So passing the exams was entirely irrelevant to them.

So knowledge for the knowledge or something?

Yes, it's knowledge for its own sake. Not knowledge for accreditation, not knowledge for job. So that's like in French, learning a language you're trying to improve your capability for the world and that's what's important to you. With a lot of formal education we have to prove our opportunities in the world, so we have to demonstrate we've learned something, but I know perfectly well that I can speak French better now and how well equipped I am when I'm gonna go on holidays. That's all I need, I don't need some certificate. So the question then is up to the person who supplied this information, only eight per cent passed, well what percentage wanted to, what percentage wanted that representation.

I don't have an answer to that...

Otherwise that state is meaningless. That's what they should present.

Ok, but there are other modules that eighty or ninety per cent of the students pass the exams and take their degree...

You remember what modules are?

Yes, the modules with the low rate is about Informatics and...

Informatics... Informatics is the kind of area which is vocational oriented, because people want to improve their job perspectives. But Informatics is also a subject area which is very difficult and if you are coming into that course with a very low previous experience you won't get it, even begin to get it. Now in open courses, genuinely open, you don't have to have any prior qualifications, you can get all kinds of people that shouldn't be there. Now you can't expect to get everybody to that same place no matter what their background, unless it's explicitly a course for beginners in Informatics. If it were not a course for beginners in Informatics then I would be worried.

It's an undergraduate programme.

An undergraduate programme. And so do they have to have any prior qualifications to go into doing that?

No, not really.

Not really, ok... Well, if they would expect to be able to pass and they would have a good reason to expect they can pass, then I'd be worried about.

So is it students' responsibility to be somehow ready when they come to the university or it's the university's responsibility to support them?

The university is responsible to make clear what the deal is. So if it says everybody welcome to join this course in Informatics, well remember who you can get. You're

gonna get people who can barely take that up. So you have a responsibility to explain that. If you can do this and this and this... It doesn't take much to offer a pretest. If you can do this logic problem and you do it...

A pretest... Doesn't that limit the access to the university?

Yes, it does limit it.

And we are talking about open universities.

Yes, I know. But it's not you have a qualification you have to pass. It's simply a pretest which tells you how likely you are to be able to make sense of this. Now if you don't even have an understanding of what an equation is for example, you are gonna have great difficulties with whatever, wherever the course on informatics starts. If you don't understand what algebra is, you've got no background in algebra, you're gonna have great difficulty. So either the Informatics course starts with teaching some basic algebra (she laughs) or it says you're gonna have some algebra, here's a short pretest you can do to find out whether you will be able to make the great in this course. You've got to give them... If it's completely open then it's closed to a lot of other people who will be on that stage. So you have to decide what's the journey you are taking the students on. It's from here to here. And if you haven't got to that point yet, do this on the course first. That's all I say.

Maybe a foundation course or something?

Maybe a foundation course or something.

Or maybe a MOOC? What about a MOOC as a foundation course?

Yes, it could be a MOOC, if it is designed for it. It could be all sorts of things. But don't expect that you can take anybody from nothing to the same place with one course. It's not possible. So it's the university's responsibility to understand that and it's the learners' responsibility to read what the university tells them. "Do that pretest!" or whatever.

So you say that there should be some prerequisites, some skills should be at a certain level before someone begins a course.

Yeah, that's right. The way we used to do it in the Open University in the UK was... We would have, I think we called them contributories or something like that. So if you were doing a course on technology, an introductory course on technology and you were very shaky on arithmetic, let's say, or you've had no calculus ever, then there would be a little sub-lesson you could do which took you through the basics enough that you could follow what this next thing you are saying. So you can have those little contributories that come back to the main stream and that kind of thing. That was a way of interpreting it.

Sounds personalized...

It's personalized, yes.

In your book you develop this idea of a university as learning organization. Is this somehow related to quality enhancement?

Yes, yes.

An institution that discusses and evaluates every aspect of its operation in order to enhance its performance...

Yes.

Can you see it like that?

Yes, I think in order to function in this world you have to carry on learning. Whoever you are, whatever kind of organization you are and that's a common enough concept in business that your organization has to be adaptive to the environment out there whether it's commercial, technological, cultural, social whatever. And some organizations fail so... Isn't KODAK, one of the famous examples? There was a camera company that didn't adapt to the advent of smart phones which can take photographs. So if you are not aware of the environment in which your company is operating and you suddenly see all these kinds of cameras that everybody's got, you've got to do something special to stay alive as a camera company. So it's the same with universities. If we are not aware of that, suddenly you see all these opportunities for the students to have access to education of different kinds or suddenly the workplace is changed and everybody is become digital and we are sending out architects and economists and so on who don't understand anything about the digital world, then we are failing. So the organization university has to keep learning about where the curriculum is going, whether that's been learnt by the commercial and cultural world or others been learnt by research so you have to keep it up to that, you've got to keep it up to the way you teach because you've got different kinds of students coming in with, we've broaden access in education or we have more multicultural students coming in, so we've got to internationalize our curriculum. And all of these different ways the university has to keep adopting, to keep looking out there to see what's overall, where are we, what's going on out there.

Responding to the needs and the changes...

Exactly. That means being continually a learning organization. Just as every human being is.

Do you think that quality and innovation are somehow related to a university's performance?

Quality and innovation.

Are these notions related somehow?

Ok. Quality of what?

Quality of teaching and learning.

Yes, for the reasons we've just agreed. University has to adapt and keep learning and that means keep innovating. Because if we are not embracing the digital world at all then we are failing our students. They will not be properly equipped. So we have to adapt to that. And then as long as your adoptions to the digital world... The digital world changes incredibly fast, so there's some innovation and every single one impacts on what we do. So all of the things that we've been talked about at the conference today, practically all of them have not come from education. Virtual learning environments are the only technology that was developed for education. Everything else has been developed for Fine Arts, for the leisure industry, big business, the commercial world and so on.

Now that technology is everywhere and universities, even traditional universities, use online classes, online courses, is there a reason of having open universities? In other words what's the role of an open university nowadays?

I think they have a very specific kind of role, which is to give a structured university education to people that can't attend a place. We have campus based universities and you might just as well be asking the same questions about those in a way... We have campus based universities because of the value of being together to learn and especially for young people that's really important. So we surely not get rid of the campus based universities. Are we? No.

No.

So how are you going to get an undergraduate education if you can't go to a campus based university? And many people who left school too early and they are working and they have full time work and they've got a family, they want to carry on doing that or people who have various kinds of disabilities or people who are on overseas locations or whatever the circumstances can't go to a campus based university, an open and distance learning university is for them. And they're all set up to give that properly structured, scaffolded, personally, attentive. So all these characteristics I mentioned of what counts as university education, you've got small group for learning, you've got personal feedback on what you as an individual do and how you are developing and you've got collaboration amongst your peers and so on, all of these things and you've got assessment, credits' use. All of that is what all of those kinds of universities provide, whether they are campus based or open. And that's all run on a model of one academic to a smallest number of students. MOOCs are not like that, there is one academic to thousands of students and that's never going to provide that kind of opportunity for learners. So open universities still feel that role of enabling non campus based students to acquire a genuine; equivalent level of degree education. That's the role they will always have.

Ok, but someone that cannot go to a campus based university may attend an online course offered by that very same university. Isn't that true?

Oh, yes. Commercial universities are moving into this area. That's true...

So what space is left for open universities?

Because they are not set up to do that well. They don't know how to do it well. Their focus is campus based students. And for them the open and distance learning was always an add on for the undergraduates. I think in postgraduate education they are getting more skilled, but even there they are not as good as you can get in the campus. And it is. You know, when those universities add on online teaching it's second rate in comparison of what they do on the campus because it's the campus based education they understand. An open university has always understood what you have to do for that kind learner and they probably won't do campus based learning, I think so. Well maybe but... They are set up to do that really well. And they do. And certainly in the UK the Open University had the top scores from the national students' survey on quality of teaching, because they took it really seriously, they knew how to do it. Other universities don't come close to that in the way they do open and distance learning not yet. Maybe they will but not yet.

Ok. Thank you very much for your time and your patience to answer all these questions.

My pleasure, you asked very good questions, challenging questions for distance education. Thank you.