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Interview with Don Olcott, Jr. (in English)

Vasiliki (Sylvie) Ioakeimidou

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Συνέντευξη με τον Don Olcott



The interview was conducted in Athens on the 11th November 2013 during the 7th International Conference in Open and Distance Education

Don Olcott was interviewed by Vasiliki (Sylvie) Ioakimidou, who is a teacher and a PhD candidate at the Hellenic Open University

Don Olcott, Jr. is an Independent Higher Education Consultant. He previously served as Vice President for Higher Education with VCampus Corporation. VCampus is a national and international leader in providing education and training to universities, corporations, and government agencies through web-based administrative, course management, and delivery and hosting services. Prior to his tenure at VCampus, he served as the Associate Dean for Extended University at the University of Arizona. He has held administrative and faculty appointments with the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), Oregon State University, the University of Missouri-Columbia, Western Washington University, Burlington Testing, Inc., and the United States Air Force.

Dr. Olcott has over 20 years of public and private sector experience in the design, delivery, and evaluation of higher education degree and training programs delivered via technology. Don was the 2000 University Continuing Education Association's (UCEA) Gayle B. Childs award recipient for exemplary long-term leadership, scholarship, and applied contributions to the field of continuing and distance learning. He received the 1998 Charles Wedemeyer Outstanding Distance Learning Practitioner in North America award from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and The American Center for the Study of Distance Education. He has received numerous national and professional awards for leadership, publishing, and distinguished service to the field of continuing and distance education.

Dr. Olcott serves on the Board of Directors for the National University Telecommunications Network (NUTN), the Steering Committee of the WICHE's Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, and Oklahoma State University's Institute for Telecommunications. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the Canadian Journal of Distance Education, Distance Education Report, India's Open U. e-Learning Journal, and Athabasca University's International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning. He is a nationally and internationally known speaker and has consulted to colleges, universities, and corporations across the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. He is a graduate of Harvard University's Institute for the Management of Lifelong Education. Dr. Olcott was the founder of WICHE's Institute for the Management of Distance Education (MDE).

Don received his bachelors and masters' degrees from Western Washington University and his doctorate in higher education leadership from Oregon State University. Don's personal interests include sports, music, and history.

QUESTION: What is quality in teaching and learning processes? Could you find some key-points that could indicate quality teaching?

D.O.: I think first and foremost engaging your students, taking an interest in each one of the students in so far as you can do that. You can't spend all of your time with every independent student. But getting to know your students, I think it's very important, cause you get to know their strengths and weaknesses. So when you give them feedback and when you comment on their work, it wouldn't be the same even though a student, one student and another student might make the same mistake. The feedback you give to each of these students might be a little bit different, because you know what their strengths and weaknesses are, what they should work on. So I think that's one thing.

I think having clear goals and objectives of what they are teaching, so that the student knows right at the beginning what is expected of he or she. Ok? And usually for me, like in the syllabus, I would have clear objectives. What I'd like students to learn by the end of the course. Those are broad. And then for each of either module or them in my on-line teaching we break it down by weeks, certain content each week. Week tends to be a good way to split up content. Each of those would have specific objectives in terms of what I want students to learn. And related to that is not only clear goals and objectives but your evaluation and your assessment, however you're going to measure that they've done that learning, accurately as I could, assessment to measure that learning. So that's certainly very important.

I think the instructional design process, particularly in open and distance courses is very very important. In other words how we design certain activities, how you might do small group work, like you did in your workshop at the conference. That is a very appropriate and effective tool, but not for every situation. Ok? Sometimes the most effective teaching tool is articulated content. Because for your students to be able perhaps some higher order things later in a course they have to have some basic knowledge. Don't they? So we have to do some of that still, short of the traditional road, lecture kind of approach. Perhaps boring for the students sometimes but they still have to have it. I think you have to make learning fun. They take too seriously but it should be fun. Learning can be fun. Learning is also hard work and students should know.

I believe you should have high expectations because even if the expectations are very high, the students only get to there (he makes a nod). If they started way down here (a nod) they've done it very very well. So it's not unreasonable to have expectations that perhaps they won't meet.

Another component at least in my teaching that I find important is if you remember from the world of psychology the idea of enforcement, which means knowing when to give positive feedback to a student at certain times. And what we all know from that process is that if I give you feedback positive all the time after a while you don't

care anymore. Ok? But if I give you positive feedback today and tomorrow it's not quite as positive or I give you none... So you have to select the right times where you think it can help the student the most. I think that's very important.

Interaction is something that has been promoted a lot as a key to effective teaching. I have mixed feeling about that. You go back forty years, in a world, in the days when psychology was dominated by the behaviorists, P. F. Skinner all that. Their argument was that learning doesn't occur unless I can observe it. But I've had students in my own classes who say nothing the entire quarter, very quiet students. But when they test and do exams, they do very well. So they are learning, even though I can't physically observe them doing that. Following behavioral psychologists came cognitive psychology and all that, which says yes, learning can go on even if we can't directly observe it. Ok? I think interaction with the content, interaction student to student and interaction between the student and the instructor are also very important. I'm just unsure of how you can measure how important it is to the actual learning. Ok. Makes it funnier, makes it more enjoyable, but doesn't really contribute with the student learn anyway. Ok? So, but at the end of the day I've come to the conclusion that it's better to have the interaction. It's better because it's... I think it's a good educational process, that we should be interacting sharing ideas. And as you know, that same student, who in a regular class would sit here right now and not saying a word, get him on-line where you could give you feedback, they don't stop. They always have things to say. So I think that's very important.

The last thing I would say is that inviting observations and interactions from your peers. And for faculty members that's not so easy. I'm a faculty member, I invite you and Sofia into my class to actually give an evaluation, what did you think I did well in that class. Ok?

QUESTION: As an observer?

D.O.: As an observer, not necessarily as a formal evaluator. That would be done by your supervisor as a teacher. Right? But even informally to have others to be confident enough to say «I want to be a better teacher so I'd like your feedback». That's not always easy, because teachers and faculty members like to think that they are autonomous and do it all on their own. But I think the more feedback we have, the better. We won't use it all. That may not apply to me, that may not be a good strategy for me. But I think getting that kind of feedback plus, it builds collegiality among faculty and teachers together. So...

QUESTION: I'm thinking about quality as an opportunity to show and share good practices. Not punishing someone because something went wrong, instead as showing something good to others so as to get a feedback, to hear some other ideas and become better. What do you think about that?

D.O.: Well, I think absolutely we should promote that, if we can. I think that in most systems of education the culture tends to resist that a little bit and to protect the autonomy of the faculty member.

QUESTION: Is this a threat for the autonomy of the faculty member?

D.O.: It doesn't have to be. But it is preserved that way sometimes. Do you know that there faculty members today all over world that don't get involved with technology, because they actually believe that technology will replace them as a teacher? It's almost an Orwellian concept that technology will take over. When in fact we've learnt clearly that the best uses of technology are very much about what a human being does those technologies. It's not about the technologies themselves. So the answer to your question is yes. I think we should try to encourage that as much as possible. The problem is that if you have a school of fifty faculties, for example, and only two are willing to do that and the other forty eight aren't willing to do that, it makes it very very difficult. So you have, I think you have to take your time and be patient and frame that in such a way that is not evaluative or punitive, it's about giving you feedback and creating best practices that can benefit many many people, other teachers as well. So yes, I agree we should find ways to do that.

QUESTION: I guess that we need a different culture. I mean this idea that I have an open door and you are welcome to come in and share with me your point of you, you can give me feedback. It's not necessarily something that should make me feel threatened.

D.O.: Yes. One of the things I teach in my leadership course is that in leading change, moving things in different directions. That the hardest thing in the world to do is to change the culture of anything. For the long term. You can change people's behavior for a short term, but actually making those embedded as part of something that is valued in that culture is a much longer process.

QUESTION: So how can you make it last?

D.O.: You have to be able to talk about the benefits. That's what people want to hear about. They don't want to hear about work, they don't want to hear about all that. And you have to also remember that, if you want faculty to be open about people giving them feedback. If you recall the other night when I talked about Open Educational Resources, would you be willing to give all of your content free to the world? Some people said yes, other people said no. Remember how we evaluate faculty. Everything we evaluate a faculty member on is about being autonomous. The research they do, the teaching they do, the service they do, the committees they serve on. So if you are being rewarded for those things, it makes it really hard to say: "Here take all of my content". Right? Because you are being evaluated on what you produce as a faculty member. So the benefits for the faculty member have to be that they are not penalized for doing that. Because we evaluate faculty on their individual achievements. Every faculty member is gonna be evaluated based on his research, his teaching, his doctorate students, those things. Not what his fellow teacher does down the hall. Ok? So we don't necessarily want to break that down, because those are skills a teacher and particularly a university academic should have. But we could do a lot better job in collaboration. And I'm not talking only about Greece, I'm talking about everywhere. It's that culture of higher education that we've created, this mystic about the professor. The old knowing person who sits on a pedestal. There's no experts today. Not in this knowledge age. You could probably store in your laptop the knowledge of the world five hundred years ago. All in that little laptop. And probably in another ten years you could store the knowledge of the human race on something this big. It's a different world.

QUESTION: So who's the expert then? The one who knows how to use this information?

D.O.: A, you've raised a really good question, that goes back to quality teaching and learning. Don't misinterpret what I'm saying. The teacher has to have a knowledge base, and have expertise in a content area and as appropriate in a research process. Ofcourse. We all know that. But think about. If I have fifteen students in my class who have access to the Web, they could find out in no more about something in two days that I could never know. So where that does leave the faculty member? It leads faculty member in a position to enhance teaching and learning by doing a few things. One, learning how to direct students to this information. Two, how to analyze it, synthesize it and apply it. They have the ability these teachers to bring different students together to do collaborative work. So it's not just the faculty doing collaborative work. Have you ever wrote a group paper with two or three other people? Not as easy. Everyone writes differently, everybody thinks differently, but you are supposed to write one paper. But you see, learning isn't right in the content. Is it? The real learning is learning how to work with those three people who are different from you. Ofcourse the paper is important, but it's not the only thing. It's that process of working all the three, which is easier for some than others. We've all been involved in small groups before and there is that one person that doesn't want to be there at the begging. And they're gonna do anything they can to make it up for the most unenjoyable person in planet. So those changing roles of the teacher, I think, are really crucial for the future. As they are right now, it's not new. Those roles have been changing for the last twenty years. From that so expert to being a facilitator of knowledge. I think the old say moving from being a sage on the stage to a guide on the side. Be more of like a coach, a mentor as opposed to that person who stands up there and you just short of "Wow". But that's today. A hundred years ago the expert on the stage worked. Doesn't work anymore. This is too much knowledge, too much going on and whether or not universities in the future choose to go on-line, regardless of the quality issue, probably they will have very little to do with what the organization thinks they should do and what its members think they should do. The students will drive the agenda and the competition will drive the agenda. And you could choose to play or you can choose to say "Oh, no, no, no. We are not going to do that. We are too good to do that.". That's fine. But you may be out of the market, if you are not willing to do some of that. Those are the difficult choices we have to make our organizations.

QUESTION: Difficult choices and we have to be careful when we choose. There is a matter of ethics, humanity and I think we have to be careful with this idea of ranking rating everything.

D.O.: Yes, absolutely. Education is more than money and that process. There is no question about...

QUESTION: And quality is coming from the market side. I mean, is there a paradox between quality assurance and education? Do you see any paradox here?

D.O.: If I am an employer I want good graduates coming in to work for me. That's the measure of quality. That's a huge measure of quality. If I can't hire good graduates from the university of Athens, I'm gonna go somewhere else and hire the

graduates I need. So education may be just a process, but at the end of the day the people they're gonna hire are students should have a say in that process. And if I am director of IT Company and your institution sends me three or four graduates that I interview and it's clear that they don't have the skills that I believe they should have coming out of a university then someone along the line or university didn't do his job. So I think that even though the market has great influence on what we do, I think it's justified. They deserve to be able to hire what we say we are putting out there in terms of what our graduates can do and can't do. So it's a very delicate balance. Because there those who would like to argue that education is not a business. I disagree with that. In fact education is really a business.

QUESTION: Sounds very technocratic. There are those who believe that education is a social good. How in the terms of the market all people will have access in education, people of every age for example...

D.O.: Unesco! Education for all! Every should be able to read and write by the time...

QUESTION: Yes. I'm being provocative...

D.O.: No, no. You are asking the question between... If education is a business, how can we also meet the social agenda that we have expulsed to hundreds and hundreds of educators? I think you can do both. But we are learning right now and we are learning very harshly not only in Greece, but around the world. At the end of the day it comes down to money. No matter how you cut it. You can talk about all these ideals, somebody is gonna have to pay sooner or later. Somebody has to pay.

QUESTION: So it's just for the words what we are saying about education for all etc. Who wants to invest in someone who's fifty years old and wants to be educated?

D.O.: You know I live in North America and western society for forty years of my adult life. I have gone every year hearing people say our future is depended on education and year after year after year in America, in Britain, in Germany the politicians cut education. They cut money to education. How can you talk about that public agenda when you turn around and your action as a policy maker, as apparent, as somebody who's supposed to serve the public good, meaning the services that provide the most benefit to the majority of the people? Why? Because they are competing with lots of other things. We have presents we have to stuff; we have highways we have to build. It isn't just about education. That's another one of these harsh realities that most societies have to come to grips with.

QUESTION: So about quality...

D.O.: I was saying that an employer has every right to ask to have good people come and work for him. And if you are the university preparing those people you either do a good job or you don't do a good job. That's what differentiates universities. Don't misinterpret that I don't think that the social agenda of education is credible. I absolutely do. And you might note that even today one of the growing trends around the world is the growing role of business in promoting social agendas, promoting green environments. Corporations are doing a lot. They are our partners not our

enemies.

QUESTION: I'm just trying to compromise this idea of education for all and the market that needs very specific things in a very "clear" and strict way. So there are domains that we are losing them from education, for example there is a big question about courses like ancient greek etc. Who needs the ancient greek? On the other side we have a huge number of students in universities and also a huge number of unemployed people with university degrees...

D.O.: I think there isn't a neither or nor answer. Ok? And there's usually more than two answers to just about everything. At least to important questions on this planet. So I think again even if you don't have a history or culture of people, that's what I shared the other evening, which people don't necessarily agree with you and that's bringing people from different sectors together to talk about joined solutions. That may not a tradition, that may not be part of the culture, but as most change strategies will tell you, if the pain gets high enough, people will come together and talk. It's just unfortunate that we have to wait to get at that point to do that, rather than looking forward. And it happens for many many reasons, I recognize that in any country, for politics, for ethnographics, for influential people, for the history and reputation of education versus business, versus other things. I think one of the very unfortunate trans in education everywhere is that we've created institutions that tend to market their programs based on the business approach to what's gonna happen to the students once they leave the institution. It's not the students' or the universities' fault that there are no jobs. It's important to remember that. I'll say that again. It's not the university or the students' fault, if there are not more jobs available to them when they leave.

QUESTION: It's definitely not the students' fault. What about the university, what about the planning, the courses that are offered. There are decisions that are made.

D.O.: Well, look at most students. What they want a major in? They want a major in engineering, they want a major in business, because they think that's gonna get them a job. Right now the numbers are showing that that's not necessary either. I was an undergraduate history major. Twenty century European history. Most of my friends said: "Why are you majoring in that?" You know what my answer was? "Because that's what I like". "What are you gonna do with that?" Well, at that I thought I might teach in high school. And at the end I chose a whole other direction, but I finished my history degree. Do I have any regrets? Not a single one. Taught me how to write, taught me how to analyze, look at different historical events in different countries. For me it was the right thing to do. Today students, I don't know that students are making their own choices. They are making choices based on what they think might be a good life later on. I'll get a degree in business. In America, for example, it's supposed to be one of the most enlightened countries on this planet, that doesn't show off on them. We start people speaking a second language when they are fourteen years old. That's crazy! All the research in the world from the linguists to language teachers will tell you what? Learn a second language when you are four or five years old. That's when you teach somebody to really truly speak an effective second language. And what research also shows us after that is that after you learnt that first second language everyone after that is even easier, even if they are not related like the Romantic languages or the Slavic languages or something like that. I

think it's terrible that we are losing that. And we are not just losing it in America, because I think the approach to languages has always been faulty. I mean there is value in the English language in that bridges multiple languages in the world and so give a language, which everyone can use at least for that purposes. But you talked about ancient greek civilization and thing like that, I think we are losing some thing if we don't make these programs anymore.