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Brenda Gourley

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Ladies and gentlemen: we live in uncertain and troubling times. We also live in extraordinary times. Never before has the world been so prosperous, never before have so many people lived such long and healthy lives, never before have we witnessed such dazzling technology and never before have we reached, on average, such levels of education. And yet, in absolute numbers, never before have so many people lived in such poverty, never before have so many died from preventable diseases, never before has the planet been so threatened, never before have so many needed education. And it is education that fuels sustainable development, education that is fundamental to enlightened citizenship, to the peace and harmony – and even the continued life – of our species on this planet.

And the wonderful thing is we have the means for education for many, many more people; not conventional education for the few (relatively speaking) who can travel the distances to physical sites of learning, more especially universities. That perforce will remain the privilege of the few. But our science, our technology, our imagination and our ingenuity have brought us now to a situation where we have other means. There is now near universal satellite coverage, there is an internet which holds vast and ever-growing stores of knowledge, and we have learnt much about pedagogy and how to teach and learn in this new environment. So it is an exciting time full of possibilities – possibilities way beyond any possibilities at any time in our history.

What we have invented in this new technology enables us to communicate with more people than ever before – and importantly, for our academic purpose, allows us to be included in the knowledge production process in ways not possible before. We now hear ‘voices’ we did not hear before, we share artefacts and artworks and museum pieces in ways we did not before, learn about each other in ways undreamt of even a few short decades ago. As we speak thousands of books and paintings and artefacts are being digitised and this fact, together with the awesome computer power we can now summon, means that we can ask research questions we couldn’t ask before, search vast stores of knowledge that would have been humanly impossible to search before. What this means is that we have to redefine what it is to be a scholar and indeed, not only what technological skills and expertise we need in our lives as active scholars but also what we expect of our students at every level.

The great issues of the world are complex and multi-faceted. They are going to need the combined will and imagination of scholars everywhere to address them. Never before has collaborative learning, collaborative research and collaborative service been so necessary. In the process we should learn better how to share – share our knowledge, share our technology, share our insights into learning in this new century, share our common wealth. And share we must, it seems to me. Each of us working on our own, in different institutions, in different countries, on different continents, will take too long to reach the people who need education and development so badly, wherever they may be.

The open educational resource movement is a marvellous step in the right direction. A relatively small number of universities are putting up on the web, free to use, a vast number of courses as well as learning resources to help people negotiate their way through them. This is a good start. The Internet has made it possible to reach many more people and, indeed, involve many more people, even if only on a part-time basis. And each of us needs to ask ourselves whether we are playing our part in making sure that we too, as individuals, are sharing and learning. We are fortunate indeed to live in such an extraordinary world with the means to communicate with so many people and find in the process that there is far more that binds us together in our common humanity than will divide us; find also that we can make individual contributions to causes we all share. Each of us has a part to play.

I would also argue at this time that traditional ways of teaching and learning do not constitute sufficient mobilisation for the task at hand. In particular I believe we need to integrate our community outreach activities into the teaching and learning experience of our students – and scale them up. We should look to initiatives in various university communities that could act on the change agenda. The most important of these in my opinion is what has come to be known as ‘service learning’ – a movement which seeks to engage students in real work in the communities both local and further afield in an attempt to not only locate learning but also to emphasise the importance and even necessity of students becoming involved in making the world a better place. The growth of the NGO sector is one of the major trends of our time as more and more people recognise that governments are not always able to solve local problems.

Indeed, as Daniel Bell once famously observed, “*the national state has become too small for the big problems in life, and too big for the small problems.*” (1977, pàg. 132).

Many of us will be familiar with initiatives in some universities which involve students in community efforts that relate directly to their professions: law students running legal aid clinics, medical students running community medicine clinics, accountancy students running tax aid or financial aid clinics and so on. It seems to me that these should hardly be voluntary. But whatever they are, universities should be emphasising the importance of voluntary work and actively creating possibilities for all its students to pursue.

Another such universities’ initiative is the Talloires Network, an international collective of individuals and institutions committed to civic engagement and harnessing the power of university students worldwide. The network now has 185 member institutions from 59 countries throughout the world. It represents an understanding that the issues in the world today require mobilisation at scale, and such mobilisation should be seen as one of the responsibilities of universities. What other world institutions have a collective sense of this mission and purpose? The prospect of a very large network representing thousands of staff and millions of students throughout the world has huge possibilities. It is also important as a symbol of what is appropriate for these times. And it is a fundamental learning experience for our students who will never be able to claim that they don’t know how they, as individuals, can make a difference in this complex world.

So my hope today, ladies and gentlemen, is that we exploit the potential of the new technologies and embrace the education opportunities now rendered possible by them and also the networks they have spawned – and we do so in the conscious knowledge that they may well be central to the solution of many of the problems facing us in the 21st century. This generation will collectively determine whether life as we know it on our planet survives, or not. As educators we have a critical role in fostering, supporting, encouraging and, above all, equipping our students with the values and skill-set necessary to drive forward such initiatives.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am today honoured by the Open University of Catalonia. I thank the University for that acknowledgement. If I have been able to play even the smallest role in the world of education, I count that as a privilege, as indeed I count it a privilege to live in these exciting times. My only wish is that I had done more.

References

Bell, Daniel (Summer 1977). "The Future World Disorder". *Foreign Policy*, p. 132.

Talloires Network

<http://www.tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork/>