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Online learning: a New Testament

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The statement by Hunter R. Rawlings III that "there are no good studies on what constitutes bad online pedagogy" coincides with the creation of a Global Learning Council to define the guidelines that previous online educators have allegedly failed to identify. This article discusses these disparaging remarks by the President of the Association of American Universities about the distance education (DE) field and the likely influence on the Council's deliberations by the motives of its members—American university presidents, corporate representatives, and providers of support for massive open online courses. The influence of their conclusions on public attitudes to new educational practices is anticipated, and the distorted pedagogical principles being offered in support of massive course practices are defined as arising from a form of plagiarism. A formal response by DE and online learning specialists to the rejection of their previous literature is encouraged; and an analysis of the situation is offered by a fictitious educational historian in the year 2031.

Keywords: online learning; Hunter R. Rawlings III; Global Learning Council; massive open online courses; connectivism; disciplinary plagiarism

Introduction

Imagine that the president or vice chancellor of your institution told the press that you and your colleagues had been slacking for 40 years. You would be annoyed, I imagine. All that teaching, research, and writing devalued in a single statement. The allegation would merit a letter of protest to the president signed by the whole department, with a demand for a public apology. Not to challenge him could suggest that he was right. At the very least, a request to justify his comments would be in order.

In late 2013, the President of the Association of American Universities, Hunter Ripley Rawlings III, made a blanket statement of this kind about the whole online education field:

> (E)ven as online education expands rapidly and on an enormous scale, there is very little good research on the best forms of online learning, and, I might add, there are no good studies on what constitutes bad online pedagogy, of which there is a fair amount. (Rawlings, 2013)

This is not the first time traditional educators have criticized distance education (DE) approaches. Noble (2002) denounced DE's alleged creation of "digital diploma

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mills;" and Moll ([1998](#)) wrote angrily about the world of "No more teachers, no more schools" that she believed was coming. But Rawlings' comments take this criticism to a new level, by dismissing the field of online education in its entirety. It seems unlikely that Rawlings will be able to corroborate his attack. In a follow-up statement, he says, "It is just much too early in my mind to give any kind of final judgment. Let's give this some time, and some real scrutiny" (Rawlings, [2013](#)). As he is an influential US opinion leader, however, there is every chance that Rawlings' initial assessment will be heeded, for presumably no well-informed educator would say that "no good studies" have been conducted unless he had good reason.

Rawlings has made his comments on the launch of the new Global Learning Council (GLC), established with the declared aim of defining good online practices where previous attempts have failed. His views are echoed by the GLC's chair, President Subra Suresh of Carnegie Mellon University (Walters, [2013](#)). Suresh's comments are more cautious than Rawlings' and acknowledge a large amount of relevant research conducted over 50 years—at Carnegie Mellon specifically, if nowhere else. But he endorses Rawlings' dismissive assessment of previous DE conclusions in stating that the GLC's role will be to define "guidelines and best practices that ensure academic rigor and successful learning for students worldwide" (Walters, [2013](#)). To prevent the Council from needing to meet more than once, its members might be encouraged to begin their work by reading the quality assurance (QA) guidelines already defined for open and DE by professional associations in Asia, Australia, Europe, and the USA (Bates, [2010](#); Belawati, [2010](#)), and the update of international QA policy and guidelines documented by Jung and Latchem ([2012](#)).

But the GLC's approach is not likely to be that simple. Hunter R. Rawlings III has already set the tone for the Council's work by rejecting the previous literature—although it is questionable as to whether, as a classics scholar by training, he has actually read much of it. Relatively few of his Council colleagues (listed by Walters, [2013](#)) may be equipped to advise him on this. Ten of them have a pure-sciences background, and the other two are from business and law. Seven of the members are presidents and senior executives of universities and other public bodies, and the remaining six represent corporate interests. These include the founders of Coursera and edX, leading massive open online course (MOOC) providers. All of the GLC's members are American. Even his Nobel Prize in physics may not qualify one GLC member to argue about the good points of the online learning literature.

But the education and social sciences literature has produced numerous reliable conclusions for online learning (Baggaley, [2011](#)). For example, instructional and media design principles have shown an unwavering regard for the teacher's role and for the usefulness of student-centered activities as one approach among many. In the current MOOC era, these are inconvenient truths. For MOOCs have two unalienable characteristics: massive student numbers and the inability of teachers to handle them. It has therefore become expedient for MOOC advocates to suggest that teachers have failed in their task and/or that student-organized activities can suffice in isolation of all other methods. The GLC has been formed months after these controversial notions have been criticized by DE specialists including Bates ([2013](#)), Daniel ([2013](#)), Naidu ([2013](#)), and Romiszowski ([2013](#)), as Massive Open Online Repetitions of Failed Pedagogy by Hake ([2013](#)), and as driven by commercial motives (Holmwood, [2013](#)). Simultaneously, a change of attitude is evident at the elite US universities that previously supported MOOCs:

- Harvard has announced that it is now "post-MOOC" (Coughlan, 2013);
- Stanford University is taking control of its online developments previously outsourced to Coursera, the MOOC-providing company that it helped to establish in 2012 (Kolowich, 2013); and
- Udacity has announced that it is ceasing the educational side of its operations altogether, described by its own CEO, Sebastian Thrun, as "a lousy product" (Chafkin, 2013).

And the recriminations have begun. Siemens, whose "connectivist" ideas have been criticized, on grounds summarized by Lange and others (2011–2013) as providing a poor basis for MOOCs, has alleged (2013), "No one did more of a disservice to MOOCs than Thrun." Meanwhile, Thrun blames Udacity's failure on "poor students" (Cottom, 2013), and Lodge (2013) has countered by pointing out that the "extensive history of research in education and the learning sciences, (and) the voices of the thousands of eminent scholars in these fields have been largely drowned out" by MOOC advocates. Meanwhile, traditional educators are echoing Rawlings' view that online education in general is to blame: "The failures of massive online education come as no shock to those of us who actually educate students by being in the same room with them" (Schuman, 2013). This is exactly the blame game that I predicted in a previous article, in discussing the likely damage by the MOOC trend to effective and efficient DE, and to the reputation of DE in general (Baggaley, 2013).

As long as they share the goal of increasing student revenues while reducing faculty costs, however, Rawlings and his colleagues on the new GLC are unlikely to abandon MOOC-related principles altogether. In this context, it becomes expedient for them to begin their work by rejecting the literature that has gone before, and by implication the awkward principles and naysayers in it. In this way, the GLC can position itself to resolve the confusion of the earlier era by creating a New Testament.

A New Testament

Technology-based education has seen such tipping points before. I associate 1995 with e-mails from British university colleagues whose ETV facilities were being closed and who were now redundant. Blythe (1987) described recurrent cycles in the development of British health education during the last century, in which new approaches were developed by national health education authorities over periods of approximately 20 years, and then summarily overturned by the firing of the national committees and their replacement by neophyte groups. Corporate lobbying interests was a familiar ingredient in this process. Schumpeter (1942) indicated that technological "gales of change" are economically driven and occur every 18 years; and it is fitting that GLC leaders have denounced the first era of online education 18 years after the mid-90s gale. The President of the Association of American Universities' 2013 statement that DE specialists have produced "no good studies on what constitutes bad online pedagogy" resembles a similar line in the sand, suggesting that the Old Testament is dead and that the future of online learning begins with the deliberations of the GLC.

The biblical New Testament was created at just such a time of confusion. On the one hand, it is perceived simply as an update document containing the new principles of Christian era. But the new ideas were being criticized at the time as an inaccurate rehash of old principles, by writers including Celsus the Platonist (c. 180 AD, cited by Turner, 1908), and Porphyry the Neoplatonist (Wicker, 1987). In turn, these scholars were dismissed by the new order as:

> the most rustic fellows, teaching strange paradoxes … they lard their lean books with the fat of old fables … and still the less do they understand … and they write nonsense on vellum … and still be doing, never done. (Origen of Alexandria, c. 251, cited by Bushby, 2007)

By 325 AD, the strife between opposing groups was jeopardizing the unity of the Roman Empire, and the Emperor Constantine saw the need for an official state religion (Bushby, 2007). Although he apparently knew little about theology, his advisers told him that the old doctrines were "destitute of foundation" and should be discredited. So the Emperor decided to form a Council! The outcome was the New Testament collating the doctrines regarded as politically acceptable.

Without wishing to suggest that today's opinion leaders such as Rawlings and Suresh possess the status and authority of the Emperor Constantine, certain ironic parallels are clear. Current online learning practices are also being criticized for flouting orthodox beliefs, and for giving the impression that MOOCs are a new idea, despite the fact that institutions have been using solid design principles to deliver massive open courses for over a decade (Davidson, 2013; Malik, 2010). Lange (2011–2013) has lamented the reintroduction of these principles in informal blogs and conference presentations which, unobstructed by naysaying peer reviewers and quality control procedures, have allowed flawed ideas to spread unchecked. It is in current blogs, for example that connectivist principles dating back 70 years have been promoted as a new and appropriate pedagogical rationale for the massive online courses (see Note 1). The "new" MOOC process and "new" pedagogy have been rapidly adopted by US corporations, and their supporters have dealt with opposing viewpoints by dismissing them as destitute of foundation!

For MOOC providers, the GLC's formation is particularly timely. "I am honored to work with the council," says Anant Agarwal, President of edX, "to develop innovative approaches to improving learning outcomes" (Walters, 2013). It will be interesting to see if, with the input of its edX and Coursera advisers, the Council will include current MOOC practices in its New Testament of acceptable approaches. Or will these advisers now step away from their current practices, blaming connectivist notions for misleading them as to the practices that would be viable, and dismissing them as a product of the Old online learning Testament? As long as the GLC can sustain the assumption that MOOC practices are new and only need refining, the first of these approaches—promoting the practices—seems the most likely to win the day. The fact that old-order writers have vigorously argued against them is unlikely to change this outcome.

Promoting a New Testament that is not actually new, however, could lead the GLC to be complicit in a form of plagiarism. Plagiarism is usually defined as the deliberate copying of one person's ideas by another without attribution; but less obvious forms of plagiarism have also been identified (Bailey, 2012; Turnitin.com, 2012). When the conclusions of a whole field of research and practice are selectively

reinvented under new headings, we are witnessing a level of plagiarism at a disciplinary level, in which "mashup" concepts are created from multiple sources, reedited into new forms, and recycled with or without citation. If the GLC, after reviewing the open learning literature, decides in favor of current MOOC concepts and practices while denouncing less convenient principles, its New Testament will be guilty of sanctioning these plagiaristic activities.

Conclusions

Hunter Ripley Rawlings III's comments and the declared aims of the new GLC have met with an instant, negative response.

> I wonder sometimes whether anyone out there is better at reinventing the wheel than higher education administrators. They seem to be masters of leaping to the front of whatever parade they see and shouting "Follow me!"

> They've never heard of Sloan Consortium or Quality Matters? Standards have been out there for years!

> Surely, with "technology-company executives" on the board, they'll have no vested interests that they'll be interested in promoting and capitalizing on, eh?

> Did you notice whether anyone among this group is an expert in online education? Moocs?! They are the worst people to represent "standards" for good online education. OMG.

> We are having online learning standards set by a group of brick & mortar heavyweights and two MOOC entrepreneurs that are still thrashing about trying to understand online learning. Here's a serious case of the blind leading the blind that will have adverse effects on the future of online learning. It's worse than that. It's the blind attempting to lead the sighted.

Unfortunately, these often anonymous criticisms are unlikely to cause a ripple in the creation of the New Testament by the GLC. As with other principles and practices in the current online learning age, they too have appeared in unreviewed blogs, and they should now be reinforced by formal challenges from DE professionals and organizations. Official responses might stress the fact that when teachers fail to handle massive numbers, it is the enrolment practices that are at fault rather than the teachers themselves, and that the solution is not to marginalize the teachers as in many current massive open courses. The selective repackaging of the learner-centered principles commonly offered to justify these practices should also be recognized as mashups and recycling—forms of plagiarism which, intentionally or not, distort and misapply existing principles. When used to discredit a whole field of enquiry, the process becomes a disciplinary hijack, the possible corporate motives for which should be denounced as sweepingly as its supporters are currently denouncing the online learning literature.

Tailpiece

In a previous article, I attempted to illustrate the possible evolution of DE with some comments by a fictitious historian in the year 2018. I did not anticipate that today's

situation—in which MOOC students can find themselves surrounded by thousands of other students with no teachers to guide them—would make my navel-gazing seem quite so accurate so quickly:

> Successive generations of DE embraced useful ingredients for making education more flexible … but designed their usage in increasingly unwieldy ways, unreliable for teachers and students in the developed and developing world alike. (Anon, 2018, cited by Baggaley, 2007)

That prediction has lost its bite now, because once a prediction comes true there is less one can do to guard against it. I am therefore encouraged to offer a fanciful update to Anon's analysis, set in the year 2031. This time, I hope that his or her observations about DE outcomes are so improbable that they will *stand no chance* of ever coming true; and I can reassure literal-minded readers that I am not actually speculating that they will. Indeed, their grounding in current events is just too far-fetched to be imaginable.

> In the mid-90s, online methods began to take over from earlier approaches, and DE researchers developed ways of using them effectively in different situations. In 2013, 18 years later, the quality of online learning studies was denounced by Hunter R. Rawlings III, spokesman for the new GLC. His rejection of previous principles was a landmark in the evolution of online learning. With corporate backing, the GLC proceeded to entrench the practices of the controversial MOOC, as it was dubbed. In 2016, the Council reported its conclusion that teachers in all disciplines had conducted "no good work" for 200 years. In the ensuing "Night of the Hunter," teachers' security of tenure was abandoned worldwide, and their unions and professional associations were outlawed.

> In 2018, the ex-university presidents who had formed the original GLC were well past retirement age, and they were ousted in a coup by the President and Executive members of the newly formed International Learners' Co-op (ILC). The ILC criticized the GLC for not going far enough in banning teachers from all educational activities, and the original Council was disbanded as a remnant of the old teacher-driven era. By 2020, under the ILC's control, learners had taken over the administration of universities and colleges worldwide. Since then, international learners have had the glorious freedom of a totally teacher-free environment in which they can write whatever they like and submit it for grading to a fellow student with similar ideas.

> But the new learner leadership did not succeed in solving the economic problems of its predecessors, and by the late 2020s public discontent with the educational system was fueling fond memories of the olden days when teachers were available to provide learner support. In 2031, after a Learner Revolution that had lasted 18 years, teachers are once again being welcomed into positions of educational and administrative control. The new era has been lauded by Hunter R. Rawlings V, grandson of the outspoken GLC leader of 2013 ("My grand-dad loved his work, but he had bad advice"). Unfortunately, the educators with the most appropriate background experience for the new teaching and administrative positions are themselves now past retirement age, so the future is uncertain. (Anon, 2031, pp. 64–65)

Note

1. The origins of massive open course notions in blogs by Siemens (2008–2012) and Downes (2008–2013) have been discussed in preceding articles (Baggaley, 2014) and need not be revisited here.

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