

Who killed the OLA? A post-modern-day British Columbian whodunit

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The Open Learning Agency (OLA) of British Columbia is dead. Worse still, dismembered. Its component parts – Open University, Open College, and Knowledge Network – have been severed and dispersed (or are in the process of being dispersed) to various parts of Vancouver and beyond.

How did this happen? How could an institution that had a seemingly enlightened five-fold provincial mandate to ‘provide an educational credit bank for students, coordinate the development of open learning education, use open learning methods to provide educational programmes and services, carry out research related to open learning education, and operate one or more broadcasting undertakings devoted primarily to the field of educational broadcasting’ (Nielsen, 1992, p.2) come to this brutal end?

The killers are sought.

The investigation

Who is responsible for the death of the OLA? How is it that its Open University and Open College component parts have been severed and despatched to Kamloops, site of the newly created Thompson Rivers University (TRU), hundreds of kilometres north-west of Vancouver in the Rockies (Thompson Rivers University Open Learning, 2005)? Why is the Knowledge Network being privatised (McCullough, 2003, Crawford, 2004, Canada NewsWire, 2004)? What was the reasoning behind chopping off the OLA’s International Credential Evaluation Service and lodging it at the BC Institute of Technology (WestCoast News, 2004)? Why is the OLA’s BC Electronic Library now with Simon Fraser University (ibid.)?

Are the ‘killers’ the politicians who conceived the scheme some 25 years ago, or members of the new right-wing government? Were they members of warring faculty factions within the institution itself? Did they come from OLA management or the unions or a combination of the two? Were they from other British Columbian universities and colleges? Or were they adult learners or other key stakeholders?

Using historical evidence from (1) a master’s thesis (Nielsen, 1992) that drew upon the views of OLA executive members, (2) interviewing of Nielsen, a middle manager of OLA, by the author in the early 1990s, both in Canada and New Zealand, and (3) an on-site workshop that recorded the opinions of OLA staff members in general together with (4) recent media reports (‘British Columbia’s Burnaby-based distance educator is breaking apart’, ‘Degrees of pain for BC students’, ‘Don’t sell Knowledge Network’), the murder scene will be subjected to critical inquiry.

A traditional detective such as a Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Maigret, or Colombo – depicted on page or screen – might identify the suspects, interview them one by one, piece together the evidence, and then, in a dramatic, insightful ‘Aha!’ moment, expose the killer among the fortuitously or deliberately assembled throng.

In contrast to that, the author will assume the role of a post-modern, systems-thinking investigator and make his first, essential task the formulation of *the mess*, that is, like a

snapshot at a particular time, 'the future implicit in the present behaviour of the system, the consequence of the system's current state of affairs' (Gharajedaghi, 1999, p.118). In his investigation – which will be assumed to be a three-stage iterative process involving analysis, mapping of themes, and story-telling (Gharajedaghi, 1999, pp.118-128) - he will have snapshots available from the late 1970s, the 1980s, the early 1990s, and from 2000 to the present. Evidence, he notes, is still being sought from the middle and late 1990s.

A particular theme that will be considered relates to Mintzberg's seven typical configurations (1983, 1989, as cited by Nielsen, 1992, pp.98-108, and used in his thesis) – that is, the entrepreneurial, machine, diversified, professional, innovative, missionary, and political configurations - to which organizations are attracted because of environmental, internal and strategic considerations.

Suspects #1: The politicians who conceived the scheme

It is possible to set things up to fail. This can be done through misplaced enthusiasm or political skulduggery. Did the politicians who originally promoted the idea of the OLA fit one or the other of these categories or were they enlightened visionaries caught in a web of adversely unfolding variables that they could neither foresee nor control?

The OLA was established on 1 April 1988 through the passing of the Open Learning Agency Act. It was preceded by two organizations, the Open Learning Institute (OLI), established in 1978, and the Knowledge Network of the West Communications Authority, established in 1980. The act effectively dissolved the OLI and KNOW and created three programming components within the OLA: the Open University, the Open College, and the Knowledge Network. Initially, the OLA was located at various locations in the south-Vancouver satellite of Richmond and then at a purpose-built, space-age campus in the west-Vancouver satellite of Burnaby.

The amalgamation of OLI and KNOW was anticipated by McGeer, Minister of Education (1975-79) and later Minister of Universities, Science and Technology (1980-86), and Hardwick, Deputy Minister of Education (1976-80) and later, significantly, President and Chair of KNOW (1980-85). It occurred in a context of antipathy between OLI and KNOW characterised by different approaches to distance education and the use of instructional technology. As stated by Nielsen (1992, p.141):

OLI had favoured, for many pragmatic reasons, inexpensive distance education delivery technology, primarily print-based with telephone support and little emphasis on television or other telecommunication technologies. On the other hand, KNOW was founded on the premise of television and telecommunication technologies as vital to the growth of distance education in British Columbia.

McGeer and Hardwick clearly favoured television as the driving force for distance education. Most likely (Nielsen, 1992, p.128), they created KNOW because they believed OLI would not embrace television as a method of teaching.

They might have been seen as visionaries by some but were labelled as troublesome manipulators by others. In Mintzberg's terms, their configuration perceived for the OLA was probably hybrid, with the OLI component 'machine' and KNOW 'entrepreneurial' come 'innovative'. The evidence suggests they were driven politically and were loath to accept the advice of educationalists around them. For example, suggestions by OLI managers that course materials from the British Open University should not be used without major adaptation were ignored. "Hardwick refused to believe OLI's judgement that it was not an easy matter of carving up and 'wrapping around' the BOU courses and intimated that the OLI leaders did not have sufficient will to make it work" (Nielsen, 1992, p.130).

Suspects #2: Warring faculty factions

It might be argued that the enforced mix of staff from a university, a college (that is, a polytechnic equivalent), and a television studio to comprise the OLA was a recipe for disaster. After all, don't the academics of universities see themselves as superior to those of polytechnics and worthy of significantly higher pay? Further, don't the 'beautiful people' of television see themselves as a class apart that warrants special privileges and market-competitive compensation packages?

Certainly, a major force for change at OLA during the 1990s was the ambiguous nature of the Knowledge Network. Farrell, the OLA's President and CEO, was of the opinion that during the formation of the agency in the mid-1980s KNOW had simply been "bolted on" to OLI and that the superstructure of management and support systems that had been created and "tinkered with" over time "dealt only with symptoms and did little to overcome the original problem" (Nielsen, 1992, p.168-169).

Similarly, Pacey, Vice President, Technology, Television and General Education, and General Manager of the Knowledge Network in the early 1990s, used the analogy of KNOW being "handcuffed" to OLI with the regulatory functions of the agency providing "the chain in the middle" (Nielsen, 1992, p.169).

This led to the 'centring of internal coalitions around the predecessor organizations from which OLA was created', the Knowledge Network component being seen as "a unique entity and sometimes regarded as the 'favoured child' by former OLI staff" (Nielsen, 1992, p.148). The perception lasted. It was catalysed by market surveys that indicated the Knowledge Network has an attractive profile with the viewing public and is better recognised by the average British Columbian than OLA (Nielsen, 1992, p.171, Crawford, 2004).

Distinct from Knowledge Network considerations, the Open University and Open College components of the OLA had to come to terms with their own differences. These involved 'conformity with the post-secondary system and prevailing norms' on the part of the university and 'an emphasis on openness rather than exclusivity on the part of the college' (Nielsen, 1992, pp.124-125).

Some things worked well in a collaborative sense; many others did not. As stated by Nielsen (1992, p.156):

With respect to strategy making, there was generally no difficulty among staff in accepting the broad goal of lifelong learning. The details of how to get there, however, very much resided with each component and in essence, despite the best attempts to merge individual efforts into one plan for the agency, the annual strategic plan and its day-to-day enactment were at best a collation of individual strategies.

Farrell attributed this problem 'to historic reasons and Hardwick's original vision of three separate components as opposed to one organization' and considered it as analogous to 'kings of three mountains' (1992, p.156). In a mix of metaphors, he described himself as 'ringmaster in a three-ring circus' (p.154) and heard talk of 'the balkanisation of the agency into components parts' and an ongoing question of 'Are we three or are we one?' (p.155).

In Mintzberg's terms, the Open University probably saw itself as 'professional', the Open College 'innovative' and even 'missionary' from time to time, and the Knowledge Network 'entrepreneurial, 'professional' and 'innovative'. A 'schizophrenia permeated the organization' (Nielsen, 1992, p.163).

Suspects #3: OLA management

The finger of suspicion might now point in turn to each of OLA's top managers. In the early 1990s, at a critical time of restructuring, they were Farrell (President and CEO), Bates (Executive Director, Research and Strategic Planning), Segal (Vice President, Administration and Human Resource Development), Mugridge (Vice President, Student Support and Open University), Scales (Vice President, Business Development and Open College), and Pacey (Vice President, Technology, Television and General Education). How well did they identify with the provincial government initiative? Just what were their motives? However, rather than singling them out at this stage, we'll consider them more as a group. The individualised analysis can be saved for a later iteration.

The 'schizophrenia' mentioned above may well have been a major characteristic of some top managers, torn as they were between responsibilities to the agency as a whole, on the one hand, and their component parts, on the other. This led to inconsistencies. For example, did they place too much or too little emphasis on vocational education? Certainly, 'a distinctive workplace orientation' was one of the three strategic themes of the organization, the others being 'collaboration' and 'flexibility' (Nielsen, 1991, p.471). However, was it the focus?

According to some critics, a “mile wide, inch deep syndrome” applied to the offering of programmes and courses. “Is there anything we don’t do?” they questioned. Perhaps this was because numbers of enrolments, rather than quality of enrolments, became the “coin of the realm” (1991, p. 149).

Internally, perhaps in contrast to the external orientation, there was a workplace mentality. There was a belief that ‘what gets measured, gets done’ (Nielsen, 1992, p.152). There were suggestions that the agency was run as a mere extrapolation of a corporate business organization. The rhetoric featured ‘empowerment’, ‘total quality management’, and ‘the learning organization’ (Nielsen, 1992, p.153). But the reality may have been the ‘administrative tail wagging the operational dog’ (Nielsen, 1992, p.154).

Divergence from the original ideas of McGeer and Hardwick was apparent. Farrell wanted the organization to become ‘demand-driven’ as opposed to ‘supply-oriented’ (Nielsen, 1992, pp.2-3).

He grew impatient with the term, distance education, which he felt narrowly defined a ‘toolkit of pedagogical methodologies’ and suggested an artificial dichotomy with more traditional forms of instruction; he preferred use of the broader term, open learning, which encompassed distance education and connoted a spectrum of educational opportunities for the learner. (Nielsen, 1992, pp.127-128).

In Mintzberg’s terms, outside the rhetoric of OLA management, the configuration may well have been ‘machine’ or ‘professional’ rather than ‘innovative’. It was probably perceived by managers and staff alike as hierarchical rather than collegial. “As one executive member put it, “I don’t do windows” does not wash around here,’ referring to the fact that agency employees were prone (and encouraged) to ‘roll up their sleeves’ and undertake new or unusual tasks that did not necessarily fit with specific details of their job description, because if they did not, there were no others (either in number or expertise) within the agency who could undertake the tasks” (Nielsen, 1992, p.150).

Suspects #4: Unions

Based on perceptions of mistrust of management and inevitable conflict, the unions and their members may well have played a significant part in the downfall of the OLA. How committed were they to the concept? How willing were they to concede certain perceived entitlements in the interests of the greater good of the educational initiative and the lifelong learners of British Columbia? How much emphasis did they put on collaboration amongst themselves and management, as necessary, rather than non-stop bloody-minded negotiation?

Differences between Hardwick and Farrell did not help. As stated by Nielsen (1992, p.169):

At the time of formation of OLA, Farrell had pushed hard for the creation of a fourth programming component called ‘continuing education’ (or ‘general education’) to avoid the dual service and programming role of the Knowledge Network. The board at the time passed the minutes but Hardwick had intervened and would not implement the idea, concerned about preserving the identity of the Knowledge Network. In particular, Hardwick was concerned that if Farrell’s idea were pursued, the local union of OLI would more easily incorporate the Knowledge Network staff.

Nielsen (1992, p.169) notes that the ‘distinctive culture of the Knowledge Network’ was aided and abetted by ‘separate office locations; historic antipathy between the two predecessor organizations of OLA and differing perspectives in provision of their services; different working conditions; and the tremendous public profile enjoyed by the television service’.

In fact, Knowledge Network staff did not become unionised and their working conditions were very different from those of other staff. Again, the roots were historical. OLI staff had been organised under a British Columbia Government Employees’ Union (BCGEU) collective agreement which was similar in content to other college agreements. Unionised staff worked 35-hour weeks. KNOW staff, on the other hand, had not been organised into any union, having opted for a ‘fair comparison’ method for establishment of salaries, and using other broadcasting

organizations as their point of reference. Knowledge Network staff worked 40-hour weeks and also had a different salary, vacation and benefit structure from OLI staff. Salary levels for Knowledge Network staff in higher grades exceeded those of unionised staff while the converse was true for lower grades; in general, vacation and benefits for Knowledge Network staff exceeded those of unionised staff (Nielsen, 1992, p.171).

Tutor alienation, felt in the early years of OLI, resurfaced in the early 1990s, with the formation of a new union, the Open Learning Agency Tutors' Association (OLATA). A significant factor was that tutors did not work on campus. Typically, they were appointed from industry or other educational institutions and were accountable to managers at the OLA campus. As stated by Nielsen (1992, p.125): 'A major disadvantage was that tutors had no particular allegiance to the organization, no disciplinary community nor any evident role models.'

In Mintzberg's terms, given their strict accountability to OLA managers and their feeling of alienation, tutors and their unions would almost certainly have perceived the organizational configuration as 'machine'.

Suspects #5: Other British Columbian universities and colleges

Existing educational institutions throughout British Columbia may not have accepted the need for the OLA. Did they see it as a threat? Was it considered a potential monstrosity that would bleed them of the strengths they had developed with considerable effort and traditional dedication over many decades? Were they motivated to protect their own interests and put in the knife before things got out of hand?

Did the conceiving politicians think in terms of independent rather than interdependent variables (Gharajedaghi, 1991, pp.8-9)? Did they imagine that the OLA would effect positive change while other tertiary institutions went on with business as usual? That, of course, hasn't been the case. The other institutions – particularly the universities – have changed their 'game' to ward off a perceived threat of the OLA. Rather than collaborating they have imitated and sought competitive advantage (Gharajedaghi, 1999, pp.3-9). One example was the formation of the Western University Telecourse Consortium (WUTC), a collaboration of 13 conventional, dual mode and distance teaching universities from the four western provinces of Canada with an aim was to increase the number of on-campus students who take at least some first- and second-year university foundation courses at a distance.

Was there an assumption that there are specific populations of 'distance' and 'conventional' students who complete most, if not all, of their studies in a single mode and at a single institution (Black, 1994, p.341)? If so, it might have been consistent with the educational environment of the 1970s and 1980s but didn't fit the facts of the 1990s. As indicated by Black 'In British Columbia, a high level of inter-institutional co-ordination and collaboration has resulted in a dual mode university system and a large number of dual mode students, students who combine both on-campus and distance study, and often at two or more institutions' (Black, 1994, p.345).

Was the OLA the cause of this or just an additional player in a set of interrelationships that had evolved naturally and strategically over time? More the latter, probably, than the former. Before the conception of the OLA (as the Open Learning Institute in 1978), university distance education in British Columbia was already offered by three dual mode universities – the University of British Columbia, from 1919, the University of Victoria, from 1963, and Simon Fraser University, established in 1965 and offering distance education courses from 1975. A fourth dual mode university – the University of Northern British Columbia – opened its doors in 1994.

The offering, it is to be noted, was substantial. 'In 1992-93, the dual mode universities offered a combined total of more than 200 university distance courses (Simon Fraser University offered 107 distance courses, the University of BC offered 69, and the University of Victoria offered 33)' (Black, 1994, p.342). Through these institutions students could take 'a wide range of degree, diploma and certificate programs, either totally or partially through distance education' (Black, 1994, p.342).

Not surprisingly, given what was available, critics wondered why there was a need for the Open University component of the OLA. In Mintzberg's terms, they probably saw it as 'missionary' or misguidedly 'political'.

Suspects #6: Adult learners

On the surface, it is hard to imagine that the lifelong learners, individually or collectively, would have wished the downfall of the OLA. After all, it was providing them with greater access to further and higher education through, for example, recognition of their prior learning and the provision of a credit bank. However, perhaps through apathy, they became both the victims and perpetrators of the demise.

Throughout the 1990s, the OLA as British Columbia's dedicated distance educator has attracted a healthy but not majority proportion of distance course enrolments. In 1991-92, for example, of the 25,000 university distance education course enrolments in British Columbia, 58 percent were with the dual mode universities, 35 percent with the OLA, and 7 percent with the OLA as 'consortium students' (explained below).

However, it has been rare for British Columbian graduates to do all their coursework through OLA's Open University. According to Black (1994, p.348), of the first 402 degrees awarded by the Open University, *only two* of the graduates had completed all of their coursework through the Open University. Of the remaining 400, 157 had completed all of their coursework at other post-secondary institutions and 243 through mixed study modes and institutions. Few did more than one year of coursework through the Open University.

So why enrol at the OLA rather than at another institution? An answer relates to the fact that students have been able to enrol in the distance courses offered by the dual mode universities in two ways: (1) directly through the dual mode university or (2) indirectly through the OLA. To register directly, students have had to meet the regular university admission requirements. To register through the OLA, they haven't had to demonstrate that they meet the university entrance requirements. The OLA has registered these 'consortium students' and the dual mode universities have delivered the instruction.

Has the OLA access been perceived as an easy way in? Has it contributed to the 'laundering' of qualifications? Yes and yes, the perception has been shared by a significant number of critics, according to staff of the OLA. Their advice to people outside British Columbia wanting to implement a similar scheme included "Don't focus on a one-institution credit bank [such as that in British Columbia]", "Watch out for the 'laundering' aspect", and "Don't promote it [Prior Learning Assessment] as credit for experience [rather than learned experience] or an easy option" (Hornblow, 1994, p.250).

In Mintzberg's terms, maybe the adult learners have seen the OLA as 'political' and, in relation to its production-line operation, 'machine'.

Suspect #7: The new right-wing government?

New governments are apt not only to put the knife into old schemes but also to apply a twist in an ostensibly sadistic pleasure in witnessing the discomfort of political opponents. Was this the case with the newly-elected Liberals?

They were quick to make changes in educational policy and practice. Ruthlessly and decisively, they ended years of tuition fee freezes in February 2002. As a consequence British Columbia registered the highest fee increases across Canada in 2003. University fees jumped 30.4 percent and college fees 38.4 percent from 2002 (Bhatty, 2004, p.4).

Over their time in office, the province has been slipping in the annual ranking by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives of provincial post-secondary education systems, based on four key indicators: quality, accessibility, equity and accountability. British Columbia was top in 1999, fourth in 2003, and sixth in 2004. Tuition fees, other compulsory fees, and fees for international students have all soared (Bhatty, 2004, p.7).

Talk about selling the Knowledge Network, together with other corporations that the provincial government controls, has been loud and determined. According to Canada NewsWire (2004), several bids have already been received for Knowledge Network and privatisation, despite public opposition (McCullough 2003, Crawford, 2004, Canada NewsWire, 2004), is imminent. 'A new model – working in partnership with the private sector, public sector or a combination of both – can help deliver what British Columbians need and want from educational programming

well into the future,' Advanced Education Minister, Shirley Bond, emphasised in a release (McCullough, 2003).

There is an ongoing political, dismembering approach to what was perceived by new-right politicians as a 'political' configuration.

Suspects #8: Other key stakeholders

Were the researchers and advisers correct in their forecasting of Canadian societal change? For example, according to the projections of the Hudson Institute (cited in Nielsen, 1991, p.468):

- Computer-directed robots will be able to take dictation, edit letters' load trucks or pick strawberries. Workers who depend on their manual skills will be displaced.
- Advanced synthetic materials (ceramics, reinforced plastics, diamond coatings) will increase the durability of manufactured goods. This will shrink the market for raw materials and make traditional assembly-line jobs obsolete.
- Factories will be able to produce custom-designed products, while taking advantage of mass-production techniques. They will be manned by teams of multi-skilled workers.

Thus far, the forecasting hasn't stood the test of time. Robots haven't taken over. Manual skills are still required. In the interests of the bottom line of business, manufactured goods are rarely made to last and multi-skilling is not the norm in the sweatshops strategically located in developing countries by multinational corporations.

Traditional forecasting doesn't fit a society that has shifted within a generation from a relatively simple and stable environment to one of complexity and dynamism. Useful predictions need to take account of paradigmatic shifts (Gharajedaghi, 1999, pp.8-9).

Conclusion

The OLA by name is dead. The OLA in terms of its provincial mandate is dead. The Knowledge Network as a public telecaster – unless there is an unexpected reprieve - is about to snuff it.

No longer does British Columbia have a single tertiary education institution that provides an educational credit bank for students, coordinates the development of open learning education, uses open learning methods to provide educational programmes and services, carries out research related to open learning education, and operates one or more broadcasting undertakings devoted primarily to the field of educational broadcasting.

It would be easy for a Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot or Colombo to point the finger of blame at British Columbia's new Liberal government and say "You did it! You're guilty as sin!" Clearly, these right-wingers conspired to act, made their decision, put in the knife, severed the body parts, and are in the process of dispersing them to various parts of the province. Like typical accused from literary or electronic fiction, they haven't admitted to the murder. Rather, they have rationalised that 'It all came down to efficiency and looking at savings' (Janice Lee Gerard, a senior communication officer of the OLA, clearly speaking for the government, cited in WestCoast News, 2004).

However, unlike a Holmes, Poirot or Colombo, it is not appropriate for a post-modern-day, systems thinking investigator to point the finger at a single suspect or collection of conspirators. Rather, there is a systemic mess to be formulated before problem solving can be addressed.

The formulation continues. Just one thing need be considered certain at this stage. The butler didn't do it. There wasn't one.

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