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Open Learning: Philosophy or Expediency?

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Abstract: In the ever growing body of literature on open learning there is a clearly identifiable strand of scepticism. This questions whether the current interest in the area is founded on educational philosophy or practical expediency. The article examines the inevitability of this more closely. We argue that the assumption of a divide between philosophy and practice is not only unnecessary but ultimately untenable. We acknowledge, however, that they are frequently experienced as separate. We suggest that this reflects differing emphases given to 'why' questions and 'how' questions in relation to open learning. The former encourages 'philosophical' answers, the latter 'practical'. We focus in particular on how much of the language and how much of the practice of open learning has come to convey meanings which are contrary to the philosophy of openness. We argue that what is required is the construction of a new OL vocabulary which acknowledges both the *why* and the *how* of open learning and also the desirability of idealism and realism coexisting. Finally, we suggest that strategies which start with 'the possible' are more likely to protect the ideals than those which start with Utopian dreams.

Introduction

Our intention in this paper is to make a contribution to the growing and increasingly confused debate about what open learning is. We wish to open up the debate by providing some new perspectives, not to close it down by providing a definitive argument.

The protagonists in this debate tend to see open learning, at one extreme, as an educational philosophy to be adhered to and, at the other extreme, as a repertoire of educational tools to be called upon. The latter see the former as idealistic romantics, while the former see the latter as opportunistic practitioners. Neither has much time for the other but both are apparently enthusiasts of open learning.

As MacKenzie, Postgate and Scupham commented in their UNESCO study of Open Learning Systems:

'Open Learning is an impressive phrase to which a range of meanings can be, and is attached. It eludes definition. But as an inscription to be carried in procession on a banner, gathering adherents and enthusiasm, it has great potential.' (MacKenzie et al., 1975)

Over 10 years later, open learning seems as elusive as it ever was. Nonetheless, it continues to gather adherents and enthusiasts. Robin Snell (1987) suggests that this is because of the seductive and fantastical images that have been carefully created by funding bodies and providers alike. He believes that the images associated with open learning:

'Allow us to subliminally indulge in visions of making the work place into a site of continual learning opportunities and making society into a learning community.' (Snell, 1987)

As Snell points out, such images are not at the end of the day in accord with the status quo and are therefore, he suggests, part of what he calls the open learning con.

Peter Critten (Critten, 1986) also discusses open learning in terms of its potential to impact upon and change the kind of society in which we live. Critten draws on the work of Carl Rogers, whom he quotes as saying:

'In persons who are moving towards greater openness to their experiencing, there is an organismic commonality of value directions. These common value directions are of such kinds as to enhance the development of the individual himself, of others in his community, and to contribute to the survival and evaluation of the species.' (Rogers, 1969)

Implicitly Critten, like Snell, sees open learning as a particular educational end. He also, however, expresses concerns about whether such an end can be or will be attained. The problem as Critten sees it is the tendency to see open learning as a means rather than an end in its own right. He perceptively comments:

'I am concerned that the promise open learning offers is not dissipated, as was programmed learning, as an expedient technique for delivering learning, but is embraced as a paradigm and realises the potential Rogers held out for real openness to learning, which was not inconsiderable.' (Critten, 1986)

Snell's and Critten's assessment is essentially that open learning is not being embraced as a philosophical ideal but as an expedient measure for delivering learning and maintaining the status quo. While this may well be the case, the recent book by David Harris on openness and closure in distance education (Harris,

1987) equally illustrates how easy and necessary it sometimes appears to be for educationalists to let pressures of expediency override educational ideals.

The open access policy of the Open University is a case in point. For political and economic reasons Harris maintains:

'The OU came to embrace a policy of openness in a rather residual and strategic manner – the need to attract a larger audience to gain cost advantages, and a desire to avoid the hostility of powerful groups already in the conventional education market produced the impetus towards open access, as much as any positive intention to reform the exclusive nature of higher education or provide a "second" chance for those unfairly excluded.' (Harris, 1987)

According to Harris, the Open University felt the need to devise policies which reduced early anxiety that 'unsuitable' students might drop out and thus waste resources. In effect, Harris maintains, the OU did develop a selection policy which was to weight applicants 'suitability'. In the event the scheme was not needed because as Harris explains, '... the overwhelming majority of applicants were "suitable" anyway'.

While Harris is sympathetic to the reasons for the Open University, particularly in its early years, wanting to demonstrate and ensure its viability, he does make the point:

'Although the initial interest in "safe" ("middle class") students was justified in terms of the need to achieve initial academic recognition, no real steps have been taken, even now, to attract more "working class" students.' (Harris, op cit)

What Harris' critique illustrates is how measures taken initially for practical and expedient reasons can easily, almost without notice, become both policy and implicitly philosophy.

Harris himself seems almost to see this as inevitable if institutions of the size and scale of the Open University want to survive.

Thus, while Snell's and Critten's arguments are less sympathetic in ascribing motives, Harris implicitly reaches the same kind of conclusions as them in that idealistic philosophy becomes submerged into expedient practice, which in reality perpetuates the status quo.

The relationship between philosophy and practice

It may be that these problems and the confusion that surrounds them are compounded by the current status of the term 'open learning' itself. It seems to have become a shibboleth in the education and training world. Thus, for many, its utility in making distinctions between different educational philosophies or practices has become of secondary importance. Its prime

importance is in that those who can successfully apply it to their work can demonstrate that they are members of the new orthodoxy. And in the current economic climate the benefits of such membership can be great. It is not surprising, therefore, that the term remains undiscriminating and its use indiscriminate. The unfortunate effect, however, is that it is possible for discussions about open learning to take place with some or even all of the participants unaware that they are discussing different things. This in turn means that, far from being a single consistent educational philosophy, open learning becomes a mechanism which blurs philosophical differences. This leaves some frustrated, disappointed or disillusioned while others feel free to 'get on with the job' unhindered by unnecessary 'philosophical' arguments.

Clearly, the task is to find some means of identifying and distinguishing between the different usages of the term. Cunningham (1984) has recently developed a general analysis model which may aid us. He uses it to demonstrate the relationship between different levels of 'strategic planning' or 'thinking processes' and 'operational planning' or the 'process of doing'. Cunningham describes it as his 'U' model.

As can be seen from Figure 1, he has at the top of his 'U' *philosophy* and *micro-techniques*. This is because he believes that the most generally applicable and least environmentally constrained levels of 'thinking' and of 'doing' are philosophy and micro-techniques. Cunningham describes micro-techniques in terms of the specific, almost idiosyncratic, ways individuals carry out a particular technique. *Techniques*, on the other hand, he sees as less general and more bound or limited by their context. Similarly, he sees the next level down from philosophy as *principles* which, he suggests, like techniques are less abstract and general, and more limited by the context or kind of activity one is engaged in. Cunningham sees the next level of thinking down again as the situation-specific application of principles. He labels this level *policy* which on the operational side of the 'U' is paralleled by *method* which, he suggests, is also situation-specific. Finally, he describes the application of policy within a particular and specific time-frame as *strategy*. How a particular strategy is actually operationalized within the time-frame Cunningham describes as *tactics*.

Basically, Cunningham's model attempts to show that practice is always linked to philosophy but the link is not a simple, straight-line hierarchical one. One advantage of the suggested 'U'-shaped relationship is that it sheds light on the way in which practice might get separated from philosophy through the processes of educational planning and decision making. These processes tend to start at the level of strategy and tactics. This is understandable because, in terms of Cunningham's model, this level is the most shared, immediate and amenable to change. However, educators who approach this level with questions of

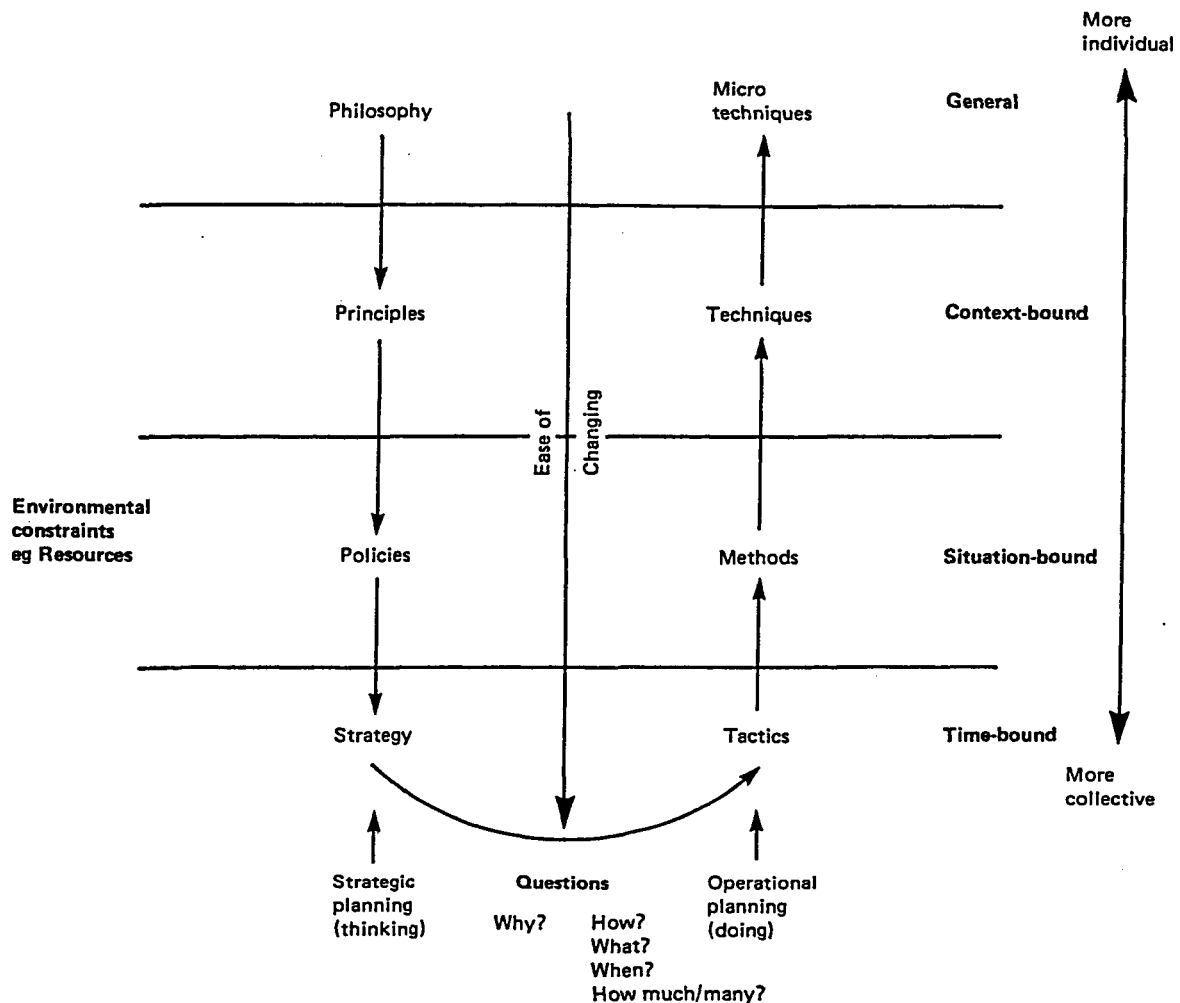


Figure 1. U-model

legitimation ('why' questions) will be drawn up the left arm of the 'U' and those that approach it with questions of implementation ('how' questions) will be drawn up the right arm. In some senses they will be moving in the same direction – from the specific (time, situation and context bound) to the general, and so might reasonably expect to be able to discuss similar issues in similar language. In another sense they will be starting in the middle and moving in opposite directions – the one working towards images of an 'open society' (philosophy) and the other towards details of personal style (micro-technique). Their concerns and their language might reasonably, therefore, be expected to differ. Paradoxically, they will be close and miles apart. It is as though Cunningham's 'U' were the cross-section of a chasm. The two sides are close

enough to throw things across, like criticism, cant and contempt, but not close enough for people to engage with each other. The only way engagement can be achieved is by climbing down one side and up the other. For this, good, clear footholds are required. In terms of our discussion here, this means articulating the characteristics or dimensions of openness at each stage. This may in turn require the development of a new, more elaborated open learning vocabulary – a theme to which we shall return. This will make it easier to identify commonality or opposition in the varying propositions of different educationalists; easier to identify contradictions in the propositions of individual educationalists; and easier to identify the philosophical assumptions underlying different educational practices. All of these in turn will make it clearer

where apparent expediency is 'good intention' distorted by contextual pressures (the Harris argument) and where it is part of a repertoire of control masquerading in the clothing of openness (the Snell argument).

Implicit in this last comment is our belief that open learning cannot be understood independently of its context, as though 'openness' were simply a property of educational provision. It is possible that the *experience* of openness is just as much a function of the context. Take, for example, new technology as a particular aspect of the context regarded by many as a significant factor in the current interest and enthusiasm for open learning (see, for example, Gritton, 1982; Binsted and Hodgson, 1984; Northcott, 1986). Some writers believe it is essential that new technology plays a part in equipping and educating a society that is becoming increasingly technological. Thus, Dede remarks:

'The power of the new information technologies offers the possibility of transforming formal education in both developed and developing countries. These devices can help educators meet the challenge of preparing civilisation for the advent of the intelligent work place.' (Dede, 1985)

He also comments, however:

'Research has shown that the unintended, second order outcomes of the technological innovation are frequently more influential, long term, than its direct and deliberate effects.' (Dede, *op cit*)

Hawkridge (1983) suggests, for example, that the enhanced use of new technology is potentially more likely to increase the elitism and cost of educational opportunity than reduce it. Possibly a much more fundamental danger, however, is of it 'dehumanizing' the educational process with the unintended effects this could have upon the learner and the learning process itself (see Hubbard, 1981; Forsythe, 1983; Larsen, 1986). Finally, there is the very real concern that educational provision will be determined more by the technology used than by any educational philosophy or intent (Hawkridge, 1983; Binsted and Hodgson, 1984; Boot and Boxer, 1980). It seems to us that this is more likely to happen when 'how' questions get separated from 'why' questions – 'Technology is there, how can we use it?' gets separated from 'Technology is there, why would we want to use it?' Opportunities can, then, distort as much as can constraints.

Openness as reflected in the language of open learning

Meanwhile, however, in the public sphere the inconsistencies and contradictions continue.

Thus, in a recent call for papers by the International Higher Education Standing Committee for a conference on The Place of Open and Distance Learning, the following appeared (with our emphases):

'Here learning is thought to be cojoint (*sic*) with and complemented by teaching. According to the theory, *learners should be provided with mechanisms that enable them to better develop their self learning abilities* . . . A certain class of provision for learning (as opposed to teaching) is termed *Open Learning*: Those involved in open learning undertake the learning of subject matter at their own pace and without direct supervision, unhindered by the severe time pressures normally experienced in classroom situations. Within overall time constraints, they permit learners to travel the educational road at their own pace. *Open learning programmes must be delivered as highly structured units of material, so that learners are able to pursue their learning activities along a clearly defined and directed pathway.*' (IHESC, 1988)

It is tempting to equate the use of the word 'open' in this passage with its use in the term 'open-prison'.

The following appeared in an article by Hilary Temple shortly after she had been appointed Director of the Open Learning Branch of the Manpower Services Commission (again with our emphases):

'Open learning is not a peripheral activity (and indeed those who have worked in it for years have always known this) but a *fundamental approach to learning which needs to underpin all our education and training strategies and methods*. Open Tech showed that it was possible to develop this *alternative system* at comparatively low cost, and get it recognised as a *reliable product*. So now open learning is firmly established as a *valid method of delivery training*, what is OLB going to do?' (Temple, 1987)

The MSC, through the considerable amounts of financial support it has given, has greatly influenced current working definitions of open learning. It is not surprising, therefore, if there is confusion and misunderstanding among and between people working in the field, if open learning is spoken of as simultaneously and unproblematically a fundamental approach to learning underpinning all education and training (a philosophy?), an alternative system, a reliable product and a method of delivery. So is this part of the 'con' to which Snell refers? Possibly, but we suspect rather that the same concerns for viability and credibility that Harris suggests have diverted the good intentions represented by the Open University, have diverted the good intentions represented by the Open Tech programme. The difference being in whose eyes credibility was being sought. In the former case, it was predominantly those of the academic 'establishment' and in the latter predominantly those of the industrial training 'establishment'. We suggested earlier that the experience of openness may be as much a function of context as of provision. Given what we have said elsewhere:

'... for many people the organizations and institutions in which they live and work are the greatest source of constraint. In other words, while learning and development are *natural processes*, learning and development opportunities are not necessarily a *normal part of everyday working life.*' (Boot and Hodgson, 1987)

We should perhaps be pleased that the MSC appear to be tackling this most significant contextual constraint. Unfortunately, they have chosen to tackle it using the language of the market-place – product, package, delivery etc. This is understandable given the way they are constituted and the political context within which they are operating. But, as the use of this language has increased over time, so the ‘customer’ has changed from the learner to the training manager. Thus, in July 1982 we were being told in the Open Tech Task Group Report that:

‘The main thing is that learner needs and circumstances are paramount and determine the system to be used in each instance.’ (MSC, 1982)

By September 1983, together with comments like:

‘... Open learning reduces or removes barriers to access and to progress;
‘... Open learning offers a choice of content to suit the student’s needs’,

we find (our emphasis)

‘Open learning provides the opportunity for the student to learn at a pace, time and place which satisfy the student’s circumstances and requirements (or alternatively, the employer’s circumstances and requirements).’ (Tolley, 1983)

By June 1987, Temple’s prime concern in the article already referred to is that:

‘Industry is unlikely to respond to exhortation, even by MSC, to use open learning. The two things which will convince managers that open learning works are seeing it in practice in a reputable company... and proof that it contributes to profitability.’

She therefore refers them to Open Learning Branch’s set of case studies which describe ways in which:

‘... open learning works for the Hotel and Catering Board and B & Q, the D-I-Y retailers, Jaguar and several others.’ (Temple, op cit)

Note, ‘works for’ not ‘in the context of’ or ‘supported by’. But why are we highlighting these trends? It is because we believe that the market-place concept is problematical in relation to open learning. We believe that openness is at risk in the change of customer and that there are constraints upon openness inherent in the language.

To elaborate on the first of these, we would like to take a particular MSC sponsored case written up in an article enticingly titled ‘Open learning – the key to success’ (Williams, 1986). The success claimed in that title is justified predominantly in terms of cost effectiveness (with an impressive cost comparison model), increased programme flexibility, scale of courseware production and accumulated trainee hours. All seem very reasonable concerns for a responsible training manager. Do they, however, constitute success in terms of openness (or learning for that matter)? There are aspects of the

case study that suggest not only that they don’t but that openness was not a criterion. Thus to set against the ‘student choice’ based upon ‘their own needs’ spoken of in early MSC documentation, we have:

‘The need is normally identified by our plant or company training staffs. Each plant is responsible for the identification of its own training needs. Resourcing and development staffs within the company personnel function identify the training needs of the company corporate functions. Both these sets of staff are conversant (through open learning awareness packages) with open learning techniques and will advise company training staffs of the identified training needs.’ (Williams, op cit)

and

‘Our conventional courseware is advertised through a course directory which is circulated to appropriate managers via the plant training departments. Trainees are then nominated by their immediate managers for the relevant courses. On acceptance of nomination, course joining instructions are issued. Open learning operates in a similar way.’ (ibid)

and

‘Having completed the design specification and having the content outline and objectives approved by the client and/or subject matter expert (SME), the package is ready for development.’ (ibid)

Here the ‘client’ would seem to be those involved in training needs identification (see above).

We emphasize that we are not trying to say these practices are necessarily wrong. Indeed, they may make good commercial sense. But we are questioning the claims to openness. By way of a coda to this particular theme we quote Williams again:

‘This is where our open learning tools are applied. We will not, for obvious commercial reasons, give details of what constitutes a tool.’ (ibid)

Let us now return briefly to our concern about the language of the market-place as a source of constraint. This concern stems from the frequency with which open learning is discussed in terms of product, package, delivery and market. The frequency is such that the message getting across is that open learning *is* these things. ‘Open learning’ has become a noun, an ‘it’, an entity independent of those people engaged in learning processes. It is a finite product owned by educators who are trying to *sell* it to learners (or their bosses). It is something learners *acquire* as a result of transactions in the market-place. It is not something that they *do* which results in personal change and development.

Our point here is not that individuals do not and will not make use of learning packages etc for the purposes of personal change and development. Our concern is rather about the effect that the acceptance of this language has on the thinking of those educators who are

interested in supporting open learning. We fear that it is resulting in a narrowing of the vision of what is desirable and a closing of the eyes to what is possible in terms of support, encouragement and enhancement of opportunity for the great variety of individual learners and the great variety of circumstances in which they live and work.

Open learning as philosophy and practice

In what we have written so far we have concentrated heavily on the basic assumptions underlying public discussions by others about the nature of open learning. Our own views have, for the most part, remained implicit in this process. We feel it would be appropriate to try to make these more explicit before moving on to what seem to us to be the implications of what we have been saying. Unfortunately, these too contain their inconsistencies and contradictions.

In essence, open learning means to us not only freedom of choice for the individual, but also the opportunity and the power to exercise that choice. In its most general form, this leads us into the debates about free will and determinism that have exercised philosophers for centuries. While not regarding these debates as irrelevant (given what we have said so far, how could we?), our interest here is in the educational principles that follow from that philosophy and in how those principles can be translated into policies, strategies, tactics etc for educational practice. In this context, we believe, education supports open learning to the extent that it provides *for* the exercise of choice. By this we mean choice not simply in logistics – location, timing, pacing and so on – but in all the other aspects of education that have concerned educational theorists and practitioners through the years. These range from the content, structure and assessment of courses to the content, structure and validation of knowledge, and include appropriateness of media and materials, organization of learning resources, the nature of teaching and learning, and the nature of tutor/learner roles and relationships. In this we do not argue for one set of educational practices to be preferred over another, but instead argue for asking how, by whom and why decisions are made at each stage. In an earlier article we discussed the claims to openness of what appeared to be competing orientations to educational provision and suggested that such competition was misguided (Boot and Hodgson, 1987). Here, we are suggesting that to the extent that educationalists take it upon themselves to prescribe the form that open learning should take, they may be missing the point, regardless of how radical or Utopian their orientation. Thus in relation to schooling Giroux claims:

'The interface between theory and practice is not at the point where "radicals" provide prescriptions and parents, workers and the oppressed receive and utilize

them; instead it is at the point where these various groups come together and raise the fundamental question of how they may enlighten each other, and how through such an exchange (of theoretical positions) a mode of practice might emerge in which all groups may benefit.' (Giroux, 1983)

We are suggesting that the principles which should guide those of us who claim a commitment to openness in learning are dialogue and critical reflexivity. By dialogue, we mean a commitment to engaging with the aspirations, demands and experience of those whose learning interests we are claiming to serve. This implies a continuous process, not a one-off piece of 'market research'. By critical reflexivity, we mean a continual examination and questioning of the basic assumptions that underly our practice and of the interests that guide it. This implies going beyond, or beneath, the level of our conscious intentions in search of those aspects of our practice in which we work against openness but of which we are unaware.

What, then, are we suggesting actually needs to be done? At a general level there is a need to develop a tighter, more discriminating language for talking about and thinking about open learning. It must make it possible to distinguish between different degrees or dimensions of openness at the different levels of philosophy and practice, so that we shall no longer need to deal with everything in terms of a single all-embracing, overworked and ill-defined dichotomy – 'open/closed'.

Also, at a general level there is a need for a greater understanding of the impact of 'context' on the experience of openness. This means more research into the influence of social, political, economic, technological, organizational and personal factors upon open learning. These must include their influence not only upon decisions to provide open learning opportunities and upon the form they eventually take, but also upon decisions to 'take up' (or not) those opportunities and indeed upon the propensity for individuals to recognize them or regard them as relevant to themselves.

There are also some more particular aspects of open learning 'design' that need attending to. So, for example, where 'open' is being considered also in terms of 'distant' the notion of dialogue between educational provider and educational user becomes more complicated. Meighan suggests that materials, resources and texts are haunted by the ghosts of their producers.

'Their inaccuracies, distortions and biases are embedded in their writing and designing and may pass unrecognized and unchallenged.' (Meighan, 1981)

There is a need to experiment with the production of 'dialogical' texts and materials. This implies more than those which allow or encourage users to create their own meanings. It implies somehow enabling 'learners' to engage with and change the thinking of the producers.

The same argument applies at the level of overall pro-

grammes. There is a need to explore designs that contain within them mechanisms for their own continuing transformation based upon dialogue between user and producer.

There is, however, an obvious problem in the suggestion of design for dialogue. Dialogue is itself a complicated process needing particular skills, not least language skills. So perhaps attention needs first to be paid to helping people develop these skills. But how do we do this if not through the process of dialogue? And who has determined that 'they' need it anyway?

There is a similar conundrum involved in the assumption underlying our own arguments. That is that openness, whatever it is, is good and people should have it. But Magee, in discussing Karl Popper's view of the Open Society and the forces working against it, suggests:

'We purchase freedom at the cost of security, equality at the cost of our self-esteem, and critical self-awareness at the cost of our peace of mind. The price is steep: none of us pays it happily, and many do not want to pay it at all.' (Magee, 1973)

So does all this mean we have to give up our dreams? We think not, but it does mean starting with the way things are at present and being prepared for our dreams to change.

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Biographical notes

Richard Boot and Vivien Hodgson are both members of the Centre for the Study of Management Learning, University of Lancaster. Richard Boot started his career working for a major UK oil company. Prior to joining the Centre in 1980, he had held academic posts at City University Business School and London Business School. He has a continuing interest in the relationship between learning and experience and in

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tioner, and is particularly interested in the different ways in which it is possible to support such learning.

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