

**GLOBALISATION AND OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING:
POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS FOR
NOMADIC AND TRAVELLER EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Globalisation is a 'hot topic', engendering widely ranging analysis and emotion. Globalisation, particularly in concert with open and distance learning, is claimed by some commentators to promote the recognition and valuing of difference and by others to perpetuate the marginalisation of groups who deviate from 'the norm'. This debate applies also to the education of nomads and Travellers such as pastoralists and circus and fairground or show people. In some cases, their mobility is effectively articulated with global flows and crossing national boundaries; in other cases, that mobility is seen as damaging to economic development, particularly in 'Third World' countries. The argument is illustrated by six national studies of nomadic and Traveller education in Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe (Danaher, 2000a). The paper concludes that attending to the sociocultural and political, as much as to the financial and technological, dimensions of globalisation is crucial if the possibilities for nomadic and Traveller education are to be realised and if the problems are to be minimised. Central to that process is the nomads' and Travellers' capacity to set the educational agenda for themselves.

Introduction

Globalisation is a 'hot topic' in contemporary thought. By this I mean that all manner of claims are made for and against globalisation; the term pulses through academic and media discourses, and it generates emotion as much as (or perhaps more than) analysis. Apparently coined in the mid 1980s, 'globalisation' has become in many quarters "“globe-babble”" (Hoogvelt, 1997, pp. 114, 116) – or, as Perraton (2000) pointed out, "Globalisation can, of course, like language, be used to explain anything" (p. 152). This view was cogently synthesised by Beck (2000):

Globalization has certainly been the most widely used – and misused – keyword in disputes of recent years and will be of the coming years too; but it is also one of the most rarely defined, the most nebulous and misunderstood, as well as the most politically effective. (p. 19)

Globalisation is concerned with the intersection on an international scale of such elements as cultural practices, finance and technologies. In combination, these phenomena constitute a fundamental and enduring change to existing assumptions and practices. Such change provides simultaneously possibilities for empowerment of previously disadvantaged groups and problems with that potential empowerment (because of the charge that globalisation is complicit with winners rather than losers and is not a politically innocent process).

The question whether globalisation promotes or hinders social improvement for marginalised groups is played out in debates about open and distance learning technologies and their relevance for different kinds of learners in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, considerable hype is attached to claims that these

technologies have shifted the balance of power from the producer to the consumer of knowledge, through references to 'just in time' learning and 'flexible delivery' of that learning. On the other hand, equally strong claims have been made that globalisation assists rich nations and groups to grow richer and leaves poor communities further behind. This view underpinned much of the rationale for the anti-globalisation protests in Mexico City in 1995 (Karliner, 1997), and more recently in Genoa in July 2001.

An informed understanding of this debate, and of the rightness or otherwise of particular claims about globalisation and open and distance learning, requires attention to be paid to specific groups of learners. This paper scrutinises the links between globalisation and open and distance learning as they apply to learners who are mobile for various reasons: barge people, circus people, fairground or show people, Gypsy Travellers, migrant fisherpeople and nomadic pastoralists. These people occupy every inhabited continent on earth, and they vary from very small communities to sizeable minorities within larger settled populations. They have in common a mobility of lifestyle and occupation that has rendered them invisible to, or subject to discrimination by, the state, including factors relating to educational provision.

The paper consists of three sections. Firstly, I analyse briefly some of the recent literature on globalisation, particularly as it impinges on open and distance learning. Secondly, I examine some recent accounts of nomadic and Traveller education in Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe in a special issue of the *International Journal of Educational Research* (Danaher, 2000a) to discern instances where globalisation provides opportunities for empowerment of these mobile learners. Thirdly, I interrogate the same accounts for examples where globalisation exerts a malign rather than a benign

influence on these learners' educational experiences and life chances. I conclude that it is crucial for the educational agenda to be set by nomadic and Traveller people themselves if globalisation's potential for empowerment is to be realised and its possible malign influence is to be defused. Furthermore, this controlling of the educational agenda requires proportionately much greater recognition to be given to globalisation as a sociocultural and political phenomenon, in addition to its financial and technological dimensions.

Globalisation and open and distance learning

The abundance of definitions of globalisation attests to both its significance and its complexity. According to Beck (2000), globalisation (which he distinguished from 'globalism' and 'globality'), "denotes the *processes* through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks" (p. 11). Prakash and Hart (2000) (emphasising the economic dimension of globalisation, and distinguishing it from 'internationalisation') similarly called globalisation "a *process* of market integration, primarily through the establishment of value chains that are increasingly dispersed geographically" (p. 5). Evans (1997) emphasised a different dimension: "Globalisation can be viewed as substantially a cultural process, or rather as a collection of processes which connect and fuse previously relatively discrete cultures together" (p. 7).

Rather than seeking a single definition of globalisation, it is preferable to acknowledge that different authors highlight separate elements of the phenomenon for particular purposes. Globalisation has been variously identified as exhibiting five

dimensions of global cultural flows (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes) (Apparadurai, 1990); as having “political-economic, socio-cultural and technological dimensions” (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000, p. 147); as displaying “links and institutions” as well as “culture and consciousness” (Lechner & Boli, 2000, p. 1); and as involving “the dimensions of *communications technology, ecology, economics, work organization, culture and civil society*” (Beck, 2000, p. 19).

Apart from definitions and dimensions, it is helpful to consider some of the questions asked about globalisation. Representatively, Lechner and Boli (2000) identified six such questions:

- What does globalisation involve?
- Is globalisation new?
- Is globalisation driven by the expanding market?
- Does globalisation make the world more homogeneous?
- Does globalisation determine local events?
- Is globalisation harmful? (pp. 1-3)

I am less concerned with addressing these questions in general terms than with using them to illustrate several of the debates attending globalisation. These debates centre on whether and how globalisation is beneficial or harmful, whether it is a servant of the market or a harbinger of culture, and whether it promotes homogenisation of daily life. These debates also underpin the uneasy uncertainty – identified earlier in this paper – about whether globalisation brings with it possibilities of empowerment or problems of continued marginalisation.

That same uneasy uncertainty underlies discussions of the links between globalisation and open and distance learning. As with accounts of globalisation *per se*, discussions of those links vary considerably – and reflect the ideological assumptions and interests of their authors. Mason (1998) argued that the jury is still out:

The big issue in global education is the cultural one, and...most practitioners have hardly begun to tackle it. Much of the promise of the globalisation movement in education depends on how successfully cultural differences are addressed, once the first wave of enthusiasts gives way to the mass adopters. (p. x)

Field (1995) made the important point that assessing globalisation's impact on open and distance learning requires attention being paid to the agency of learners:

What I am proposing is rather that we need to take the acts of consumption as seriously as we do those of production, and recognise that distance open learning is used by active consumers within real, often highly localised yet still complex social, cultural and economic contexts. (p. 282)

Edwards (1995) was generally optimistic, observing that “globalisation reconfigures the global–local nexus, intensifying the importance of place and cultural difference even as trends towards global cultural uniformity appear to increase” (p. 248). Moreover, “forms of open learning, including distance learning, provide the possibility for the affirmation of a sense of place based on localised requirements and the recognition of difference” (p. 251).

Perraton (2000) observed relatively little impact of globalisation on open and distance learning:

...globalisation's main effect has not been in the development of international policy for open and distance learning, or the establishment of specialised agencies, or the development of common courses, or in international enrolment but in accelerating and easing the diffusion of innovations....International forces and agencies do not seem to be operating with the intensity and extent, or with the speed and level of impact, that would...mark a fully globalised system. National policies, and national perceptions of the strength and weakness of distance education, remain the major determinants of its shape. (pp. 175-176)

Robertson (2000) was more certain of the negative and alienating educational effects of globalisation (which she associated with "fast capitalism"), although her focus was on teachers rather than on learners:

In the new era of fast capitalism and fast schools, teachers will be placed in a new exploitative relationship with each other. If my analysis is correct, the rise of teachers as a professional class will be limited to the rise of more individualised occupational identities with their own vantage points and self-interested objectives. (p. 213)

This necessarily selective account of the globalisation literature, especially as it intersects with open and distance learning, highlights some of the eddies and flows attending educational provision in a globalised environment. Some commentators are optimistic about the empowerment of previously disadvantaged learners; others are pessimistic; still others prefer to 'wait and see'. I turn now to locate this broad discussion in the particular context of nomadic and Traveller education in Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe. In doing so, I conceive of the ongoing debate about the

possibilities and problems for improving educational opportunities for nomads and Travellers as reflecting several of the wider issues of access, control and power identified above.

Possibilities for nomadic and Traveller education

The 'field' of nomadic and Traveller education research is complex and growing strongly (Danaher, 2000b). Before the invention of agriculture in the Neolithic Revolution, all human communities were mobile hunters and gatherers, and large numbers of nomadic pastoralists remain in several African and Asian countries. Separate groups of occupational Travellers, operating barges in inland waterways, performing in travelling circuses and following the fairground or show circuits, live in Australia, Europe and North America. Gypsy Travellers live in several European countries; some retain their mobile lifestyle, while others have opted for a settled existence. New (Age) Travellers, also particularly common in Europe, have moved in the opposite direction and opted out of settled society with varying degrees of permanence.

These groups of mobile people clearly differ fundamentally from one another. Yet the fact that they are itinerant for some or all of their lives renders them at a common disadvantage from their permanently settled counterparts. That disadvantage takes many forms, but what concerns me here is its educational dimension. The earlier reference to the Neolithic Revolution is a timely reminder that mass schooling was an outcome of the Industrial Revolution, with its demands for a cheap, relatively well skilled labour force. Mobile people, by following a lifestyle that predated the Neolithic Revolution, present a challenge to permanent residence, mass schooling and the other

appurtenances of industrial capitalism. The latter's response has been termed 'sedentarism' (McVeigh, 1997), a term that evokes the range of prejudice and discrimination endured by mobile groups, including factors relating to educational provision.

Herein lies the strongest possibility that globalisation might help to provide a more appropriate and productive form of educational provision for mobile people than they have previously received. This is on the assumption that some forms of globalisation are associated with postmodernity's recognition and valuing of difference (Edwards, 1995), and that they challenge modernity's links with industrial capitalism (including mass schooling). For this to translate effectively into nomadic and Traveller education, there would need to be evidence that one of the undeniable strengths of mobile groups – their capacity to cross borders that would otherwise limit freedom of thought and action – can be linked with globalisation to result in a freer, more appropriate schooling system.

Of the eight national studies of nomadic and Traveller education canvassed in the special issue of the *International Journal of Educational Research* (Danaher, 2000a) mentioned above, this possibility for empowerment of such education is largely restricted to the Australian and European cases. The most strikingly successful example is the Australian fairground or show people (Danaher & Danaher, 2000). These people, who had experienced generations of educational neglect and marginalisation, had successfully lobbied for a specialised program within an existing educational bureaucracy, and then for a separate school for themselves. Part of their armoury in achieving this exceptional educational outcome was to deploy discourses associated

with globalisation to considerable effect. For example, they emphasised ideas such as ‘social justice’ and ‘access and equity’, which circulated around the globe from the late 1980s. Similarly, they linked their aspirations with the Australian federal government’s policy on opening new schools in the late 1990s, which articulated with globally circulating ideas about increasing parental participation in deciding the form and substance of schooling provision.

The European cases also demonstrated the positive outcomes of globalisation being linked with open and distance learning. The European Federation for the Education of the Children of the Occupational Travellers (EFECOT), founded in 1988, beginning operations in 1989 and based in Brussels, has used its extensive networks with European Union countries to lobby for improved educational provision – including open and distance learning – that extends beyond national borders. This lobbying has resulted in direct benefits for groups as varied as Gypsy Travellers and fairground people in Scotland (Jordan, 2000, p. 260) and in England (Kiddle, 2000, p. 272), and Dutch bargee families (Scholten, 2000, p. 282).

Problems for nomadic and Traveller education

The preceding section of the paper outlined ways in which globalisation creates new possibilities for more appropriate educational provision, including open and distance learning, for nomads and Travellers. I turn now to examine the reverse proposition: that globalisation is a force for the further marginalisation of nomads and Travellers. The logic underpinning this proposition is that, rather than globalisation promoting the celebration of difference associated with postmodernity (Edwards, 1995), globalisation

is an agent of late capitalism and encourages cultural homogenisation that threatens the survival of alternative lifestyles (Barber, 1995) – presumably including mobile populations.

The African and Asian cases demonstrate powerfully the idea that the positive effects of globalisation noted above are by no means global in their extent. In Nigeria, where nomadic pastoralists own ninety per cent of the nation's cattle, there were examples of appropriate nomadic education prior to the 1990s but they were small scale and sporadic (Umar & Tahir, 2000). During the 1990s, several positive developments took place, including the expansion of the Nigerian National Commission for Nomadic Education and the establishment of the *Journal of Nomadic Studies*. On the other hand, an increasingly repressive federal government and national instability have made it difficult for the Commission to achieve some of its key objectives. More broadly, pressures for national economic development have inevitably heightened pressures on nomadic pastoralism as a way of life that might be constructed as inimical to such national development. That is, if one facet of globalisation is the encouragement of so-called 'Third World' countries to 'catch up' to the economic progress already experienced in the 'First World', supposedly pre-industrial forms of economic activity such as nomadic pastoralism can come to be viewed as even more outmoded and a threat to national progress in a globalised world.

That same combination – rushing to join the 'club' of globalised, late capitalist economies and regarding mobile populations as at best an anachronism and at worst a threat to entry to that 'club' – is also apparent in India. Despite the rhetorical promise of India's endorsement of "Education for All", educational provision for the approximately

ninety thousand nomadic pastoralist Rabaris of Kachch in western India has been disjointed and piecemeal (Dyer, 2000). According to Dyer:

The research study reported in this chapter shows not only how difficult a notion education is, but also some of the processes of developing understandings of the complex relationships between education and development that underpin the notion of EFA [“Education for All”]. (p. 249)

This “complex relationship between education and development” articulates with the connections between globalisation and open and distance learning. In India, as in Nigeria, the impact of globalisation not only perpetuates the nomadic pastoralists’ educational marginalisation but also encourages the enduring prejudice against their claim to live a separate existence from their settled peers.

In Australia, while the show people have been largely successful in lobbying for the educational provision that they most desired, itinerant circus performers and workers have been less effective in achieving their educational aspirations. Historically, circus people were recognised for their indispensable contribution to a vast travelling show industry that entertained Australians from the 1840s to the 1930s (St Leon, 2000). Whether the technological developments that caused that recognition to fade – including radio, cinema and television – are considered part of globalisation, there is little doubt that globalised technologies such as the Internet make it less rather than more likely for people to wish to view a live circus performance. Similarly, moves to ban circus animals, which can be considered part of the globalised environmental movement, have threatened the livelihood of traditional circuses – in Australia and elsewhere – and need to be engaged with in some way by circus personnel (Moriarty, 2000, p. 303).

Conclusion

In 1997 a colleague and I (Danaher & Wyer, 1997) interrogated the interplay between globalisation and Australian fairground or show culture. Our conclusion was largely optimistic:

Our study of the education of the show children indicates that such a minority group has the capacity to refine its own culture within the dominant culture and that this capacity is vital if its future generation is to be able to enter the dominant culture at will and to be able to take from that culture whenever required. What we see here is globalisation, rather than domination, becoming a tool for cultural maintenance and development. (p. 110)

The optimism of that earlier and more restricted analysis has been somewhat tempered by this geographically enlarged account of the links and tensions among globalisation, open and distance learning and nomadic and Traveller education. On the one hand, the possibilities outlined above – centred on Australian show people and European occupational Travellers – indicate that globalisation can indeed function to promote the postmodernist project of recognising and valuing difference, by contesting the modernist boundaries within and among countries – just as mobile groups have crossed those boundaries for generations. On the other hand, the tendency for globalisation to be complicit with pressures for economic development in ‘Third World’ countries has a direct and deleterious impact on educational provision for African and Asian nomadic pastoralists.

A recurring question in this analysis of the possibilities and problems of globalisation has been who has been able to set the educational agenda for nomads and Travellers. The Australian show people, EFECOT and the mobile groups for whom EFECOT advocates might lay claim to having a direct input into the agenda of the most appropriate forms of educational provision for their needs and circumstances. Conversely, despite the rhetoric of “Education for All”, African and Asian nomadic pastoralists, and to some extent Australian circus people, have far less influence on how education – including open and distance learning – is organised in relation to them. Indeed, either official ‘others’ claim to speak for them or they are entirely sidelined from such discussions and their presence is elided – in keeping with the construction that their continued existence in their current livelihood and a nation’s economic development are mutually exclusive.

Many factors can be adduced to explain why globalisation can promote nomadic and Traveller education in some contexts and threaten it in others. Following the notion of setting and controlling an agenda, a major factor is undoubtedly that globalisation is a sociocultural and a political phenomenon, as much as an economic manifestation or a set of technologies. That is, nomadic and Traveller education, which in many instances includes some form of open and distance learning, is far more than ensuring that nomads and Travellers are equipped with certain basis skills to equip them to participate in the broader society. On the contrary, nomadic and Traveller education is a crucial element of endorsing and supporting nomads’ and Travellers’ desire to live a lifestyle and pursue a livelihood that has survived for generations, despite prejudice from settled communities and discrimination by the capitalist and industrial state. To the extent that

globalisation, acting in concert with postmodernity, can promote that lifestyle and uphold that livelihood, its sociocultural and political dimensions are clearly evident. They are also but contrastingly evident if globalisation, as an ally of national development for 'Third World' countries, threatens the rights of nomads and Travellers to live their lives as they wish and to aspire to appropriate educational provision. It is this enduring and fundamental tension that makes globalisation such a 'hot topic' for both open and distance learning and nomadic and Traveller education.

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