Imagining What is Open: An Interview with Sir John Daniel
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Sir John Daniel is the president and chief executive officer of the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, Canada. He has served in myriad academic leadership positions, including vice president for learning services at Athabasca University, president of Laurentian University, and vice chancellor of the Open UK University. Before coming to the Commonwealth of Learning in 2004, he was assistant director-general for education at UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Sir John Daniel is the author of many books, most recently, Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All *(Routledge, 2010). We interviewed him on 21 July 2011. Thanks to Sterling Treadwell for an initial transcription of the conversation. Thank you to Sir John Daniel for his willingness to work on this interview with us.*

Alan Mandell (AM): Can you describe some of the work you have been doing in the relatively new world of open resources?

Sir John Daniel (JD): We should go right back to the mission of the Commonwealth of Learning, which is learning for development. We're in the business of helping the developing countries of the Commonwealth to expand and improve the learning that takes place in their countries on all levels -- anything from open universities to rural development, secondary schooling and other aspects of learning, whether on the Web or in traditional forms. In that context, we're very keen to get the maximum mileage out of everything we do and to make it as "open" as possible. Often we are talking about tools, guides, books and so on, but more recently we got involved in helping others to produce learning materials. We took the decision some while ago to make those freely available.

Nan Travers (NT): Can you give us an example?

JD: Let me start with secondary schooling. For us, the world's biggest educational challenge at the moment is what we call "the secondary surge." For years now, governments and international bodies like the World Bank have been investing in trying to achieve universal primary education. We're not there yet -- there are still some countries with gaps like Nigeria and Pakistan, but by and large, most countries can see the end of that tunnel. And although the last few percentage points of children of primary age are quite difficult to chase up and get into school, there is a feeling among many that the issue is nearly solved. The problem, of course, is that this success creates an issue at the next stage. One scholar estimates that around the world there are some four hundred million children between the ages of 12 and 17 who are not in secondary school. To us that is really the world's biggest educational challenge.

As a modest contribution to that, we have been working with six countries to produce a complete senior secondary curriculum grades 10 to 12 as open education resources, which those countries and anyone else in the world can use. The six countries will take each other's materials, adapt them to their own national curriculum, and then they will have a complete curriculum to offer. We've done this, primarily, with what we call "Open Schools," which are distance learning operations aimed at secondary school children using materials that are freely available and can be shared, repurposed and reused.

AM: You have been working with the connections between wider access, lower costs and higher quality. So in the activities that you've been describing, where does the "quality"- side fit in?

JD: This particular project is a good example. A lot of effort went into making sure that these learning materials were of high quality. We had a whole process around designing them with workshops, instruction design templates, and so on. But then there was a formative evaluation of all the materials done by the South African Institute for Distance Education, as a result of which further revisions were done. So we're pretty confident that these materials will be as good as any commercially available text books or other learning materials. We're obviously not pretending that quality education simply amounts to quality learning materials, but there is lot of evidence from the UNESCO surveys that having effective quality learning materials available is a major contribution to quality education.

Example number two, where we are more peripheral players, is a very large program called TESSA, Teacher Education South Sahara Africa. This is a consortium of a dozen African universities, the U.K. Open University, ourselves, UNESCO, various people. And they have developed hundreds of open education resources for teacher education and particularly classroom-focused teacher education. These are being used all over Africa in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili, and 320,000 African teachers were using these materials last year. Since they are classroom-focused teacher education resources, we can assume that millions of children in their classrooms are also benefitting. So it's a perfect example of the use of open education resources to have the combination of global quality and local relevance.

NT: In looking at these frameworks, is there much attention to how to *assess* the learning that is occurring, or is the focus more typically on what curricula needs to be in place?

JD: Because these resources are developed through a systematic process, including instructional design, you could say the assessment is built in from the start. It's not always true that the instructional design process starts with designing the final assessment and then works back from there, but nevertheless, I think this process makes everyone involved much more conscious of the learning objectives and how they are going to assess them than the conventional way in which individual teachers might design a course starting with the content they want to transmit.

AM: When you visited us at SUNY Empire State College last spring (Sir John Daniel delivered the Boyer Family Lecture at the college's annual All College Conference), you spoke about what you called "dimensions of openness." I took this to mean that, historically, most universities used a "take it or leave it" approach, but within such a system questions about the possibilities of knowledge that are *not* contained in the curricula were not seriously taken up. In this context, do you think about these open models on which you are working as offering significant criticisms of schooling in general and of the university in particular as we know it?

JD: There is no question about that. After all, if we go back to the moment when studies were opened up by the University of London about 150 years ago, at that time the accepted world of knowledge -- the canon, if you like -- was a whole lot smaller. So when the University of London said "We will offer an examination in economics and here is the curriculum. You prepare yourself and challenge the examination; if you pass, that's fine," there probably wasn't too much argument about the scope of economics and where it took you, as well as where it didn't. That course has changed utterly. The field of knowledge is now so big and the combinations of it are now so huge that there are going to be areas where the students themselves want to do things which either the university doesn't have the scale to offer to everyone or simply would like to have tested with first. So the students can design the curriculum, negotiate with a mentor and so on. What I think must be helpful to students today is that as they get going -- once you've agreed on what combination of subjects a student is going to explore -- there is a whole lot more stuff out there that they can use and benefit from that might not have existed 40 years ago.

NT: There is surely another connection here with assessment to the extent that the evaluation of experiential learning that occurs outside the academy was another way of acknowledging that all knowledge is not the monopoly of the university, just like all resources are not born from the university. Does PLA/RPL thus become an issue?

JD: I think the honest and short answer is *no*. And that's primarily because we're dealing with mass, with large scale. And this is just my take on our particular mission. I talked about 400 million kids between 12 and 17 who are not in school. There is such a huge demand for a mass product, something standardized to take kids through the basics of mathematics, their own language and so on, that we have not gotten into the kind of things that you're talking about. That's in no way to depreciate them. My experience of experiential learning and the assessment has given me a healthy respect for the difficulties. This goes back to a time when I was the vice chancellor at the Open University where, because we were the largest national institution, I felt we had to support the government's policy of national vocational frameworks and vocational qualifications (which was a big push in the late 90s and since). The problem with those frameworks was that many of them were assessed on a portfolio basis. My experience is that this is quite a challenge because while you can clearly do a good assessment of things on the basis of portfolios, I've never really seen a way of getting the cost down because it's a very personalized kind of thing. I remember one of my own staff at the university doing one of these qualifications, and when she finished, although she was very proud of her qualification, she said that, frankly, the task of creating a portfolio was probably greater than going back to college and doing the same course in a formal way. That's unfortunate and I hope we've moved on since then. At the Commonwealth of Learning, we have a pretty large task to get a standard product out there and assessing it in a more standard way so that we don't have to worry too much about the assessment of prior learning.

NT: I think we have "moved on," but I also see that your current work and the assessment of prior learning work are both focused on different types of access.

JD: I suppose if you asked some of them: "How do you deal with kids who say: '*I'm not in secondary school because I never finished primary school*'?" I think my answer there would be much in the same spirit that the Open University operates on in Britain, which is to say that we will not have any entry requirements for admission. Only failure to succeed in the courses will be a bar to progression because of our belief that someone who is motivated and intelligent can make up a terrific amount of lost ground. And I've seen in India where they had taken some teenagers and given them a three month residential course. In that three month course they were pretty well able to bring them up to speed for the whole primary curriculum, which is a good example of how fast kids can learn if they're put into a really stimulating and high pressure environment. I think if we're using prior learning as a prerequisite for the learning people really want to do, we sometimes exaggerate those requirements, which is a very different thing from assessing the learning for someone that wants to be certified for right now.

AM: I would like to return to the issue of scale. And I am thinking here about a RPL/PLA model on a national level, in for example South Africa, which, at least in part, is trying to connect RPL/PLA to the goal of achieving greater social justice. How do you do this so that issues of fairness of accreditation and credentialing can be accounted for *and* that you have created a system that is both user-friendly and something that students can successfully complete? The point you made about the person from your staff is a significant point. You can't have a system that is so astonishingly complex that it creates, in effect, even more barriers to completion.

JD: That's right. I think that in creating anything that is new in the academic world, people tend to be more Catholic than the pope, especially in terms of assessing it and making sure it's on the up and up. One assumes that as time goes on and people get more familiar with it they become a little less "over the top" in demanding things. Though it is not my area of expertise, we still try to encourage this recognition of what someone knows and network them with other people in the Commonwealth who are interested in this area. Clearly people now

have very different trajectories through the education system. We all have many stories of people who suddenly got into the right educational environment and just took off. It's very important that one facilitates that with assessment that is helpful. It's all very well to say: "Come in and see if you can make it," but at the OU we did try to ensure that the students had a reasonable chance at that. We got applications from students who clearly had very rudimentary educational backgrounds. They were admissible but we got our counselors onto them and said: "You do realize this is going to be challenging and if you want advice on how you might prepare yourself better then here is some advice;" or on the other hand, "If you think you can hack it then in you come and do it." There is no point in setting people up for failure, especially for people who have already experienced a lot of failure already, so I think that's part of the whole dynamic of assessing prior learning. Presumably some of that, in terms of admitting people into a new course, can be pretty informal. A good counselor in a lengthy interview can get some idea of whether someone has appropriate background knowledge and above all the motivation and intelligence to hack the course that they want to take.

NT: There has been some very interesting research that you have probably seen by CAEL about the fact that retention and graduation rates end up being significantly higher among students who have the opportunity to display their experiential learning through standardized tests or using a portfolio model. It is good to have evidence now that offers prior learning for credit opportunities for university students—this really is a motivation for students to persist and complete their degrees.

JD: And I am sure that's true. At the Open University, we used to monitor very closely what happened with the students who didn't have the "normal" entry qualifications. Our experience was that the first year they struggled a bit more than other students, the second year there was almost no difference and the third year they were right up there and often did brilliantly. I think that places like Empire State College and the OU have built their whole missions on the fact that intelligent and highly motivated people who have decided they really need to do something can perform at a very high level. They just need to be encouraged along the way by being told that what they've done is OK and great preparation for what they want to do next. This is surely part of the access discussion.

NT: What you're saying here is also connected to the world of open learning resources. More and more people will have access -- and will take advantage of that access -- to all kinds of learning resources, which will lead to increased knowledge and growth. This really questions the role of higher education. How does any institution begin to put its arms around the vastness of knowledge that can be coming to the institution, assessing and then accrediting that knowledge? I was wondering if you had done some thinking about what this might look like in the future.

JD: I don't think I can give you any startling revelations, but I think you're quite right. The other day it had occurred to me that what we're moving to in higher education is much more of a self-service culture. You can all remember that not all that long ago you would drive into a gas station and some man would fill your tank for you. Now most of the time you might have a small line of "full service" and all the rest are "self serve." When we first moved to France in 1969, you had to stand at a counter and ask for what you wanted and the grocer got it from behind the shelf. Now, and for a long time, you go in and fill your basket and serve yourself. Higher education has taken some time to get to that stage but it is clearly getting to that stage now. This is a radical change. So instead of having, if you like, instructors, lecturers, professors behind the counters serving up the knowledge in the lecture theaters, they are now much more in the role of the checkout clerk where students have filled their baskets with stuff and want to know how much it costs. That's where we're going once we've made the adjustment.

AM: So here is surely where attention to the assessment side becomes critical.

JD: I'm still conservative enough to think that at the end of the day you want some creditable authority that

society recognizes to say: "Yes, this is solid knowledge/experience/expertise and society should be ready to trust that this person has what it takes to do a job based on that knowledge." This traditionally has been the role of universities, colleges and schools. Now there's a whole new dimension that I'm not really confident that I can make judgments about yet because it's too early; it's in the area they are calling "badges." A community of practice will essentially offer its expertise (usually online). People who go through a process to acquire that expertise will then be given a badge, which says: "We, as this community of practice, believe that you have achieved this level in whatever it is." Now some people are very skeptical about that and say: "Well it's only as good as the community of practice." But of course the problem -- one that we mentioned earlier -- is that today, knowledge is so vast that no university is going to have the communities of practice in all the areas that society might need for specialized knowledge. So why don't you allow groups to certify themselves? We already do this in the case of the Cisco academies, the Microsoft academies; the "badge academies" is really an example of that. It throws this whole accreditation concept back on those who are using and accepting it. If, for example, employers, graduate admissions offices, immigration people, were to carefully check all the qualifications put in front of them, the *degree-mill* business would be shut down in a very short time. But they don't, and so you have people working for government offices with phony credentials. How we get a culture in place that makes people much more educated in judging qualifications and able to make assessments on who is standing behind this particular knowledge is a challenge. But, after all, there is a very solid mechanism in place for checking that passports are genuine and it would not be that difficult to extend that technology to university diplomas and transcripts. I am sure that will happen over time, but even getting to that stage that still doesn't deal with the problem of these *informal* kinds of certifications because they are often so specialized that you're really relying on that particular community of practice to certify it and it is very open to abuse. From my view, all of this is a very difficult issue to handle at the societal level.

AM: Are you imagining some type of central authoritative body that would have responsibility for these kinds of assessments at the national level, for example?

JD: I suspect that might come, but it's such a moving target that what you have at first would be lower levels of aggregation in the same way that I think most governments are getting their acts together on knowing and proclaiming which higher education institutions are legitimate in their jurisdictions. UNESCO has a portal where you can go in and find out whether a university from country "x" is a legitimate university recognized by that country. To date some 40 to 50 countries (including the U.S.) have put their lists of institutions on there. When we had the degree-mill international committee a few years back, we came to the conclusion very quickly that you could only create such "white lists" because "black lists" were really problematic. Naming phony institutions didn't work because the first thing the phony institution does is change its name. The white list is only really beginning, as we've only got 40 to 50 countries out of about 190 on there so far. But I think that's the next stage. But at the end of the day, it's unreasonable to expect individual employers to make their own judgments. So there's going to be a role for some *body* (whether it's a national body or a private body recognized by the state). This is basically the mode of accreditation that you have in the U.S. You have private bodies doing things and the state recognizes them and that's OK, whereas in most countries, that function is provided by the public sector. But the function is critical.

AM: I think this is really fascinating because one of the significant challenges in PLA/RPL and in a world of open resources is that in both cases we are inviting learning into the academy that the academy didn't create. And thus the question: "Who is the most valid assessor of that learning?" seems to me to be quite complex. If the assessor is expected to come from the university – from the bastion of people who *question* that learning -- then that "judge" might not be the fairest evaluator of knowledge and skills that someone has gained.

JD: I think that is absolutely true, although it is also true that universities have been doing this for a lot longer than we'd like to think. Take fields like law. Much of law is not law that can be taught by university law professors. You've got to rely on people who are actually in the thick of it, doing the work every day, since the

laws are changing all the time. So you get those people in -- the adjuncts -- and they do the business. You co-opt them, if you like. What we're talking about here (because the university can't possibly co-opt enough people to deal with all aspects of knowledge) is to more or less "outsource" some of it by having networks of people who you trust to judge student learning. When I was at the Open University we had 8,000 part-time staff whom we trusted to assess student learning. Many of them, in all but the most academic areas, were practitioners from the various professional fields in which they were working. So it's not a sharp yes/no concept, but we're already doing it in some form. What we have to do is to expand our idea of what is "academic." At the Open University, I felt a bit of resistance from the faculty to getting us into this area of vocational qualifications because it seemed like something for the unwashed (even at a non-snobbish place like the Open University). Questions about what's academic and not academic become extremely difficult because I'm sure some of these "badges" in the software industry that I was talking about take you into quite advanced levels of reasoning and critical thinking, even though at the end of the day they have a very practical application. So it doesn't really behoove a university any longer to stand on its high horse and say it knows what knowledge is and how it can assess all of it. This is a very tricky idea, but I think now we have more arrows in our quiver than we did in our past.

NT: Building on that, we're really back into that basic question of what constitutes college level learning in the first place. What really does belong, what should be accredited, what should come from or at least be accepted by the academy?

JD: That is an extremely difficult challenge. As you know, one of your former Empire State College presidents, Jim Hall, was front and center of an attempt in the U.S. to define the "core curriculum" or to imagine what was "against" it. But I think that horse is out of the stable now. People used to joke that geography is what geographers do, and I think we've gotten to a stage where higher education is what higher education institutions do. And they have to make up their own minds about what that is. We have an interesting phenomena in Canada, which I am sure you have in the States as well, of university graduates coming out and going straight back to community colleges to get some more practical type of diploma or certificate because they find the job market a bit tough. Well that's fine, but chances are, before long, all the universities will add that "training" to their own curricula so their graduates can go out with the degree that also includes something that they can immediately go and take to the marketplace.

AM: Do you ever imagine that the direction that all of this is going in, the work of open educational resources, badges, PLA/RPL, and so on, will ultimately mean the demise of the university as we know it?

JD: I've thought about and written on this quite a bit. The fact is that most people who have predicted the demise of the university have gotten it wrong -- even an authority like Peter Drucker who, in around 1990, announced that the universities as we know them today would not exist in 30 years' time. We're now in 2011, so there's another nine years, but I see very little prospect that your 64 campuses of SUNY will all be out of business in nine years. What I do think is happening is that we are finally at a tipping point, which is going to induce some very radical transformations. Often these things start with economics, and as you know tuition fees in the U.S. have been rising considerably faster than inflation for 30 years. I think we're now at a stage where (without calling it a bubble) this is going to reverse for all kinds of reasons. First of all, it is becoming more expensive than many folks can bear after a prolonged recession. But also with all these new approaches and the self-service culture that I talked about, I think people are going to start to break ranks and offer much less expensive experiences. Some states are pressuring their universities to do this already.

AM: And then there are also the for-profits.

JD: I've written recently about the way the for-profits are working with the state universities in the U.S. to take some of their high demand graduate courses (and even undergraduate courses, for example in nursing,

secondary education, etc.) and offer them at scale and for much lower fees that most universities are used to charging, with the for-profit partner taking about 70 to 80 percent of the revenue. So models are changing. There will always be a place, I'm sure, for the highly elite prestige institutions where you come out with a nice address book from your classmates and you also come out with a good education. But I think the bulk business may be going elsewhere. I had made this forecast, which is perhaps more rhetorical than real because a counter-pressure will build up: if present trends continue, most teaching in the U.S. will be done by the for-profit sector in a relatively short number of years. The public sector will start to react, get its act together and counter that trend. But at the moment, the trend for students to want self-service, flexible e-learning and the trend of the for-profits to do a better job of offering it does lead you in some new directions.

NT: I'm wondering if possibly what has happened is that we have gotten very caught up in a particular model that many of us find very hard to let go of. In the United States, for example, where the faculty really do control the curriculum, there tends to be a legacy of "closed" rather than "open" curriculum. It is very difficult to get faculty to move toward new trends. By the time you get this new idea together, by the time you start developing the courses, by the time you get the new policies in place, it usually has taken five years -- five years for any substantive change! By then you would need to make another change and you've already missed the window. So, again, I am wondering about whether all of the factors we have been discussing, including the presence of so many open learning resources, will be able to help institutions shift faster to recapture that knowledge edge.

JD: There obviously have to be some pressures that make people dissatisfied with the present. Those pressures, in some institutions, are already economic pressures. Certain universities simply can no longer offer five modern languages, so they are starting to shut those offerings down and lay people off. That does get people and whole institutions into thinking of more creative ways to work together. But I think first and foremost there has to be a willingness to change. I've been very impressed by the work that Tony Bates did on e-learning in the U.S. He makes the point that when faculty do get into e-learning, they tend to do it along with their own model. The problem with this is it simply adds to the cost base and the quality is not all that good. This is why many institutions are getting creamed by the for-profits, who are making these changes in a more systematic way and get better quality. Sooner or later those collective and individual faculty say: "Wait a minute, instead of developing my Economics 100 course completely myself from scratch, if I look out there and see what's available; maybe I can put together a much more exciting course with less effort and greater quality." There's a terrific psychological leap there. Despite the arguments that this is really plagiarism and just using other people's work, people are getting there. After all, people are taking stuff from Google every day for various purposes, not whole courses but bits and pieces. I think there is now more of a cultural readiness to do that. It is a great psychological reversal into something like: "I'm not the source of knowledge or even necessarily the aggregator of knowledge. I am someone who selects knowledge for students to start with and then tries to follow them as they use it." It is a radical change, but it also brings me back to our discussion about the demise of the university. What that's leading us to is a much more self-service university. I mean, part of the reason the for-profits are laughing is that they don't have a huge infrastructure, they haven't been persuading rich people to build buildings on their campuses for a thousand years, they don't have football teams, they don't have a huge amount of sub-costs they need to maintain. They can go into e-learning, travel lightly and take advantage of having a much less costly model. Because their competition at the moment is the much more costly campus institutions, you can't blame them for charging what the market will bear. They have a really huge margin that they can cut their costs if the competition starts heating up. It's going to be quite interesting to watch.

AM: You are imagining *significant* change.

JD: Yes: I believe that the university is undergoing a massive change that will produce an even greater diversity of models. Some of the good campus and residential experiences will survive very nicely, others will

struggle a bit more and will need to be very clear with what exactly they are trying to do, particularly for the public state institutions who can straddle both face-to-face and e-learning. For them, being all things to all people is going to be a somewhat uncomfortable place to be. But, you also have to remember at the moment there are around 150 million higher education students in the world and projections are that by 2025 there will be 250 million. That's over 100 million more students in just less than 14 years. If you do the math and divide the 100 million by 14 years by 52 weeks, you come up with a rather startling figure. You would need to create three or four 30,000-student campuses every week between now and 2025. I doubt that's going to happen, but what it tells you is there is going to be a massive demand for tertiary education. Therefore in many countries, higher education has lots of time to get its act together and the U.S. could take in some of these people and keep itself going if, of course, it can offer it at a decent price. There are exceptions though. The U.S. is at a bit of a demographic dip at the moment, but not in the long term. China has a very substantial demographic dip in that age group and they will now achieve the participation rates that they want by adding what is in Chinese terms a relatively small number of students simply because the numbers in that 18 to 24-year-old age group are going to go down so steeply. But they are exceptions; in most of the world -- India and Africa, for example -- you've got very large numbers of people who are coming along. There are still countries with half the population range under the age of 15, and a lot where half the population's age is under 20. Since there is a massive surge out there, the problem is not a shortage of demand for higher education; the problem is having that demand satisfied in the right places with the programs that people actually want to study.

AM: And with the kind of quality one would hope to provide them?

JD: One of the encouraging things is that worldwide, governments have been stepping up to this with more and more determination over the last dozen years. I've been involved myself in programs that help to build the capacity of quality assurance bodies in developing countries where there was almost nothing 10 years ago and now they have quite a lot of good things going on. Additionally, you know when there is a high demand and not enough supply, the scams will get involved and that will become a problem for everybody to control. Nevertheless, I think investors are investing in higher education because it seems to be a good business to be in. We shouldn't be totally mournful and dismal about our prospects. It's good that some of us around the world, like Empire State College, are pushing the boundaries forward and trying to get into the new higher education space and show other people the way there.