

OPEN VIEW



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The OU continues to lead and innovate as a provider of flexible learning

Whole books are now being written about scholarship in a digital age. "Scholarship is scholarship," I hear you say. What more is there to add? Quite a lot, it turns out. We recently spent a considerable part of a conference at The Open University talking about what it meant to be a scholarly academic at The Open University in the 21st century.

This is an institution which has managed to combine excellent learning experiences for its students with scale (200,000 students' worth of scale). One of our not-so-secret weapons has been our use of course teams, rather than individuals, to produce learning resources. And such course teams include disciplinary experts, educational technology experts, media specialists, etc. The result is superb multimedia course materials which, together with careful student support based as locally to the student as possible and a marvellous virtual learning environment, has created a blended learning model which has proved very durable.

Technology was always envisaged as much more than a tool for The Open University. Of course, we have harnessed the tool for educational purposes; but more importantly it has made it possible for us to reach many people who were previously unreachable, and inspired in many more the excitement of learning and growing intellectually. We can now communicate more things with more people than has ever been possible in the past, and the imaginative use of the technologies and the social changes they have enabled has become fundamental to the achievement of the very mission of the university.

In this university, as you'd expect, we have a strong focus on knowledge media – on research which not only centres on the knowledge media but devises new ones, on the pedagogies that drive students' learning in this new environment, on ways of harnessing the media to improve learning or reach people in new ways. This is the very stuff of scholarship in The Open University. We've reached the point now where these media have such a powerful presence in our lives that they are changing the very nature of what academics do.

In the teaching role academics have always been the navigator of the student's journey through a wealth of resources, a designer of learning experiences. What has happened in the last few years is that design of the learning experience has become a lot more complex – and more interesting. Much imagination is required to harness the possibilities – but also much knowledge of the technologies. This is no longer something that can safely be delegated to one member of the course team. An academic who is not engaged in the technology will not be able to fully appreciate the possibilities and the learning design will be the poorer for it. So the academic's work is changing dramatically.

Scholarship in this century in this university is irrevocably tied to the technology and the knowledge media that constitute such important drivers in the society of which we are part. Such scholarship is part of the cultural capital of The Open University and the reason why it continues to innovate and maintain its leadership position in the open and distance learning world. It is a tough position in a fast-changing environment – but I wouldn't swap it!

OPEN EYE

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Prejudice under the microscope

TV's portrayal of women in science is undermining efforts to promote equal opportunities in the field, according to recent research. **Yvonne Cook** reports

Decades after equal opportunities legislation came into force, only one in five professionals working in science, engineering and technology is a woman. And one reason for this could be what our children watch on television.

Representations of women scientists in children's TV are stereotyped, selective and sparse, according to new research presented to the annual conference of the government-funded UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (UKRC).

A team of researchers from The Open University recorded two weeks' worth of programmes containing any aspect of science, engineering, technology and maths on all five UK terrestrial channels, and analysed all those aimed at children and young people. They followed this up by working with groups of children aged eight to 15, to see how their attitudes to these subjects were affected by what they watched.

One of the researchers' first findings was that men figured more heavily in all the programmes, with educational programmes and cartoons being the most biased. In educational programmes, the ratio of words spoken was 70:30 in favour of men; in cartoons, women's words made up less than 30 per cent.

"What we found in the programmes that we looked at is that representations of science and technology and professionals in these fields are very gendered," says Elizabeth Whitelegg, senior lecturer in the OU's Science faculty and co-leader of the research with social scientist Dr Richard Holliman.

"Even where women were better

represented – in current affairs programmes, for example – they were often not the people identified by the programme as 'experts'. They were the presenters. The perception this gives children is of an absence of women in these fields."

And the women scientists who do appear tend to conform to a narrow stereotype, particularly in fiction and cartoon series, says Whitelegg. "The female scientist tends to be unrealistically young for the position which she has reached, slim, attractive with long blonde hair which she flicks in a rather alluring manner, and wearing glasses which she takes off at crucial moments."

"There aren't very many diverse images of women sci-

'Lisa Simpson is good at maths and sciences – and she's fun and lively'



tists. This is something which other researchers have found, and which our research backs up. With men, stereotypes do exist, but you get a much broader range of representations. "It is a problem because if you only ever show high achievers as beautiful, then that's not a goal that many girls will feel they can achieve. You need to show the more ordinary ones as well."

The UKRC also believes that the media plays a key role influencing girls' views of science. It cites the big increase in applications from girls to study forensic science at university in the wake of the BBC drama *Silent Witness*, featuring the work of female pathologist Sam Ryan.

Dr Jennifer Carr is one of the scientists on Whitelegg's team involved in analysing children's reactions to what they see on TV. She says that when children were shown just two static images from programmes such as *The Simpsons* and *Spiderman*, they could identify which episode of the programme they were from, and recount the narrative. "The recall of these episodes was quite staggering. Children can remember these things for a long time, and the impressions they get from watching them are very important," she says.

The researchers did uncover some positive images in the programmes, she adds, sometimes in surprising places. "A good example is Lisa Simpson in *The Simpsons*. There is a very strong focus on maths and science in this series and on the fact that Lisa is good at these things. And she's fun, she's lively, she plays the saxophone. She appeals to both boys and girls."

On the other hand, even programmes aimed at young children can contain quite subtle gender stereotyping.

"We recorded an episode of *Captain Scarlet* where Captain Scarlet and Lieutenant Green, the female engineering officer, go to visit a new spaceship. The scene cuts between Captain Scarlet who is off discussing the weaponry and the engines, and Lieutenant Green who is left in the command area where the whole conversation is with a guy from the other ship who wants to take her out to dinner, and she tries to deflect his advances. And Captain Scarlet is aimed at eight, nine, 10 year olds."



Role model: girls are as good at science as boys, but are less likely to choose it as a career PHOTODISC

Whitelegg is also co-author of an Institute of Physics report called "Girls in the Physics Classroom", looking at how girls are turned off physics at school. She says the media is one factor in a "great web" of influences putting girls off science as they grow older. As well as narrowing girls' range of career options, it is also damaging to the economy, she says.

"The UK needs a lot more scientists, engineers and technologists for the future, and we don't have the numbers of people we need going in to that area after they leave school. It is a waste of resources when girls are as capable of doing science at school as boys are, as their results show, but they are not being attracted to careers in it."

The OU research team's report makes a number of recommen-

dations for change in the way science, engineering, technology and maths are presented in children's programmes, including giving a higher profile to women as experts and targets for the number of science professionals featured. The media watchdog Ofcom has asked for the recommendations from the report to feed into its ongoing Public Service Broadcasting Review. The researchers are also planning to expand their research to cover digital TV channels, websites, and the magazines and games associated with children's programmes.

However, it is becoming more difficult to influence the content of children's programmes, Whitelegg says, as a growing number are imported from other countries, primarily the US. "We are not expecting our research to

change the world overnight. But uncovering these issues will hopefully result in some guidelines for the media industry."

The UKRC annual conference also discussed research by Cardiff University which reveals that women scientists are often judged by the media on the basis of their sex appeal. Copies of all the research can be found on the Resource Centre website under Research at www.ukrc4setwomen.org.

The Open University is partnering the UKRC to offer a new online short course called Return to Science, Engineering and Technology, with fee support available for women seeking to return to work in science after a career break. For details go to www.open.ac.uk/study and search for T161.

Be witness to some trying times

A new Old Bailey website unearths a treasure trove of criminal history

A catalogue of crime in London has just been uncovered – thanks to the painstaking work of academic researchers and data experts who have made the proceedings of more than 197,000 crimes tried at London's Old Bailey freely available online.

The expanded Proceedings of the Old Bailey website is "a fund of social, legal and family history" according to Sheffield University historian Professor Robert Shoemaker, who co-directed the project along with Professor Clive Emsley of the Open University. Its aim was to expand the existing Old Bailey website, which was first launched in 2003, to include a searchable database of the court's records stretching from 1674 to 1913.

The website is described as "the largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published". It contains the full details of court proceedings, including names and punishments meted out to offenders. It includes some of the most sensational cases ever heard at the Old Bailey, such as the trial of Oscar Wilde for indecency and the conviction of infamous wife-killer Dr Crippen.

It also contains a fund of supporting historical information about crime, punishment and society from the 1600s to the 1900s. The site is designed not just for spe-



Centre court: London's Old Bailey GETTY IMAGES

cialist researchers but for amateur browsers. Because it can be searched by name, it is also being used by people researching their family history. The project involved scanning the court's original paper records, running to some 50 million words.

"Until now this treasure trove of social, legal and family history has only been available to a few dedicated historians, who were prepared to spend months peering at microfilms," says Shoemaker. "Now, everyone from schoolchildren and amateur historians to scholars working in a range of academic disciplines can have easy access to this wealth of information."

Professor Clive Emsley, who heads the OU's International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research, says: "What the Old Bailey Proceedings does is provide people with the opportunity to see what

crime was really like in the past. They can make comparisons and see close parallels to what's happening today. For example, we think of terrorism as being new, but within the Old Bailey Proceedings, people will see terrorists who are attempting to do the same things 100 years ago."

But while the website demonstrates that crimes such as mugging and terrorism are far from new on London's streets, it also shows how our attitudes to punishment have changed. Up to the 19th century thieves were being condemned to hang for offences as petty as shoplifting a handkerchief or a length of ribbon. However, pardons were handed out to at least 50 per cent of offenders condemned to death in the 18th century, and 90 per cent by the early 19th-century.

The Old Bailey proceedings are at www.oldbaileyonline.org/

NEWS IN BRIEF

DIG THE PAST?

If digging up the past appeals to you, you can explore your interest through a new Open University short course "Archaeology: The Science of Investigation". The course studies techniques used in the field and in the lab and is suitable for amateur archaeologists and keen beginners. For details go to www.open.ac.uk/study and search for SA188.

GOOD HEALTH

Do you have a story to tell about healthcare? Following Kathy Sykes' exploration of complementary medicine in the recent OU/BBC series *Alternative Therapies*, The Open University is conduct-

ing research into people's experiences of all types of health treatment. You can take part by joining in a series of discussion events called "Listen to Me, I'm a Patient", taking place in London, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leeds, Newcastle, Cardiff, Exeter and Belfast in May and June. See www.open2.net for details of all events.

PLAIN SPEAKING

Environmental groups are coming together at The Open University to conduct a 10-year project to save the UK's last remaining flood-plain meadows. These species-rich habitats, home to a huge range of flowering plants, birds and butterflies,

have declined by 98 per cent since the 1950s owing to new building and changes in farming practice. There are fears that the remainder could be lost through inappropriate management.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Mad about *James May's 20th Century? Missing Nation on Film? Good news – The Open University has just launched a bespoke DVD service which lets you watch your favourite bits of OU TV programmes over and over again. The service lets you pick out favourite episodes and mix and match with text and music to create a personalised DVD. For details see www.ouwcb.co.uk*