Oral histories and engaged perspectives:

In conversation with Rory McGreal

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Abstract

Dr. Rory McGreal describes his educational journey and career in distance education. He recounts his return to education as a mature student, participating in the first Canada-Russia university exchange program, earning a PhD, and becoming involved with distance education in various Canadian educational institutions including McGill University, Télé-université du Quebec, TeleEducation New Brunswick, and Contact North. He discusses the establishment of his UNESCO Chair in OER position at Athabasca University as well as his efforts with *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* (IRRODL) and the OER Knowledge Cloud while highlighting the challenges of open educational resources (OER) due to lack of educator awareness and resistance from publishers. He highlights the evolving role of educational technology, including artificial intelligence and reflects upon academic freedom, faculty rights, and collaboration. He also suggests areas for future historical research in the field of open and distributed education.

Keywords

Athabasca University; collaboration; distance education; educational technology; history; IRRODL; learning objects; open educational resources; OER Knowledge Cloud; UNESCO Chair

Kathryn Johnson (KJ):

Today is May 27, 2025. My name is Kathryn Johnson, and I am interviewing Dr. Rory McGreal. Rory, where did you grow up? How would you describe your education there?

Rory McGreal (RM):

I was born in England, and we immigrated to Toronto when I was seven years old. My parents are Irish. We lived in an Irish ghetto, and we went to Catholic schools. I was expelled from school at age 15. I was not a good student. I hitchhiked around Canada and worked odd jobs. Then I flew to Europe and stayed there for three or four years. I never finished high school.

It was just at the time before Ireland changed into a modern country. I worked on my uncle's farm in Ireland where my duties included cajoling an ass, carrying turf for the fire, cutting hay with a scythe, and chasing after sheep. It taught me a lot about people. One of the things I learned there was that in Canada, nobody really was bothered about your religion, one way or the other, even though in the 1950s in Toronto, the Orange Lodge ran everything. They would not hire Catholics. But we didn't really notice it too much. But in Ireland, you realize that if you don't go to church, you're not part of the community. It taught me about traditions and customs.

I also learned that you have to be careful what you say. Americans and Canadians are generally used to free speech, at least up until the last few years. I found that in small communities you have to size up who's listening, where the message might go, and what the effects of that message could be before speaking. I'm glad I learned that early in life, and it was very important for me, especially when I went studying in Russia, where you had to be very careful what you said, who you were saying it to, and the reason for saying it. Also, it allowed me to understand Russians better.

KJ:

How does a Canadian not graduate from high school and then go on to higher education? Is there something like in the States, we have the General Educational Development (GED) exam?

RM:

When I was working in England and in Ireland as a steel fixer, tying steel bars for pouring cement, I applied for assisted passage to Australia. In those days for ten pounds you could get assisted passage to Australia from Ireland. I was accepted for it and planned to go, but first I went back to visit my uncle Paddy McGreal in the west of Ireland. He told me, "Your best bet is to go back to school." He was one of the great mentors of my life, and I'm fortunate I listened to him. I couldn't go on as a steel fixer or a farmer. I just didn't like it. I thought, if I'm going to work on something my whole life, I hope I like it like my uncle Paddy in Ireland. He loved farming, I mean, he was in his element.

I went to the Trinity College Library in Dublin and looked through university guidebooks. It was a smart move on my part. In Australia, I would need to get the equivalent of a high school diploma. In Canada, all I had to do was be 21 and be able to fill out the form to apply as a mature student. Not all universities had that, but they had it at the University of Waterloo and the University of Guelph. I was accepted as a mature student at both and chose to go to Waterloo. In those days, a mature student could get a grant from the Ontario government and a loan. I got both.

I returned to Canada around March 1972, and I worked at a factory there till September when the semester began, earned some money, and stayed at home with my parents. It was difficult at first, but my saving grace was that I read a lot. I'd go to second-hand bookstores all the time.

After a year at UWaterloo, I transferred to McGill University, not because McGill had the best reputation in Canada, but because I was allowed to finish university in three years rather than four, because in Quebec, they have the collège d'enseignement general et professionnel (CEGEPS) with two years pre-university at a special college. I think Canada still has that mature student admission option. The problem now is that students need a lot of money, and they don't give out grants and loans as easily as they used to do. It's harder for students today.

KJ:

How did you first encounter distance education?

RM:

When I was at McGill, I took two courses in linguistics with no teacher. These were little paper module books, with about two weeks of material, followed by a test. The books were quite interesting. I really enjoyed them. One was on the history of the English language, and the other one was about the history of Indo-European languages. Even though I was at McGill at the time, it seemed to me like a distance – separated from the instructor - and I really got into it.

KJ:

You went over to Moscow as an undergraduate exchange student. How did that happen? What was the experience like? What skills did you develop there that helped you throughout your career?

RM:

I studied Russian at McGill and Dalhousie because I thought there might be a future use for it, given the international political context of improving relations between Canada, the USA, and Russia at that time. The exchange was connected to the first Canada Cup hockey series with Russia in 1972, which was a big deal in Canada. The Russian hockey team came over and we beat them by one goal, just the skin of our teeth, after seven games. My Russian professor at Dalhousie had asked them to put in an exchange program for Canadian and Russian students to study in each other's countries. Believe it or not, they just stapled it to the back of the Canada Cup agreement. It was signed and got going.

There were 10 of us from all over Canada in the first group to go over to study in Russia. It was the first year that the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute became independent from the University of Moscow. I was actually delayed and arrived after my group because my eldest son was born a few days before I had to go to Russia for a few months. The Dalhousie exchange was my second time there, and that lasted four months.

The Russian people are very friendly. Similar to the Irish, they don't say exactly what they mean. Of course, this was much more serious in Russia due to such a long experience of censorship and political repression under the czar and then the communists. We had to attend русское страноведение [russkoe stranovedenie] lectures about the Russian way of life, which was all about communism. Absurdly, we knew the lecturer was lying. He knew that he was lying. We knew that he knew he was lying. And he knew that we knew that he knew he was lying. It was a very surreal atmosphere to be in. It was very, very strange. Everybody in the room knew it was all bullshit, but we went. We all had to go through the motions anyway.

I learned how bureaucracies work, and it's not normally through fear and intimidation as you might expect. As the Canadian group leader, I attended meetings once per week with leaders from countries like North Korea, Vietnam, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. We were supposed to tell them about our problems. At my first meeting, they went around the table and each one said "ничего" [nichevo], which means no problem. I decided to tell them about some of the little

problems that we had. For example, there was a hotel room with a television, but you couldn't plug it into the wall. It had a different type of a plug than the socket. There were all kinds of little problems like that.

One after another, the Russians who hosted the meeting kept explaining how these things happened. I noticed that the other members were glaring at me, and still, the Russians went on and on. Finally, I told them, "I understand. No problem." Then, in the next weeks, a new group had just arrived. I think it was an American Communist Party group. The US guy opened his mouth like I did, and we all glared at him. It was the same thing. It went on till they totally wore him out. It took him a while to catch on, but it took me a while to get it too. This taught me how bureaucracies work. They just wear you down. People just get frustrated. They say that the biggest enemy of change is the impatience of the change agent.

I really enjoyed being there. The Russian people were just great. Another lesson came from when I occasionally met with the KGB officers (I was informed by the Canadian Embassy who they were) in the Institute, about how everything was going. I would go first to a Berjozka, which was a store for foreigners who could use foreign currency coupons to buy cheap products. Foreigners had a pile of these coupons. I'd buy a couple of bottles of Scotch. The bottles of Scotch at that time were around $2.50, and orange juice was $3.50, you know, so, what are you gonna buy? Whenever I went into a meeting with the KGB, I'd put the bottle in the middle of the table. They really liked interviewing me, because in Russia, when you open the bottle, you have to finish it. So that helped quite a bit to smooth over any potential complications. We never had any problems with the KGB even though some strange things happened once in a while. I learned that a bottle of whiskey goes a long way.

KJ:

Have you been back to Russia since?

RM:

I've been back twice. I actually spoke in front of a committee of the Duma in 2015 to present a case for open educational resources. Luckily for me, I hadn't forgotten my Russian that much. I was able to give my talk in Russian.

KJ:

What were some of your first jobs after you returned to Canada?

RM:

I was an animateur for the Télé-université du Quebec in Schefferville, right on the Labrador border, a very isolated iron mining community. I took a distance education course from them while serving as the local animateur, which involved leading weekly classes with the group of five to ten students, promoting discussions, then sending a report back to the professor. The following year, 1978, I became the group leader for a McGill distance education course.

I became the president of the Syndicat des enseignants de Eastern Quebec, a faculty union, and worked with them through one of the big strikes in Quebec. I was there for two years, and then I left for the Seychelles Islands as a volunteer. I worked at the National Youth Service camp for two years as a "cooperant" teaching English as a second language in the Seychelles. That came about when I saw an ad in the paper for English teachers when it was about -50 degrees before Christmas. It came about because René Lévesque, the first separatist Premier of Quebec, wanted to venture in foreign affairs. The Quebec government signed an agreement with the Seychelles government. Since education is a provincial responsibility, the agreement could be done without the federal government. 25 mainly francophone teachers went over to the Seychelles, but they

wanted a few English second language teachers. When they first advertised only in French, they didn't get any, then they advertised in English. I thought it was interesting, so I talked with the agency just to see what it was. They were so happy to see an English teacher who was willing to go there that they hired me at the last minute.

With only two weeks to prepare, my wife Kathleen agreed. We packed up with two small children under the age of three, and we enjoyed it there for the two years. On our return, we spent about five months traveling through Southeast India, Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti, the US, and back to Canada. When we came back, I got a job in a francophone school teaching English as a second language for one year. Then after that I got a job in Newfoundland as the professional officer for the Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association, and I worked there for one year, and that's when I got the job with Contact North as the Secondary School Liaison Supervisor. We lived in Sudbury, and my job was to put Telewriter units in all the high schools in the vast area of northern Ontario and then to train teachers on how to use the Telewriters for distance education.

Then I applied for the position as Director of TeleEducation New Brunswick, and I got that position. So, we moved to New Brunswick, and I worked there for nearly 10 years as the Director of TeleEducation New Brunswick. We basically did the same thing as Contact North, except it was more advanced. We put actual computers into about 50 sites around the province, and trained people in computing and in using distance education to use those computers to deliver courses from the universities and colleges.

KJ:

What kind of sites did you select for the Telewriters?

RM:

In northern Ontario, they were nearly all in schools with many not in great positions within the schools. We also had a few in reserves, prisons, and community centers. In New Brunswick, they were mainly in community centers, with some schools and colleges.

KJ:

Where did the money come from for these Telewriters and training?

RM:

The Ontario Provincial Government funded Contact North. In New Brunswick, all the money came from a $10 million federal grant that we stretched out for 10 years. But when it was over, the New Brunswick government closed it down. Whereas Contact North is still going strong, with the Ontario government's support.

The political landscape played an important role in the Maritimes because the two parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, undo each other's projects when elected back into office every 10 years or so. The Liberals funded the grant, and then when the Conservatives came in, they just chopped our program. This was the norm. I realized that my days were numbered, so that's when I started looking for work elsewhere, and that's how I ended up at Athabasca University.

KJ:

Why did you choose the PhD program in computer technology and education program at Nova Southeastern University?

RM:

Terry Anderson prompted me to publish and pursue a PhD. We worked together at Contact North and he became the second great mentor in my life. At Contact North, I worked in the bilingual eastern section, and Terry was the director in the western section, out of Thunder Bay. He would visit us, and that's how we first worked together. He suggested that I write an article about the site we established on an Indigenous reserve in James Bay. With the help of one of my assistants as a co-author, the American Journal of Distance Education published it. Then I published another one in the Australian Journal of Education.

Terry completed his PhD in Calgary and encouraged me to do the same because I could get credit for all the research that I was already doing. I found only two programs I could complete at a distance so I could keep working: Nova Southeastern University in Florida and the University of Cincinnati. Both had on-campus requirements for a few weeks of orientation. I discovered that the flights to Florida were cheaper than to Cincinnati. Plus, it seemed like a good idea to go down there since it was wintertime, so I chose NSU.

It was very expensive in those days, approximately $10,000-12,000, which I couldn't afford. So, when I applied for the job in New Brunswick, I negotiated for them to help cover my educational expenses since I wasn't thrilled by the salary. This worked. But the problem for me with the PhD was completing it within the requirement of seven years. If I had three years to complete it, I would have finished it in three years. But because it was seven years, I procrastinated. At the start of the 7th year, and after inquiring with a friend who completed a PhD while working full-time, he told me that he had received an educational leave. It was just before Christmas, and when I got back to New Brunswick, I had a letter on my desk saying that the government should be more supportive of employees in furthering their education. I took that letter to my boss, the Deputy Minister, and he agreed immediately to a year off. However, I was so invested in the TeleEducation program that I kept working about half the time. I didn't take the full year off, and it was hard on my family because my boys were young. My completed thesis was a systems analysis of a distance education network in a small Canadian province, which was TeleEducation New Brunswick. I have great sympathy for those pursuing a doctorate. It's a tough job.

KJ:

How and when did you become involved with Athabasca University (AU)?

RM:

Terry Anderson encouraged me to do so when I was looking for work, when the TeleEducation New Brunswick funding was running out. The President of AU supported Terry's application for a Canada Research Chair, and that's how he moved from the University of Alberta. Terry suggested that I apply for a Canada Research Chair there, but I didn't want to move out west. A lot of Eastern Canadians have this in their head that they don't want to go to Western Canada. I was very reluctant to move, but he talked me into it.

My research chair application was not successful, but then I applied for and got the Associate Vice President (AVP), Research position because I had a record of getting grants and raising funds while I was at TeleEducation New Brunswick. I helped faculty receive quite a few grants while I was the AVP, Research. After 10 years of administration and disagreeing with the President's direction, I wanted to get back to the faculty. By mutual agreement, the President helped me secure the Athabasca University UNESCO/Commonwealth of Learning Chair in Open Educational Resources with a Hewlett grant of about $5 million. Later, the title International Council for Open and Distance Education Chair was added to this.

As Chairholder in OER, I was responsible for promoting the use of OER internationally (particularly in developing countries), nationally, and institutionally. For this, I worked with UNESCO and other Chairs on the 2012 UNESCO Declaration on OER and with the Commonwealth of Learning on the establishment of the OER Universitas project. These initiatives have had a significant effect on raising international awareness of OER. I have conducted OER workshops in more than 60 countries in Asia, Africa, Oceania, the Caribbean, South America, Canada, and Europe.

We supported the creation of the Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN) and the OER Knowledge Cloud. Nationally, we have worked with BC Campus, ECampus Ontario, and other organizations promoting the use of OER. In Alberta, I was the co-Chair of the provincial initiative supporting OER in post-secondary education. Institutionally, I was a founding member of the ad hoc Copyright Committee and have worked with faculty supporting many OER initiatives.

KJ:

Can you explain the logistics of how the Chair gets established with the combination of UNESCO support and Hewlett Foundation grant funding?

RM:

Susan D'Antoni, who was working at UNESCO, created the grant application just before she retired. She was one of the UNESCO leaders in OER[1]. She was a Canadian, and I think she happened to meet with AU President Fritz Pannekoek at an International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) meeting where she proposed a Chair in OER at AU that would be funded by a Hewlett grant. To become a UNESCO chair, an institution has to provide the financing and show that it can sustain the activities over a period of time. If you are a UNESCO chair, it could help you to get grants from different places and help to support the goals of UNESCO. There are many different UNESCO chairs around the world, for example, the UNESCO chair in water, UNESCO chair in climatology, UNESCO chair in peace.

KJ:

What other Chair positions have you held?

RM:

My first Chair position was both with UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) because of how Susan D'Antoni established the position. Then I was an ICDE chair as well, so I had all three of them for a while. Chairs must be renewed periodically. For example, the UNESCO chair renews every four years, and the Commonwealth of Learning chair every three years. I renewed my COL and UNESCO chairs. Then I retired from the Commonwealth of Learning chair, after renewing it once.

KJ:

You have advocated for all things open education combined with academic freedom and faculty rights. How are these compatible with each other?

RM:

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[1] For more on Susan D'Antoni's work with UNESCO, see:

ICDE's interview with Susan D'Antoni. (2007). *Open Praxis 1*(1), pp. 113-117. https://openpraxis.org/articles/184

Open education resources mean that educational material should be open and accessible to everybody, and transparency is part of the ethos of the open education movement and the freedom to produce what you want. There's disagreement about the term "open educator". If you're a real open educator, you allow for anyone to teach and learn whatever way they want to teach or learn, and that includes old ways like lecturing, giving exams, and checking whether they know something or not. These are faculty decisions.

KJ:

What do you think are the most immediate threats to faculty rights at Athabasca across Canada, or from a global perspective?

RM:

The biggest threat is the one in the United States with Trump and his taking money away from universities where some of the students don't agree on Israel and Palestine. I think that's the biggest threat in the world at the moment. It's a complete and full attack on academic freedom.

The historical roots of this go back much further than Trump, though. It comes from the left, where they've been cancelling people for years now, because somebody with a marginalized identity says they don't feel safe, and they used that as an excuse for censorship and making faculty declare their support for a particular position. Now the right wing has turned it on its head using the tactics created by the "woke".

KJ:

What are your thoughts about the tensions between Athabasca University being a publicly funded institution established to serve the residents of northern Alberta and boost the economic growth of the region, while branding itself as Canada's open online university? What do you think about the regional politics that have played a role in Athabasca's decisions?

RM:

I thought it was terrible the way the Board of Trustees treated and dismissed the former President, Peter Scott. He was just following the strategic plan that we'd agreed on. But there are provincial politics. It's like, "I fought the law and the law won". Well, Athabasca University fought the town, and the town won. There's good reason to support these rural towns in northern Alberta, and the only argument we've had for the government for out-of-province is that we charge them more money. These additional enrolments that are paying higher tuition allow Albertans to participate in courses that we wouldn't have the numbers to include otherwise.

The government decided eventually that everyone (faculty and staff) didn't have to move to Athabasca, and the town agreed to the compromise. Now we work more closely with Northern Alberta, but at the same time, we haven't given up on our students in other provinces. Our new president, Alex Clark, goes to the Athabasca hockey games and supports the town not only because he enjoys hockey, but also because he realizes that's part of the politics of the game here.

KJ:

You were an early pioneer in the reuse and sharing of learning materials, including the learning object movement. How have you seen the growth of the field, and how did your early work with learning objects become integrated into or diverge from the various paths that have become what we now call open education?

RM:

When we started with learning objects at TeleEducation, along with partners from other provinces, we got a federal grant to create a course in technology for high school students from

the now-defunct Office of Learning Technologies in Ottawa. The provinces generally don't like Ottawa being involved, but they got away with it for a few years. We looked at the total curriculum and determined that British Columbia will do this module, New Brunswick will do that module, Newfoundland will do another module.

Then it came to copyright. We had a face-to-face meeting in Calgary to discuss the copyright issues. We argued all day about copyright, what to allow, who can use it, who can't use it, and everything else. Eventually, we realized that the only way forward with the learning objects was, if it was just open. This was before OER was even a word. We had to open it up and make it public domain. We were talking public domain where anyone could use it. We had problems because some of the government's copyright people claimed it couldn't be public domain because the government funded it. After many hurdles, we finally got an agreement that it was open, and then later Creative Commons came along.

Creative Commons originated because they realized you can't make your materials open. Everything is automatically copyrighted ever since the adoption and widespread ratification of the Universal Copyright Convention in 1955. So even though our learning objects were open, they were still subject to copyright, and people did not have the automatic right to use them. I'm sure this issue confronted others that were making learning objects. That's why Creative Commons came about, and we got into the open education resource movement.

KJ:

How did you become involved with *IRRODL*, CIDER, and the OER Knowledge Cloud? How have each of those changed over time?

RM:

IRRODL was originally started by Peter Cookson at Athabasca, but he left after a year, so Terry Anderson took it over. I became the Editor in Chief on his retirement in 2015. We made *IRRODL* open access before there was a Creative Commons license. We didn't know how to do it, but we felt it was open. We left the copyright with the authors, but we made the journal freely available. When Creative Commons was created, we put a Creative Commons non-commercial license on it. After a few years, we took off the non-commercial license, and it became openly licensed.

IRRODL was the first openly licensed journal to get funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Initially, SSHRC would not license open-access journals. We jumped through their hoops about paid subscribers by sending out a successful request for everyone to contribute $10 each, and we kept convincing SSHRC to change their narrowly-defined requirements for funding a journal. SSHRC then changed the rules for the next call, *IRRODL* fit all the rules, and received funding[2]. We still do so. About 2016 or 2017, they changed the rules again so as to only give grants to open access journals.

In the meantime, Terry Anderson started the Canadian Initiative for Distance Education Research[3] (CIDER) in 2004 while he was the *IRRODL* Editor. CIDER is like a partner to *IRRODL*, but it was technically independent from the journal. CIDER is a monthly lecture on topics related

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[2] For further information about *IRRODL*, see this resource: Anderson, T., Cookson, P. S., Henderson, S., & McGreal, R. (2025). Twenty-five years of innovation and knowledge sharing: The legacy and future of the International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 26*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v26i1.8490

[3] https://www.cideresearch.ca/

to distance education. We got a grant from UNESCO Paris in 2018 or 2019, which included making CIDER an initiative of *IRRODL* and creating the OER Knowledge Cloud.

The OER Knowledge Cloud[4] is a repository of research articles about open educational resources. We added MOOCs, pieces about open education, etc. Now it has 2,852 records, which anyone studying open education can use to find articles relevant to their studies. Establishing the OER Knowledge Cloud happened in conjunction with the creation of the Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN), which Fred Mulder started in 2013[5].

Fred and I were both UNESCO Chairs, so we collaborated on establishing GO-GN. However, Fred focused on GO-GN, and I focused on the Knowledge Cloud. I have participated in a number of their events, and I've certainly recommended my students to join them. I worked very well with him. He was a very good friend of mine. I was very sorry to hear of his demise.

KJ:

Based on your extensive experience with UNESCO globally, what do you see as the biggest challenges confronting OER usage?

RM:

The biggest obstacle is a very simple one: the lack of awareness among faculty and students. When they learn about OER, they support it, and by a very wide margin. The only ones who don't support it are authors who are making hundreds of thousands of dollars off their textbooks, and they are very few and far between. Most authors don't make anything or just make a few hundred dollars off their textbook.

In developing countries, there is a habit in some universities where the professor sells their course notes for profit. Adopting OER could mean removing a revenue stream from them, and they're not paid very well at all. So that's another obstacle.

Of course, the big obstacle from the publishers is the open washing. I think Martin Weller coined that term. It's when journals pretend to be open. They claim to be open, but then require the author to pay, sometimes several thousand dollars, to make their article open access. There are also predatory publishers where an author has to pay to get their article published at all. Thousands of new scholarly journals have appeared that do this. They try to look like legitimate journals. This is a big problem for OER, and especially for open publishing.

A final obstacle is the desire for faculty to create their own OER rather than using ones that are already available. Why recreate the wheel and why spend a lot of time adapting the material when you don't need to? Just use it as is. For example, I know of situations like in Canada where a professor insisted on changing the train speed calculation time in a math OER that used New York to Chicago, but the professor modified it to be Toronto to Montreal. Why waste your time doing that? It doesn't make any sense. It's not needed. On the other hand, in some subject areas, there is a very real difference in approach, so I could understand that.

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[4] https://www.oerknowledgecloud.org/

[5] For further information about Fred Mulder's work creating GO-GN, see: https://go-gn.net/announcements/fred-mulder/

KJ:

When you think about institutional collaboration in higher distance education, historically, what has worked and what has not, and why?

RM:

Number one, it's worked when there's been a grant from an outside agency and specific goals. Number two, it never works otherwise. I've never seen it work. The collaboration works only up to and including the time when the goal is achieved and/or the funding is over. On a different level, personal collaborations among academics in different institutions, those could go on without the funding. They certainly go on better with funding, but they can go on. Many academics work with others in their field, co-write papers, etc.

KJ:

What seems to arrive again every so often, in a slightly different guise, but is the same ongoing concern or conversation?

RM:

Resistance to technological changes. Oh, I read once in an old document in the 1820s that the Teachers Association in Ontario were complaining about the introduction of shales (mini-blackboards made out of shale) because the kids would not know how to roll bark anymore. In the old days before shales, they'd roll birch bark and flatten it out to write. But with these shales and chalk, they could learn to write without knowing how to roll a bark. They said, this skill will be lost and they can't do anything.

I remember when I was a child, we learned to write with nib pens. It's a piece of wood with a little metal nib on the end that you dip into the ink on your desk, and you write with that. I was left-handed, and it's very difficult to write with a nib pen when you're left-handed, because you go from left to right, and you smudge with a left hand. So, I used a regular pen. We called it a biro. That's an English term for a regular pen, not a fountain pen. I'd get my hand slapped for using it and they told me I had to learn to use the nib pen. Those biros, they were very expensive. And it's like they were saying the same thing as with the shale boards which were much more expensive than the birch bark. Anyway, that's ended. Nobody writes with a nib pen anymore.

Then the big thing was the calculator. Just as the pocket calculators were being introduced, I was in university, and a student asked a professor, "What kind of a slide rule should I get?" The professor said, "Get the most expensive one you can afford, because you'll be using it your entire life." That was the year that the calculator came in anyway. My guess is that many of your readers will have to look up what a slide rule is!

Speaking of calculators, I brought over four calculators to Russia, scientific calculators with logarithms and everything on them. I sold them for quite a bit of money in Russia. They didn't have them. They were way behind on those. And of course, they're absolutely essential for engineers. People don't know how to use a slide rule anymore.

They're just using these new-fangled devices. This goes on and on and on, the same with the Internet. Who needs the internet? Why do you want or who needs computers? That was the other thing. You know, you can't do this with a computer, the internet. You can't do that on the World Wide Web. Mobile learning was another one. Oh, who wants mobile learning anyway? Like on and on and on. People go on and on.

Now it's AI. I think it's bigger than all those things put together, as far as the changes that are coming. There are people wanting to ban it, and it's ridiculous to me. I believe you're unethical if you're NOT using AI, if you're in the learning technologies field. If you can improve your work

by using AI, why wouldn't you? It doesn't make any sense, but they're talking about ethics. Yes, AI is biased. For example, I asked it to provide me with four pictures of criminals, and it showed four black guys. It's biased towards the truth, because in the US, and the US has most of the data online, the criminals are predominantly people of color. I don't know how everyone is going to deal with that bias, but I think we have to come to terms with it.

I don't believe that censorship or skewing algorithms to support what you believe is the way to go about this. We have to face up to the truth, understand it, reveal the truth, and then deal with it. And how can we deal with the bias? Well, in Ethiopia, when I was talking about it, they expressed concern about the Western bias in AI. You can ask AI to respond using an African perspective or using only African sources. There are ways of dealing with the bias, but the bias leans towards the truth, except in politics and parts of history, where you get every kind of bias.

KJ:

If you were to predict the future, what would the educators' role be in shaping the curriculum when students can create their own bespoke, individualized curriculum with artificial intelligence?

RM:

Some people don't like using the term artificial intelligence because they're talking about large language models. The large language model consists of data provided by everybody, including instructors. So, when AI comes up with a curriculum, it is coming from teachers. Why do they think that it's coming from somewhere else? AI goes out and searches all through the web. What does a teacher do? A teacher goes out and searches all over the web and comes back with a curriculum, except it takes them 100 or 1,000 times longer, and probably they miss something. Whereas in seconds, you can get the AI to do it.

Some people are concerned about originality with the curriculum. Let's be honest, very few of us are original and creative. So, for those people, AI is perfect. If you're an original and creative person, maybe you don't need AI, but I'd suggest to you that many original and creative people are now working with AI and becoming intensely creative and original. I think that's the future for creating lessons. For the students, it doesn't make any sense not to be using this. I feel it's unethical for teachers not to use it. If you spend a week doing your curriculum, why not run it by AI to see if it's okay? Then use your expertise to verify it.

There's also a future with AI and authoring publications. A friend of mine, Dr. James O'Driscoll, argued that there's a difference between the principal and the author. AI could be the author and the principal is the one who validates it, verifies it and puts their mark on For the time being, I think that people should put at the bottom that they have used AI of any research paper or lessons, Eventually, I think you won't need to do that, because you have the AI and everybody has it, and you'll just assume that people have used it. You won't assume that anyone would be stupid enough not to use it.

KJ:

Let's look back to the past, which is one of your interests since your undergraduate degree from McGill was in history. What are the undocumented stories that you think should be preserved? Where does the historical research need to be pursued in the field?

RM:

I'm also curious about how the Eastern European countries and China made the transition to charging for textbooks. They did charge during the communist period, but it was peanuts. You weighed the book to see how much you paid for it. They weren't open, but they were

unbelievably cheap. I brought hundreds of books back from Russia. When I moved, I donated them to the Dalhousie University library. Now they've transitioned to this publishing model where they have to pay higher prices, not as high as in the West, but higher prices for the books. Why? How did this happen? What happened? Did the publishing industry go in there?

More work could be done on the history of the Commonwealth of Learning. I also suggest the history of the other organizations, like the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN), the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), and the Canadian Network for Innovation in Education (CNIE). It would be interesting to have a comparative look at them.

KJ:

Thank you very much for sharing your insights.

Acknowledgements