Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REFLECTION

A giant structure

Jon Baggaley*

Centre for Distance Education, Athabasca University, Alberta, Canada

The term Tower of Babel has become synonymous with projects that have grand designs but end in confusion. So named in the Bible, the Tower is described in the Qur'an and in Judaic texts also, under different names. Its reputed purpose was to unify the nations of the earth with a common language. The Tower fell, however, and those who collaborated in its construction were scattered, their languages divided. The analogy has frequently been drawn between the Tower of Babel and the Internet. This reflection considers whether this analogy is justified within the context of contemporary distance education.

Keywords: web-based learning; global education; international projects; evaluation; sustainability; language versions; lessons of history

Introduction

Historians should regard it as a time of excitement and change. A giant structure was developed by which all nations would be united. Political interests dominated the initiative, and it was suggested that educational and cultural purposes would be served also. The project headquarters was not Silicon Valley, CERN, nor Langley in Virginia, but the Middle East. Credit for the initiative was claimed by numerous political groups, although the consensus of opinion suggests that Iraq (formerly Babylon) was its location, and that the leading team was the Hamites under Nimrod (Murphy, 1993). The project, commonly supposed to be mythical, is evidently grounded in fact. Its date, according to legend, was circa 3000 BC (Cornwell, 1995), and its name was the Tower of Babel.

Five thousand years later, at the inaugural meeting of the United Nations' Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Athens, Patrik Fältström, a Cisco Systems engineer, reported that the World Wide Web now had full language translation capabilities (Internet Governance Forum, 2006). The announcement was widely taken to suggest that the Internet is a Tower of Babel and that modern engineers have succeeded in building it (McCarthy, 2006). This interpretation seems to miss the point that the original Tower of Babel fell down – reputedly because God was angry at mankind's arrogance in building it. For their punishment, the people were scattered into diverse nations, and their common language was divided into many.

The question arises as to whether the new online version of the Tower will be more successful than the original. Analogies between the Tower of Babel and the Internet commonly suggest that it will not. Anderson (1999) argued that the Internet,

---

*Email: jon@baggaley.com

like the Tower, 'makes life simpler, yet more complicated; it brings us together, yet pushes us apart.' Wilks (2001) criticised the World Bank's Knowledge Bank project, and its Development Gateway initiative in particular, as a Babel-like activity creating 'an illusory atmosphere of consensus and universality, while proclaiming "diversity."' Guri-Rosenblit (2001) made a similar allusion to the Tower in relation to the need for an integrated technological approach in higher and distance education. Evidently, the creation of a common international communication platform still has some way to go. At the IGF's Hyderabad meeting in 2008, the chair of the Cyber-security and Cyber-crime symposium announced:

> Yesterday, I think there were about 80 headsets missing after the session … [It's] important to hand them back so that they can be recharged. If we lose 80 headsets after each session, we will not be able to hand them out anymore, and you will not be able to listen to our interpreters. (Kummer, 2008, p. 1)

The more one considers historical events, the more the differences between competing versions of them become apparent. It emerges that little has changed in human nature over the centuries, and that modern opinions are shaped by personal motives as they always have been. It is possible to question the validity of comparing the Tower of Babel and educational uses of the Internet. In the words of a reviewer of this article, the Tower was designed as an act of rebellion against God and in favour of Satan, whereas the Internet was not. It is equally possible, however, that religion was used as an excuse for political motives in ancient times as it is today, and that such motives existed for the building of both structures. The Tower is therefore not only an apt metaphor for the Internet's potential as a giant worldwide tool, but also a means for some updated reflection on how the future of online distance education may be shaped by human nature, as the Tower's fate was shaped. To explore the implications of this analogy for distance education, the article will first consider the global role of the Internet in general.

The fate of giant structures

The Tower of Babel was a ziggurat or 'raised place,' like many others in the Mesopotamian region (Crawford, 1993, p. 73). The Bible's verdict is that the project was a success – too much so, in fact, and that God destroyed it, being offended by the hubris of a building that touched the skies and would encourage the people to think they could 'do anything they want' (Genesis 11: 5–9, cited by Vision, 2001). Judaic texts give a similar account in which God destroys the nations' common language and disperses them across the earth. The Qur'an provides an account of a tower built in Egypt by the Pharaoh to confront the God of Moses; and the Book of Mormon adds a Western-centric postscript in which God preserves the common language and leads the people to America. From these different perspectives, locations, and outcomes, five themes emerge.

(1) *For better and for worse*. The ancient ziggurats and the Internet are viewed as having similar benefits for humanity – the ziggurats as places of divine worship, and the Internet as a giant structure by which diverse cultures can be unified and global education forged. These claims have been put into context by Internet critics: 'There are no simple technological solutions to social problems … Access to a universe of information cannot solve our problems:

we will forever struggle to understand one another' (Stoll, 1995, p. 50). The ziggurats' construction has also been attributed to political motives, however: the need for high places where the elite could escape from floods (Oppenheim, 1977), and for secure places where the priests could conduct their rituals unobserved (Crawford, 1993, p. 75). The least sympathetic descriptions of ziggurats resemble the modern-day critiques of the Burj Khalifa in Dubai: for example, as 'a monument for an era of credit-fuelled over-consumption – irresponsible and unsustainable' (Bedell, 2010). The Internet today, like the Tower, is similarly described as a high place where elites can operate without interference from those without online access (Burnett, Consalvo, & Ess, 2010), and as a secure place for covert interests and practices (dmoz.org, 2009). Distance educators have excellent opportunities to advance the Internet's potential for good; and the World Wide Web's inventor, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, defends it as a tool for 'helping humanity … any innovator can dream up an idea and set up a website at some random place and let it just take off.' He also stresses, however, the need to build 'systems that help organisations become accountable … that respect users' (Warman, 2010). Thus, Berners-Lee indicates that, as with all media, the Internet is neither better nor worse than the skills and intentions of its users.

(2) *On again, off again*. The development of the Tower was a series of trial-and-error experiments with different techniques, some successful for a time, though all ultimately thwarted by political interests. After its original collapse in the third millennium BC, the Tower was rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC), and crumbled again after the Persian invasion of 478 BC (Krystek, 1998). Internet governance is in a similar period of flux at present. Since Fältström's statement at the IGF Conference in 2006 (Internet Governance Forum, 2006), Internet designers have lamented the lack of a unified infrastructure, and the proliferation of technical protocols and terms: 'everyone is trying to build a better mousetrap' (Ditter, cited by Amos, 2006). As a deterrent to this division of labour, and in an attempt to dissuade nations from setting up their own independent root servers, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has recently abandoned its requirement for Internet domain names to be spelled in Western characters (Adkihari, 2009). It may equally be suspected, however, that this new measure will hasten the *confusion of tongues* associated with the Tower, and the Internet's loss of focus as a unified global structure. This development would restrict international distance education initiatives.

(3) *Which world*? To the author(s) of Genesis, the world extended from the Mediterranean and the Black Sea to modern-day Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, and no further (Seely, 2001). Today, a similarly blinkered view is shown by those who recommend web-based education in the developing world despite its relative inaccessibility for students. In a presentation to the 2005 Conference of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA), this writer suggested that web-based education (WBE) would begin dying out by 2010 (Baggaley, 2005). This seemed to create a frisson among the delegates, dispelled in the ODLAA president's closing comment that in 2010 WBE would be alive and well. It is now 2011, and President Forster was correct: WBE still flourishes, in the Australian and Western world at least. In other regions, it continues to falter. Nations including China and Japan are making

political efforts to kick-start online education in favour of traditional TV methods; but academics remain concerned that traditional media expertise and penetration will be lost to cost-ineffective alternatives (Carr-Chellman, 2005; Wikramanayake et al., 2010).

(4) *What common language*? Of course, there never was a common language – at least not when the Tower was built in the third millennium BC. Seely (2001) indicates the diversity of languages that already existed in the region at that time. Thus, the Tower of Babel has received an unfair reputation as the project that provoked a divine decision to divide one language into many, and the assumption has prevailed that it was named after the Hebrew term *babel* meaning confusion. Yet it is also identified with Babylon, which as Dietz (2004) points out, has been translated as 'gateway of the gods.' The educational Internet has similarly been represented as both a gateway of opportunity, and as a conduit of chaos. Pictures if not words are becoming the Internet's common language. In the week this article is being written, photos of a gang rape in Vancouver have been circulated on Facebook and other social media sites, raising the victim's humiliation to an appalling international level (Bellett, Woo, & Crawford, 2010). This exemplifies the growing mass of online abuses currently being identified (Electronic Privacy Information Center, 2010; Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2009). If Western-style distance education and its tools are not better controlled than this, we need not feel surprised when other nations refuse to let their people access them, and decide that a multiplicity of Internets is the only option.

(5) *Warning signals*. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Babylonian ziggurats were strongly built with baked brick (Forbes, 1964). Judging by the barrage of hazards the Tower of Babel faced in Judaic, Greek, and Roman texts (Wikipedia, 2010), it was singularly robust, withstanding high winds, fire, floods, and subsidence before finally collapsing. Perhaps the high priests, like the Titanic crew, became blasé as their Tower survived successive disasters, and failed to spot the warning signals of the end that was approaching. Warning signals are accumulating today about the use of online methods in education: for example, the decline and closure of online communities that results from loss of student interest (Garber, 2004); loss of student control caused by learning management systems (Hotrum, 2005); and student frustration in being required to use social media in their courses without clear justification (Cheal, 2009). A cost-conscious educational administrator could invoke any one of these findings as an excuse to slash online resources. In other fields, the Internet and World Wide Web would doubtless have longer staying power, with little attention being paid to the demise of the educational subsector. As Hughes (2010) notes, the need for evidence of pedagogical validity is central in the adoption of new online tools, and failure to act upon it is a critical misjudgment.

Postscript

It takes a humorist such as Jonathan Goldstein (2009) to make the events of the past seem truly immediate. He speculates about how the builders of the Tower of Babel got on with their lives when the Tower fell:

And so they cooked up new ideas … Li wanted to build the world's longest wall; Costa wanted to build a place where hundreds of people could sit in a circle and watch marvelous events; [and Mibzar] opened the world's first language school. (Goldstein, 2009, p. 78)

So it is with the diversity of approaches in distance education, for which the students are regularly required to master new tools. 'The field appears to have a constant identity crisis, defined by a developmental deluge of pedagogies and technologies, depending on the favoured course delivery methods of the day' (McKee, 2010). So is the field of online distance education condemned to disintegrate, Babel-like? As the Internet and the Tower of Babel are frequently compared, it is cautionary to consider this possibility. Each of these giant structures has been described as facilitating the best and worst of human goals; as the outcome of cyclic success and failure; as an idea developed in one part of the world without regard for others; as a technology that began with diverse languages and ended without unifying them; and as a project that barrels onward without paying attention to warning signals. Will the online education tower fall because its users failed to discipline it?

Citing Newsom (1952), Kurtz (1959), and the Institute for Communications Research (1962), Dowling (1996) listed the following optimistic analyses:

- 'one of the most magnificent instruments for raising the quality of teaching';
- 'an instrument for general adult education, it could significantly upgrade the common culture';
- 'no innovation has marched so quickly and confidently into the field of learning. It moves into the future of American education as a major resource';
- 'a medium with so much potential, with so many needs to meet, and so many plans being made for it'.

These statements were made between 1952 and 1962 on behalf of educational television, now marginalised in Western distance education. Dowling hoped that online education would avoid a similar fate through the development of solid educational practices: 'Television's failure to transform education was not technological. Television failed to meet the pedagogical needs of the educational community,' he wrote (1996). Maybe online educators will learn from the lessons of the past, and will be more successful. Writers such as Dowling and Goldstein tread a lonely road in using the lessons of history to point to the uncritical optimism of the present. But even giant structures and grand designs can fail, and suddenly (Bible in Basic English, 2004).

Before distance educators can learn from the lessons of the past, however, they may need to broaden their frames of reference in the present. Reflections such as these are commonly criticised by distance education purists for straying into areas of, for example, global education and Internet usage that do not directly refer to open and distance learning (ODL). ODL, however, does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped by influences from outside its specialised framework, of which its practitioners should be aware. This writer vividly recalls an article in this journal that discussed the difficult home-study conditions of women in South-East Asia, and referred to ODL barely at all (Loh-Ludher, 2007). To optimise distance education policy and practice in that region, however, knowledge of this context is essential. Free reflection within broader frameworks, current and historical, as in this section of this journal, gives us a chance to probe beyond the usual vistas.

Notes on contributor

Jon Baggaley is Professor Emeritus of Educational Technology at Canada's Open University, in Athabasca, Alberta. The current reflections are based on his keynote presentation to the Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), in Hanoi (October 2010).

References

Adkihari, R. (2009, October 30). ICANN's 'Tower of Babel' decision may prevent net schism. *TechNewsWord.* Retrieved from http://www.technewsworld.com/rsstory/68522.html?wlc=1287020071

Amos, C. (2006, December). TCP/IP-Ethernet Tower of Babel breeds confusion. *Automation World.* Retrieved from http://www.automationworld.com/primers-2751

Anderson, E. (1999, December). The Internet: 21st-century Tower of Babel. *The Trumpet.com.* Retrieved from http://www.thetrumpet.com/index.php?q=231.0.18.0

Baggaley, J. (2005). Rapportage comments. *Annual Conference of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia,* Adelaide, Australia.

Baggaley, J. (2010, October). *Sustainability, access, equity and quality.* Keynote presentation to the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), Hanoi, Vietnam.

Bedell, G. (2010, January 10). Burj Khalifa – A bleak symbol of Dubai's era of bling. *The Observer.* Retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2010/jan/10/burj-khalifa-dubai-skyscraper-architecture

Bellett, G., Woo, A., & Crawford, T. (2010, September 16). Photos of teen's gang rape go viral on Internet. *Vancouver Sun.* Retrieved from http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Photos+teen+gang+rape+viral+Internet/3536756/story.html

Bible in Basic English. (2004). Proverbs 24:22. Retrieved from http://bible.cc/proverbs/24-22.htm

Burnett, R., Consalvo, M., & Ess, C. (2010). *The handbook of Internet studies.* Chichester: Wiley.

Carr-Chellman, A. (2005). *Global perspectives on e-learning: Rhetoric and reality.* New Delhi: Sage.

Cheal, C. (2009). Student perceptions of a course taught in Second Life. *Innovate, 5*(5). Retrieved from http://innovateonline.info/pdf/vol5_issue5/Student_Perceptions_of_a_Course_Taught_in_Second_Life.pdf

Cornwell, J. (1995). The Tower of Babel and Babylon, Gilgamesh, Ningizzida, Gudea. *The Alpha and the Omega.* Retrieved from http://www.mazzaroth.com/ChapterThree/TowerOfBabel.htm

Crawford, H. (1993). *Sumer and the Sumerians.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dietz, O. (2004). *Geschichte Mesopotamiens. von den Sumerern bis zu Alexander dem Großen* [History of Mesopotamia: From the Sumerians to Alexander the Great]. Munich: Beck.

dmoz.org. (2009). Computers: Internet: Abuse. *Dmoz Open Directory Project.* Retrieved from http://www.dmoz.org/Computers/Internet/Abuse/

Doré, G. (1865). *The confusion of tongues.* Retrieved from http://www.artbible.info/art/large/492.html

Dowling, S. (1996). Internet education: Reform or false panacea? *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Internet Society.* Retrieved from http://www.isoc.org/inet96/proceedings/c1/c1_1.htm

Electronic Privacy Information Center. (2010). *Facebook privacy.* Retrieved from http://epic.org/privacy/facebook/

Forbes, R. (1964). *Studies in ancient technology* (2nd ed.). Leiden: Brill.

Garber, D. (2004). Growing virtual communities. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 5*(2). Retrieved from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/index

Goldstein, J. (2009). *Ladies and gentlemen, the Bible!* Toronto: Penguin Group.

Guri-Rosenblit, S. (2001). The Tower of Babel syndrome in the discourse on information technologies in higher education. *Global E-Journal for Open, Flexible and Distance Education, 1*(1), 28–38.

Hotrum, M. (2005). Breaking down the LMS walls. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 6*(1). Retrieved from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/index

Hughes, G. (2010). Social software: New opportunities for challenging social inequalities in learning? *Learning, Media and Technology, 34*(4), 291–305. doi: 10.1080/17439880903338580

Internet Governance Forum. (2006). *First IGF meeting: Athens, Greece.* Retrieved from http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/athensmeeting

Krystek, L. (1998). *The Tower of Babel.* Retrieved from http://www.unmuseum.org/babel.htm

Kummer, M. (2008). *Session introduction: Dimensions of Cyber-security and Cyber-crime.* Retrieved from http://www.elon.edu/docs/e-web/predictions/IGF%2008%20 Cybersecurity%20and%20cybercrime.pdf

Loh-Ludher, L. (2007). The socioeconomic context of home-based learning by women in Malaysia. *Distance Education, 28*(2), 179–193. doi: 10.1080/01587910701439233

McCarthy, K. (2006, November 23). How engineers tamed the Internet's Tower of Babel. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/nov/23/guardianweeklytechnologysection.insideit1

McKee, T. (2010). Thirty years of distance education: Personal reflections. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 11*(2). Retrieved from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/index

Murphy, F. (1993). *Pseudo-philo: Rewriting the Bible.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada. (2009). *Facebook agrees to address Privacy Commissioner's concerns.* Retrieved from http://www.priv.gc.ca/media/nr-c/2009/nr-c_090827_e.cfm

Oppenheim, A. (1977). *Ancient Mesopotamia.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Seely, P. (2001). The date of the Tower of Babel and some theological implications. *Westminster Theological Journal, 63*(1), 15–38.

Stoll, C. (1995). *Silicon snake oil: Second thoughts on the Information Highway.* New York: Anchor Books.

Vision. (2001, Summer). *Scaling the heights of hubris.* Retrieved from http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx?id=1379

Warman, M. (2010, September 15). Tim Berners-Lee defends net neutrality. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/internet/8003908/Tim-Berners-Lee-defends-net-neutrality.html

Wikipedia. (2010, September 16). *Tower of Babel.* Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_of_Babel

Wikramanayake, G., Jamtsho, S., Rinchen, S., Sangi, N., Ahmed, S., Wimalaratne, K., et al. (2010). Accessibility, acceptance and effects of distance education in South Asia. In J. Baggaley & T. Belawati (Eds.), *Distance education technologies in Asia* (pp. 1–39). New Delhi: Sage.

Wilks, A. (2001). *A Tower of Babel on the Internet?* Retrieved from http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/art-16140