

Openness: Start with why

MDDE 622 – Athabasca University

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Assignment 1

Introduction

The concept of openness in education finds roots in the planning and establishment of the UK's Open University, the world's first 'successful distance teaching university' (The Open University, 2012) and the open educational resources (OER) movement. And with just these two initiatives, the degrees of openness in education surface. As openness can mean 'open first to people' (The Open University, 2012) with a relaxed or open admission policy to allow easier entry to education (Athabasca University, 2012), and it can also mean open to ideas and knowledge, with educational content being freely available, with no or minimal costs and 'as few restrictions as possible' on its use (Yuan, MacNeill, & Kraan, 2008).

Setting Knowledge Free

The influence of licensing models and community approaches to development from the open source software movement on open educational resources (OER) (Mackie, 2008; Yuan et al., 2008), drove a whole new dimension to 'open' and the economics of sharing in education. The notion that knowledge is a shared construct and therefore, should not be owned exclusively by anyone and be available in the public domain has helped shape further definitions and constructs of use for openness in education. For example, Atkins, Seely Brown, & Hammond (2007) characterize OER as: "...teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others" (p. 4). Similarly, the OECD (2007) describes OER as: "... digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research" (p. 10). Others (Geser, 2007; Yuan et al., 2008; Ehlers, 2011) have acknowledged the need for a broader interpretation of educational 'resources' and 'materials' which includes not just the learning content, but also the tools, and

implementation know-how or 'practices,' thus widening the lens on the forms that openness can take in the educational community.

There are many examples of practice, or living definitions of openness in education, that have adapted and permutated, partly, in response to technological advances with the expansion of the web and new services, other cultural and societal factors, but also because of different needs and requirements. From large-scale, externally-funded projects such as MIT's Open Courseware, and small-scale, individually-produced projects on 'web 2.0-type' services, the 'big OER' and 'little OER' (Weller, 2010) to today, with the spread of the massive open online course or MOOC in all its pedagogic and business model variety (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012; Lane, 2012). If a definition of a concept depends on its use, what then are the motivations behind openness?

Why Openness

Some reasons for openness in education start based on principles and ideals of education and using OER to increase access to education, with special attention to those without access to high-quality local education (Atkins et al., 2007; Geser, 2007; Caswell, Henson, Jensen & Wiley, 2008; Yuan et al., 2008). Wiley (2011) refers this as the 'moral' argument or 'doing the right thing.' Referencing the United Nation's 'right to education' and positioning OER as an enabler and benefit to all students, Caswell et al. (2008) state that "for the first time, we can now begin to convert a 60-year-old declaration into reality" (p.10). However, simply putting open and freely licensed education materials online does not mean that all learners can benefit equally from them (Geser, 2007; Hatakka, 2009). Lane (2009) surmises that openness through access to digital resources and environments can fall short for different learner populations, and further divisions can arise based on learner context, and fluency in digital and educational skills.

Other arguments for openness include the pedagogic or quality argument (Wiley, 2011), that is, the act of sharing or adapting open educational resources may also increase attention to quality. By widening participation, it is thought that better quality can be derived by gaining access to the best possible resources (OECD, 2007; Yuan et al., 2008) and that it is good to 'give back' based on the culture of the open source way of developing software (OECD, 2007; Mackie, 2008). But quality is also a matter of trust; and use of OER is not always guaranteed (Hatakka, 2009).

Another argument for openness is one of practicality or value, that is, we receive something tangible from an investment in open education whether that be cost savings or an enhanced reputation. For example, my own learning journey at Athabasca University started because I was looking for a quality online master's-level program that would accept my academic credentials 'as-is.' Throughout my studies, I have come to rely on the value of access to the educational content, journals, ideas, learner community, and knowledge that comes with open teaching and learning methods and practice - but this education hasn't been 'free' and has come with a financial and personal commitment cost.

Conclusion: Open is as open does

Institutions, organizations, and individuals, all with different perspectives, implement - and rationalize - policies and practices of openness depending on their requirements, environment or context. Whether based on ideals and principles, the notion of sharing to increase quality, or practicality, these motivations ultimately drive decision-making, and in turn, create business models, approaches, and practices to openness in education, as evidenced by its various forms. None of these living definitions of openness is perfect, they are simply a place to start.

In a keynote given at the OER Congress, Lessig (2012) described the need for the educational community to continue to work together to make freely licensed content interoperable, more understandable, and 'easier to do rights.' Lessig (2012) concludes that 'OER should push for OER reasons.' Reasons are good to have; it follows on the hope that 'openness begets openness' (Mackie, 2008) which serves to evolve the concept and practice of openness in education. But openness in education doesn't build itself; it needs people, supporting systems and structures (Siemens, 2008; Leinonen, 2012) and practices (Geser, 2007; Yuan et al., 2008; Ehlers, 2011) to promote and sustain it.

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