

Stepping up as opening up

Aspects of openness in everyday pedagogic practice



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Hey, is this even 'open'?

This presentation represents some different threads of my work coming together.

I am considering how my thinking on open education and openness (see Havemann, 2016) fits with my 'everyday' practice, in my role as a learning technologist, co-developer and co-teacher of a course called *Step Up to Postgraduate Study in Arts* (see Havemann *et al.*, 2013).

Is this an open course? Is a non-open course a *closed* course?

Is this a form of OEP? What do Open Educational Practices look like?

What do we mean by open?

The open umbrella

Open Education is an 'umbrella term' covering quite a range of practices - so something of a patchwork umbrella.

It isn't obvious what exactly fits under it, but the common theme is openness. So... what is openness?

These days when we talk about open in educational content, we are usually talking about something digital.

But it wasn't always so...



Open: the career of a label

- Discussions of 'open learning' and initiatives to make education more accessible did not originate with the OER movement
- Common educational adoption of the term in 20th century, when institutions such as the UK's Open University were created with a mission to open up access to formal higher education, by both waiving the usual entry requirements, and offering distance and part-time study (Peters, Gietzen, & Ondercin, 2012).
- But we could say the roots of open education go back much further - as far as the late Middle Ages, as the rise of literacy kindled public desire for greater access to knowledge (Peter & Deimann, 2013)
- and my own institution, Birkbeck, emerged almost 200 years ago with a mission to provide evening classes to London's (male) workers, and was therefore said to be 'sowing the seeds of evil' - a practice we continue to this day.
- the freely available educational resource with an open license attached to it is a relative newcomer, as is the free online course

The openness of OER

The particular use of open in OER reflects deep concern with good practice in intellectual property and authorship, and therefore in licensing resources and granting of non-restrictive permissions (Wiley's Open Content Definition sets out 'the 5 Rs').

A key definition of OER:

The open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for noncommercial purposes (UNESCO, 2002, p. 24).

[Yet: educators who share or reuse 'without a licence' are, arguably, already aligned with the wider purpose of the OER movement, and yet are seen as operating outside of it. For Amiel & Soares (2016), there are two notions of 'the commons' in play here: the legal and the social.]

Under the umbrella: OER and MOOCs

OER has become integral to our concept of Open Education today, but even this covers quite different things:

- Openly-licensed big OER like OCW, Open Textbooks, and little OER like slide sets, documents, podcasts.
- Things which are not 'born OER' but used in an educational way - e.g. open data.

Open Education also seems to include MOOCs (again, these break down into diverse types, c- or x- and other variants) which allow *open enrolment*.



The need for critical perspectives

'Openness' has become a highly charged and politicised term, a movement operating in many areas outside of education. In the process, it has acquired a sheen of naturalised common sense and legitimacy, and formed what seems to be a post-political space of apparent consensus.

Prominent conferences are devoted to the subject, such as the Open Education Conference. In 2015 it was entitled Mainstreaming Open Education, and in 2016 it is set to be Open Culture, signalling not only a growing confidence in open education as a field in itself, but also the sense that a desire to enact extensive institutional and cultural reform is intrinsic to the movement. This highlights the oppositional structure assumed by the calls for open education which, in championing the 'open', simultaneously suppose the existence of an education that is closed and inherently contrary to contemporary ideals of accessibility and equity.

(Bayne, Knox & Ross, 2015)

OEP as critical

Despite suggestions that the 'OER movement' has not tended to be [self-]critical, I would say that already in its comparatively short history we have seen significant attempts to **question a content-centric, resource-focused model and effectively shift the discourse toward discussion of Open Educational Practices.**

The 'resource focus' has, at times, tended to obscure the complexity of human endeavour involved in resource creation, discovery, modification and consumption - and indeed, in the process of education generally, which after all, consists of much more than resources.

This is important and it is *critical*. But it's not a *criticism* of OER, instead it proposes a wider angle of vision.

The turn to 'Open Educational Practices'

An influential definition has been given by Andrade et al. (2011) who state:

OEP are defined as practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path (p.12).

Whereas OER is a label for a collection of things, OEP is perhaps most usefully understood as a lens for looking at practice, rather than an itemised list of relevant activities. These practices may, in fact, even be primarily understood as something else, rather than something done in the name of openness.



Which brings me to the question of whether this aspect of my practice can be described as OEP even though we never set out to 'do OEP' or think about it in this way.

What we did set about to do (ambitiously) was provide a catalyst for institutional change in how we think about the meaning of flexible learning and engage with the digital.

Specifically: by developing a model for blended, mostly online learning, that would be appropriate and supportive to our distinctive student body, and emerging from this, developing and running a pilot module focusing on academic skills that would seek to bridge the transition between undergraduate and postgraduate study.

How is Step Up open?

Unlike in the case many projects more typically described as open, the key audiences were 'internal'.

Enrolment is open to not-yet students who have been 'invited to enrol' (but not to anyone, anywhere) and free of charge.

The other key audience has been our colleagues, many of whom have asked to be enrolled on the module.

We were inspired by MOOCs and made use of OER but perhaps more importantly...

Opening practice, rather than practicing open?

Transparency - we aimed to make clear the reasons for developing academic skills the module supports, to reveal and provide interaction with academic (teacher) practices such as use of Turnitin reports, to be honest about our objectives in developing the module

Feedback and iteration - as an extension of the above to listen to student feedback via evaluations, group discussion and private reflections, and iteratively develop the module accordingly - open to questions and criticism

Fostering a sense of a learning community, learning together

Working collaboratively, non-hierarchically, across disciplines/roles

Participation in developing, teaching and studying the module was opt-in (and, everyone agreed, a lot of work)

Student reflections

“A lot of [BA] students were not very confident to speak in class, I can see that this may well be different on an MA! This is both a relief and a challenge.”

“I have a natural tendency to 'put my head in the sand' when it comes to unfamiliar technology - doing this course has made me realise I should at least find out more.”

“I'm not so sure I entirely agree with the presenter in the video in her defence of academic English, some of the journal articles I have read on my BA course seemed wilfully obscure and over complex in their sentence construction and vocabulary.”

“I felt that the slightly strident anti-plagiarism message rather drowned out the role of proper referencing as a tool for effective academic communication.”

Do we need to define open by its exclusions?

By saying, all sorts of things might be considered an open practice, are we making the term too open to be useful, ‘diluting the brand’?

Is there really a logical case to draw a rigid line between practices we consider closed and those we approve as open?

“practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path”

'Open'...more verb, less adjective?

'To open', opening. A process not a product. Something we work toward rather than something that's ever completed. Not-yetness.

I propose that diversity is our strength. Open provides us a community, a conference. An umbrella to stand under.

