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Open Education and the Hidden Tariff

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Abstract

This paper explores the promise that Open Educational Resources (OER) would democratise access to education, and ennuï of many within the movement regarding a revolution always just around the corner. It builds on earlier work, which posed critical questions for the open education movement. Are OER a challenge to, or a product of, neoliberalism within education? To what extent is the movement developing particular types of content, which create open education in the image of the traditional academy? And is there an alternative to the reification of the self in OER? The paper uses the idea of digital labour to explore digital inclusion; who does digital labour, who has the skills to perform digital labour and who and how do people benefit from digital labour? It suggests that seeing education as an exchange of labour and reward makes visible the hidden aspects of work; in particular it highlights how the skills required to engage with education as digital labour along with unequal access and distribution of those skills contribute to unequal access to education, even when it is freely available and openly licensed online. These assumptions in some ways replicate the tariff within formal post compulsory education. Uncovering this hidden tariff within OER allows us to make those inequities visible and address them. The paper closes with some questions. What can we learn from older traditions of open education which focus on participation and common good. How can this help us to develop models of Open Educational Practice (OEP) to overcome the visible and hidden barriers and realise the benefits of open education.

Keywords

Open Educational Practices, Widening Participation, Digital Labour

1. Introduction

This paper explores the promise of that Open Educational Resources (OER) would democratise access to education and ennuï of many within the movement as the revolution is always just around the corner. The paper looks at different critiques of OER and Open Educational Practices (OEP) which explore the underlying causes of the distance between the possible and the actual. It starts by looking at traditional modes of formal Higher Education (HE), highlighting the way entry requirements act as a tariff, and the ability to “pay the tariff” and accrue the benefits of HE level learning are often distributed unevenly within society. It asks to what degree OER risks reproducing this tariff. It then looks at some earlier work which asked whether OER is a challenge to, or a product of, neoliberalism. The paper then touches on digital inclusion as part of a broader consideration of digital labour, who does digital labour, who has the skills to perform digital labour and who and how do people benefit from digital labour. The paper suggests a focus on the hidden tariff within OER allows us to see and locate those inequities. It asks whether older traditions of open education which focus on participation and common good can help us navigate towards

Open Educational Practice (OEP) which will overcome the visible and hidden barriers and realise the benefits of open education.

2. That Which is Hidden

2.1 The Hidden Tariff

Traditional formal post compulsory HE learning requires you to be qualified to learn, to have passed exams in order to demonstrate the relevant knowledge and skills. This tariff systems is highly contextual and varies between jurisdictions and is dependent on economic, social, cultural as well as human capital (Dorling 2011). Researchers in Widening Participation (WP, broadening the socio-economic base of those accessing education) have long recognised the ability to gain the relevant tariff to enter HE is based on underlying inequalities. Inequalities that are reproduced and accentuated through the HE system itself. The Open Universities movement is about this tariff (Wienbren 2015). Open access policy is only one component, the pedagogic model attempts to strip away the hidden tariff within curriculum design by creating a journey that is suitable for a learner regardless of where they are on their journey. It is when we see what it means to strip away assumptions about knowledge and skills within the design process you begin to realise what is hidden within formal HE. When these materials are released openly providers tend to create openness in their own image (Macintyre 2013) and there is a risk these hidden assumptions may be reproduced. It is these hidden aspects we focus on in this paper.

2.2 Open Education and Neoliberalism

We can unpick what is hidden within free and open content in a number of ways. While the promise of the Open Educational Resource (OER) movement was to reduce educational inequities the reality has been very different. The case for seeing OER as a site of resistance to creeping neoliberalism within HE is far from certain. While some might argue OER has been co-opted by capital, if we explore some of the assumptions embedded in the early movement different interpretations are possible. Recently I have argued OER has embedded assumptions about the world from broader political discourses. In particular the reification of the self within OER. For example, the pedagogic model of the early cMOOCs are based on self-regulated learners, these are the very attributes that HE delivers. Attributes firmly associated with the neo-liberal subject, an autonomous learner (Macintyre 2015a). One might cry foul for suggesting that like many other “counter-culture” movements OER is simply capital searching for new markets (Heath and Potter 2004). Nevertheless, the emphasis on the self-regulated learner contains assumptions about confidence and competence that may serve to exclude the uncertain learner.

3. Digital Labour in Open Education

Having suggested different ways in which embedded assumptions about content, and design might create hidden barriers to the use of free and open content I now turn my attention the idea of free labour as way to explore these barriers. Research into digital labour on free social media platforms has focused our attention on the idea of free labour and how the large corporations that own and manage these freely available platforms extract value from this free labour (Fuchs 2015). Drawing on research within open education and ideas around digital labour we can view education as work (in the co-created sense), effectively as an exchange of labour and reward. The entry tariff is a measure of the labour required to gain the tariff and a “test” of whether you

have the skills to conduct further “academic” labour to gain a qualification. A qualification that is itself a token allowing you to conduct further labour.

This opens up a number of avenues, how the free platform providers extract value from learners “free labour”, or the impact of Silicon Valley economic models that inform the valuation and value extraction. However, here we focus is on what this perspective means in relation to user requirements to access and participate in OER. We can tease out what those skills are. For example, the influence of Silicon Valley interaction models pervade approaches to OER models, with occluded assumptions about levels of digital participation. It often assumed a set of digital literacies (in the service of self-regulated learning) that are quite sophisticated. We know the skills required to do digital labour are not equally distributed (Schradie 2013). Work on the digital divide shows while access is become pervasive differences in use by socio-economic status is creating a second digital divide, the participation divide. We can see the unequal access to and distribution of those skills contributes to unequal access to education, even when it is freely available and openly licensed online.

This helps make visible hidden aspects of how OER operate in for and through practice. If we look at the hidden labour and the skills required to do that labour assumed within many OER we can see a hidden tariff. So far we have noted the tendency of pedagogic models to reimagine the learner as the self-regulated learner, the neoliberal subject (Macintyre 2015a), but beyond this seeing OER as labour, we can start to unpick assumptions about the skills set to perform free labour. Skills and attributes that are themselves products of people who have been through HE – the self-regulated, digital literate learner. Leaving aside dreams of the working class autodidact (Rose 2002), we are left with a sense of OER which risks reproducing assumptions embedded within HE, assumptions that may act as a hidden tariff, reproducing inequalities through excluding people who lack the skills to perform this free digital labour.

4. The Other Open

OER as providers create open in their own image (Macintyre 2013) pedagogic approaches that try to create routes into education, and barriers exist even for providers who acknowledge the “hidden tariff”. The Open University (OU UK) has been working on OER for some time, releasing a set percentage of its core curriculum into the open. However, while designed for open learners within a formal setting, when released openly the content has tended to be fragments. They are robbed of their context and contain assumptions about support. Before they even arrive at an open site a learner requires to know how to locate the knowledge, how to evaluate whether it is relevant, and how to apply it to their own context. Even where content has been designed with one set of assumptions about openness embedded within them, freed from their context, they also contain assumptions that can constrain use.

There is nothing novel in suggesting HE contains a set of hidden assumptions that limit access for particular groups. Partnerships and designing curriculum for people regardless of where they are on their learning journey are well trodden approaches in the broader Widening Participation community. They are based on a tradition of open which recognises the different ways people can be excluded and excluding factors layer on top of each other (Levitas *et.al* 2007). More recently this understanding has developed into an acknowledgment as societies become

increasingly “digital by default” variations in digital participation and use by socio-economic group (Schradié 2013; Blank 2013) are likely to accentuate and raise those barriers.

The OER movement has recognised the possibilities and the barriers of OER for some time (Lane 2008), but has lacked way of encapsulating the various ways in which online openly licensed resources may appear the same but operate in different ways in the world. Seeing OER in relation to labour provides us with a way to make visible some of those barriers. The assumed skills and knowledge embedded within the learning design that flow from HE into the open. Providers are slowly realising the impact of these embedded assumptions, of the hidden tariff within content. The OU UK is creating material specifically designed as courses, consciously reflecting on level, mode of study and the type of content. Elsewhere Open Educational Practices Scotland (OEPS) a Scottish Funding Council project to support and enable the use of OER and development of OEP in Scotland is exploring the role of partnership to provide contexts where people can work together to make visible and overcome hidden tariffs. These approaches draw on ideas from participatory design (Macintyre 2015b), and the open education movement more generally (Cannell *et.al* 2015) as an attempt to deal with or “design out” embedded assumptions.

5. Conclusion

What this paper suggests is that understanding education as work, as labour which requires particular skills and knowledge allows us to tease out and explore hidden aspects of OER. It provides a perspective on numerous but often fragmented critiques of the barriers to access within OER, allowing us to see how they act together, enabling access for some learners and potentially excluding others. Understanding the role this hidden tariff might play in creating barriers allows us to view the practices around the creation and use of free and open online content as spaces where comparative disadvantage can easily be embedded. It allows us to contest those spaces and suggests actions to ensure participation in the creation and use of free and open content is democratised. This paper is in its early stages, it is an attempt at a provocative exploration of the barriers to OER use, but more than that it is an attempt to suggest a solution, a solution based on designing open learning journeys free from hidden tariffs.

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