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OPEN EDUCATION AS DISRUPTION: LESSONS FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FROM OPEN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Ronald Macintyre, The Open University in Scotland, Scotland

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on what Open and Distance Learning providers might learn from the Open Educational Resources/Practices (OER/OEP) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). It is based on experiences working on OER and OEP first at the OU in Scotland (OUiS) and more recently under the auspices of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funded Open Educational Practices Scotland (OEPS) programme hosted by OUiS. The paper by exploring the disruptive potential of MOOCs and OER within Higher Education. While it acknowledges lessons for HE it argues the focus on access and scale has obscured other lessons ODL might learn from opening up educational practices. Much of our work has centred on OEP and partnership with organisations outside the formal education sector. As such it has taken the possibilities offered by openness as an invitation to look at the relationship between the formal and the informal. The paper traces OEPS journey as it explores less apparent but no less important lessons around designing and creating open content through partnership in a way that is cost effective and context relevant.

2. MOOCs and Disruptive Innovation

In this first section we look at the rhetoric around MOOCs as a disruptive innovation, what we gain from the rhetoric and what may be obscured.

2.1 What is Disruptive Innovation?

There is a growing sense that OER and MOOCs are disrupting Higher Education, that they are a disruptive innovation that fundamentally change education paradigms (Barber *et.al* 2013). However, the case for them as a disruptive innovation is far from clear. A disruptive innovation is understood as a technological or process led innovation where the new entrant enters into the market by capturing a segment not well served by the incumbent. The incumbents have through time began to neglect their least demanding customers and allocating resource to satisfying high value highly demanding customers or particularly needy groups. A disruptive innovation recognises that for some customers the “extra” the incumbent offers is not required to satisfy particular customers, it disrupts from below (Christensen *et.al* 2015).

How do MOOCs disrupt ODL models? At the moment the “extra” provided by an ODL provider like the OU appears to be simply support and credit. Many of those using MOOCs and OER are people with credit and HE experience, self-regulated learners who can support themselves, so perhaps for them the “extra” offer is superfluous. Though as MOOC providers are finding out, with extra services it is hard to monetise the relations, and many are exploring credit and support. As some have wryly noted MOOCs are evolving towards ODL (Longstaff 2014). However, the “extra” offered by ODL providers is more than support and credit. For example at OUiS it is based on a social mission, to promote social justice and reduce educational inequities. These values inform the value it creates for its learners. The “extra” relates to a focus on participation, not just access. Its more expensive model has a social purpose, and it is not clear whether openness and MOOC rhetoric is truly disruptive, or what is even disrupting.

2.2 Focussing on Disruption

If we look at the attention paid to OER and MOOCs it tends to focus scale, and how low transaction costs of online media widen access. However, as we have seen in the UK, widening access to Education (creating more places) does little to broaden the socio-economic base of those accessing those places (Dorling 2011) and thus

does little toward widening participation (Bathmaker *et.al* 2013). Those working in ODL understand access is very different from participation. The biggest disruption to ODL models might not be MOOCs, but state policies which have promoted access over participation, leaving a dwindling market for ODL and little support for organisations looking to create routes into learning for those distanced from education. The relationship between the MOOCs/OER promotion of access and the neoliberalisation of HE is far from clear (Macintyre 2015a). In this sense ODL providers need take care what lessons they learn from OER and MOOCs, as the idea of disruptive innovation seems to break down when we consider products and process that relate to a values based mission and promote social justice and reduce inequalities.

This might seem a very partial and journalistic account of the MOOC phenomena, and clearly not all MOOCs are alike. However, MOOC/OER rhetoric is also partial, and ignores inconvenient aspects. Things that those in the Widening Participation and ODL communities are acutely aware. Consider digital participation and the tendency for the pedagogic models in open online courses to focus on competencies (like digital creation) that work on the Second Digital Divide suggests tend to privilege well educated people (Blank 2013; Schradie 2013). Consider also the direction of openness, MOOCs, and the OER movements have tended to focus on the releasing content created within HE, it often seems an attempt to reinforce the sense of the academy as the place where knowledge is created and through the clear focus on reputation enhancement an attempt to colonise public space. However, other models of openness are emerging, and it these approaches we explore in the remainder of this paper.

3. Our Journey

In this section we tease out some lessons from our journey, we start by setting out the context, then highlight the emerging and contingent nature of our approach and providing examples of our shifting approach

3.1 First Steps in Partnership

Our work at OUIs is based on encouraging participation in education, and arose as a way to meet the needs of local partners. The OU UK has a centralised production model that creates high quality materials to be delivered at scale. While scale is important within ODL, the production model means smaller cohorts, or nation specific content are not economically viable. Our partners were concerned with “reach” rather than accredited formal learning, so we started to work with them to create free and open courses on the OU’s open platform OpenLearnWorks. Through this we developed ways of working with partners and within (and sometimes around) the OU’s production model. Our first efforts focussed on the production side, using approaches from User Experience and established patterns of learning design (Macintyre 2013) to capture knowledge from partners, structuring it, and steering it through OU production.

Over time we realised partners were engaging with us and openness because they felt they had a need or want they could not meet. A deficit which they felt free and open online resources would fill, they were attracted by the rhetoric around MOOCs but uncertain about their place in the landscape. It was these uncertainties that led us to focus our work turned to the “fuzzy front end” of the learning design process. It was not that we became less concerned with aspects of production, rather we became more concerned with how we work in partnership, and what designing in partnership meant. In particular, our concern was to ensure the content created in and through partnership matched the context. That it drew on and out of the partners knowledge and expertise it met their needs.

These concerns arose from open educational practices. For example, in our original formulation we used ideas from “Design Thinking” (Brown and Martin 2015) to start with what people need, and asked partners to map out their learners. However, we found the consensus we were able to build through collective visualisations of learners was based on individual assumptions or organisational myths about clients. With the content simply reproducing hidden assumptions about learners. This was based on our own unspoken assumption, organisations knew their learners. These assumptions formed from a model developed by OUIs where we had been working with organisations with the partners acting as a trusted source of support for marginalised groups, and OUIs gained trust by association (Cannell *et.al* 2015). While these were reasonable assumptions for our existing approach to outreach and ODL. Our partners were as uncertain in this landscape as we were.

3.2 Emerging Patterns to Open up Educational Practices

We needed a different approach to understanding the learner within the design. Through work we conducted with end users as designers (Macintyre 2014a; 2014b), based on ideas around participatory design and design thinking, we developed a series of exercises to tease this out (Macintyre 2015b; 2015c). For example, based on “Rich Pictures” we would ask people to draw out their “ideal learner”, we evoked the sense of the Platonic ideal form and asked participants to situate the learner in their context and define the learning needs and the transformation process, i.e. what they would become after the learning materials had met their need. We then asked them to conduct the same exercise for their actual learners. These different visions seemed to relate to the organisations understanding of learners, with the ideal form suggesting a great deal about the organisations resources and capabilities and ability to deliver certain kinds of learning, for those with a social mission it also teased out values and the value transformation. The actual learner opened up discussion about the organisations understanding of it learners, often these focussed on deficit, what the learners lacked, difficulties in dealing with particular groups of learners, but most often the lack of information people had about their learners. The ideal learner also links to the literature on reshaping WP identities into an ideal form (Byrom and Lightfoot 2013), and thoughts of the working class autodidact (Rose 2002). It led us into thinking about how we develop context relevant content, and drawing new voices into curriculum – a theme we return to in the discussion.

This is a basic principle in “Design Thinking”, start with what people need (Brown and Martin 2015), but we found our need was to get closer to the learners, to tease out tacit assumptions. While there is no formulae, the sense of starting with who your learners are and what value(s) you want to create together we found a way to structure our approach. Based on work on designerly ways of knowing we started to talk about (Dorst and Cross 2001; Dorst 2011):

WHO [are the learner] +HOW [are/is this transformation to be achieved] = WHAT [value(s) and/or transformation]

Having asked partners to think about learners needs, what they know about them, we then ask people to fill the gaps. We call this part WHO, and this links to WHAT, is the transformation, WHAT value(s) are created for the learner. While these are in preliminary state and many change over time, the next stage is about assessing whether the organisation can reasonably meet those needs – HOW. This is where we start to consider openness and online. HOW is part of the framing process within any design process (Dorst and Cross 2001). Thinking about it as a frame allows us to explore our assumptions. For example, is HOW about creating an OER to support the transformation process just because openness is what we do? We asked ourselves and our partners to reflect on the tacit assumptions that successful solutions always apply (Corbett 2005; Holcomb *et.al* 2009). For us being clear about our tacit assumptions was about being open, about avoiding situations where, if a workshop participant suggest unease about OER and its role in HOW, they cast as being a barrier to openness. We have made those assumptions, and also observed people in partners who see openness as a solution suggest the reservations of their own staff are illegitimate – they are afraid of change.

This is why we opened up HOW, while participants had come to us because they felt OEP was HOW, we wanted to be open about the solutions, in particular thinking about the learner, the organisations resources and capabilities, its core competences, what it was good at (Grant 2010). To think about the range of HOWs that existed within present practice and the strategic fit between OER/OEP and those existing practices. The workshops became more about the how openness fitted within the organisational strategy. These “bigger questions” often made participants feel a little uneasy, while we had positive feedback about them, about the space to open up those discussions, workshops of this type were followed by long pauses. Pauses that made us wonder about our approach. However, partners have come back, often after conducting internal reviews of outreach and engagement. Once an organisation feels that being open is part of its HOW, we then need to consider what being open enables for the organisation and its learners. We found that opening up HOW helped build trust within the partnership, and a clearer focus on how we might bring new kinds of content and approaches into the academy.

4. Discussion

OER and in particular MOOCs have through sheer numbers raised awareness of the possibilities around free and open. In particular amongst groups with a social mission, organisations with a remit for public good, who want to explore the possibilities of open and online to help them create social value as funding for these activities becomes constrained. Through our engagement with these organisations we have come to see another opportunity but a significant challenge for ODL providers, in particular the OU UK.

For an ODL provider like the OU scale and scope is a key part of the business model (Weinbren 2015). The “Fordist” ethos of centralised high quality production developed when faith in the “White Heat of Technology” was high and communication technologies were expensive and centralised. Many of those assumptions have broken down and the OU has evolved and changed. However, content production is still centralised, it is based on a set of tacit assumptions which inform routines allowing it to manage quality in an efficient and effective manner (Grant 2010).

However, as noted above while this approach promotes access, it does not always promote participation. Partnerships can provide the sorts of social and context specific support to promote participation that ODL can struggle to offer at scale. The opportunity is clear, organisations in this space with an interest in openness and a social mission are likely to be a good fit, with the sense of shared values helping to build trust. If these organisations are engaged in work with the very communities and individuals we want to target they are already a “trusted source” of support, ODL providers can reach into the places they would not otherwise be able to reach. Not just in relation to learners, but also in relation to curriculum as OEP offers the possibilities to bring new voices and new knowledge and skills into the academy. Here openness is less the established MOOC/OER broadcast monologue model of releasing content from within the academy, but about drawing new voices and approaches into the academy as part of a dialogue.

However, many of the assumptions and routines which have allowed it to shift into a dominant position in OER through mapping existing resources and capabilities from its formal offer across can make it unresponsive and inflexible. While we are not at the stage where its key strength has become a weakness (Miller 1992), if the OU wants to realise the wider benefits of openness it does need to look carefully at the assumptions within its production model. The suggestion is that openness offers up the possibility of a different kind of disruption, not of demand side, but of supply (Gans 2016), of how ODL providers create content.

5. Conclusion

This paper suggests the focus on access within discourses on openness might be distracting us from less apparent but still important lessons we can learn from OEP. Opening up through partnership provides access to neglected learners, and ODL providers have employed this model to reach those distanced from education. However, it also offers the possibility (as yet generally unrealised) of developing new content and approaches, of disrupting ODL production models. Curriculum which, rather than reshaping the learner to perform acceptable WP (“Working Class”) identity explores how openness and partnership might develop context relevant curriculum. Opening up the academy to new voices and new approaches is challenging, and the ability to change is constrained in ODL providers like the OU by tacit Fordist production routines. However, OER and MOOCs are only part of the pressure on ODL, in the UK there is reduced financial and political support for the OU's organisational values of social justice. The pressure to centralise control, to retreat into “the model”, as a response to those challenges is significant. However, it will leave opportunities offered by open unrealised. Partnerships with organisations that share ODL's social values can open content creation, producing content that matches context in cost effective ways, we just need to pay attention to what openness disrupts.

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