

Fostering open educational practices: communities or networks?

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Leadership is expressed in many ways. One way can be through developing new practices in one organization that are then taken up by other organizations, where an individual or a few individuals may be the driving force. Alternatively it can be groups of like-minded people or organizations acting as communities or networks of practice that take the lead in fostering change. However, little has been said about the role and place of leadership in such communities and networks. In this chapter I explore, from my personal leadership experiences, the motivations for people and in particular organizations to act in this way through the case of open educational practices (OEP) in general and the part played by The Open University (OU) in particular.

Introduction

There has been growing interest globally in open education, and in particular the OEP involved in higher education. However there are also many debates as to what OEP actually involve and who benefits from them (as opposed to the more traditional forms of ‘closed’ classroom-based education). These debates centre on both the philosophical role of open education in removing restrictions and furthering equality and equity of opportunity when opportunity is scarce, as espoused in the global campaigns of Education for All (Lane, 2013; 2017); and also the practical role of social and technological developments in supporting or not supporting that aim as opposed to improving existing models of (classroom-based) education for those already able to participate. These tensions between broadening and deepening educational opportunity have been apparent throughout the different forms of OEP that have been seen in the past 50 years.

What are open educational practices?

The first form of OEP is exemplified by the model of open, distance (and more recently) e-learning (ODeL) as largely practised by open universities since 1970 when the OU was the first university to use the prefix of open (in whichever language). While there is variation in this model amongst the many ‘open universities’ worldwide a particular characteristic has been to both widen participation and offer greater flexibility in higher education for groups who might not otherwise be able to participate (an opening up of opportunities) (Lane, 2012). An extreme form of widening participation and flexibility in open universities is an open entry policy whereby students can register to study undergraduate courses without having any prior high school qualifications (Lane, 2015) and the flexibility to select the courses that make up their programme of study (Cooke et al., 2018). However such courses and programmes are not free to study. And while there are several international associations that provide communities or networks for the relatively small number of organisations primarily involved in ODeL, this model of higher education is still largely founded on governmental policy and not private philanthropy or international agency promotion.

The second form of open education has been characterised by open educational resources (OER), which are educational works of many forms that are openly licensed (most often with a Creative Commons License) and usually are published in digital form on the World Wide Web (WWW). The open license (a legal innovation) means that the creator of that work is giving prior permission for users of that work to not only study it for free but to also have the freedom to adapt that work for other educational purposes or even create new works out of a

mixture of other works. The WWW (a technological innovation) has literally created a platform and network by which such educational works can be published and be available and accessible to all who have access to the WWW, thus enabling an educational commons of open sharing. The OER movement took off with MIT's 2002 launch of its Open CourseWare initiative (Bliss and Smith, 2017), and has gained international traction through the Cape Town Declaration on Open Education in 2007 and the 2012 Paris OER Declaration, to name but two developments. This movement has also led to the emergence of new organisations and international associations promoting this practice (e.g. The Open Education Consortium) or existing agencies (e.g. UNESCO) taking on leadership roles amongst various communities or networks of organisations (and individuals). In the former case this has involved a wide variety of educational organisations and the models of education they undertake, not just ODeL and not just universities. The progress of the OER movement has largely involved a mixture of private philanthropy, national policy and international agency support, but little private capital, mainly because open licensing is seen as undermining traditional educational publishing business models.

A third form of open education has been the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) platforms since 2011 (Yuan and Powell, 2013). The first type of MOOCs (cMOOCs) arose from within the OER movement and were based on its constructivist, sharing and emancipatory philosophy but were quickly pushed aside by the emergence of xMOOCs that in effect moved the traditional instructional classroom-based model out on to the WWW using the wide availability of communication technologies. Interestingly, while the platforms that emerged (e.g. Coursera, Udacity, edX, FutureLearn) arose from universities they often are run as commercial operations using venture capital as people tried to work out how to make successful business models out of the enormous public interest that ensued. This focus on commerce has also meant that many MOOCs are not openly licensed, may only be openly available at set times and have proved most attractive to already well educated people, although many do still see opportunities for MOOCs to widen participation (van de Oudeweetering and Agirdag, 2018). As well as significant commercial funding it is also the case that these platforms act as a focus for networking of the universities and other organisations involved, although to date only one cooperative association of (European) MOOC providers has recently emerged.

What I have tried to highlight is that in each phase of open education there has been leadership within and by certain higher education organisations that has then stimulated other higher education organisations to adopt these new practices and that this growing collection of organisations have cooperated and collaborated (or not) in different ways to further that new practice. To illustrate this further I next look at the case of an organisation that has been heavily involved in all three phases before looking more deeply at the concepts of communities and networks of practice and how these theories map on to what has occurred in each phase.

Open educational practices and The Open University

As already noted, the OU was the first open university in the world, but is now one of 60 such universities (Lane, 2015). As such it has played, and still plays, a strong role in both helping other open universities to become established and in forming international associations of institutions involved in ODeL (e.g. European Association of Distance

Education Universities, The International Council for Distance Education). However while offering leadership within these self-selected communities or networks, the OU, and all open universities, have not greatly influenced teaching models and practices amongst the much larger body of ‘brick’ universities, with very few adopting any form of ODeL until the much more recent advent of the World Wide Web and MOOCs.

The OU was not the pioneer in the OER movement. That claim can be laid at MIT and its Open Courseware initiative (Bliss and Smith, 2017), which was their response to the educational dot.com boom and bust at the turn of the Millennium (Walsh, 2011). The OU took until 2006 to launch its own OER website – OpenLearn. The reasons why the OU joined this nascent movement is because it fitted very well with the existing institutional policies and the practices of its staff (Gourley and Lane, 2009; Lane, 2012). Having decided that OER were an important development that fitted with its mission the OU then embarked upon another set of activities that have put it the forefront of the movement. The first was to become a founding member of the international Open CourseWare (later Open Education) Consortium. The second was to secure grant funding to run a UK based Support Centre for Open Resources in Education (SCORE) that complemented other grant-funded UK based OER developments and which, over a three year period, initiated a series of activities (teaching fellowships, publishing OER) and events (workshops and conferences) that involved several hundred educational practitioners from the majority of the higher education organisations in England (Lane and Darby, 2012). The third was to initiate an international research programme into the use and value of OER (firstly as OLnet - the Open Learning Network - and latterly as the OER Research Hub). The fourth was to support a number of national and international educational projects that actively used OER and in particular used OpenLearn Create, a sister site to OpenLearn, which is where individuals and organisations can freely publish their open content, open courses and resources.

Lastly, the OU was yet again not the first university to establish a MOOC platform, with most of the front runners coming from the USA, but it has become the leading European based MOOC platform (FutureLearn was launched in 2013). In some ways the OU had already been delivering a form of MOOC since 1999 but not to non-fee paying learners (Lane et al, 2014). With a long history and experience with online learning it did not see the models of online learning being used on other platforms as being very effective and wanted to design a platform that used a better, research-informed educational rationale that other higher education organisations could use and adopt. A corollary to this philosophy was helping establish a FutureLearn Academic Network whereby staff from the partner organisations using FutureLearn could share their research and scholarship into MOOCs amongst themselves and others.

This overview of OEP at the OU provides further context for reflecting on the role of communities and networks of practice in furthering those practices and also how leadership is instantiated and what impact that leadership has on the community or network (and beyond).

Communities and networks of practice

There is widespread interest in the ideas and expression of Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998) and Networks of Practice (NoPs) (Brown and Duguid, 2001). These concepts have been used both as analytical frameworks in academic studies and as an intervention tool for providing practical viewpoints for groups of people to think about ‘real world’ situations

in a number of settings and economic sectors, including education (MacKinnon et al, 2016; Smith et al, 2017).

Although the idea of CoPs has been around for many years, it was first made explicit by Lave and Wenger in their work on apprenticeship and situated learning (1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) originally defined a CoP as “*a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential communities of practice*” (p. 98), although the definition has evolved over time with Wenger et al (2011) saying it is ‘*a learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other’s experience of practice as a learning resource*’ (p.9).

In simple terms, CoPs are groups of people who share a common pursuit, activity or concern. Members do not necessarily work together, but form a common identity and understanding through their common interests and interactions. There are many aspects to CoPs but Wenger (1998) identified three interrelated aspects that may either hinder or enhance learning:

- Joint enterprise – a collective understanding of what the community’s purpose is
- Mutual engagement – interacting and establishing norms, expectations and relationships
- Shared repertoire – using communal resources, such as language, artefacts, tools, concepts, methods, standards

More recently this has been extended to encompass the notion of value creation as a way to describe the learning from a CoP in order to account for the value that may accrue to other stakeholders, such as the organisations in or across which the CoP operates. This shift from individuals to organisations is also seen within the concept of NoP. The concept of NoPs originated in the work of Brown and Duguid (2001), who applied the term to the relations among groups of people with looser connections than expected in a CoP but also recognises that there may be people beyond an organisation within which an individual is situated, who share their practice or may influence that practice through their own practices, and which leads to extensive shared know-how (Brown and Duguid, 2001, 2002), although some of that knowhow may come from exchanges with others outside the network.

In this much looser world of NoPs some consideration has been given into how innovations (such as OEP) may be informally diffused or formally exchanged between organisations as part of the shared repertoire. Deroian (2002) argues that individuals’ (and potentially organisations’) opinions on innovations are formed and shaped through interactions with other potential adopters. Therefore, much more is involved than simple information transmission in the adoption of an innovation; it involves revisions of judgements, discussions in a wider practice related or socio-economic system, and an individual’s or organisation’s receptivity to influence (Cox, 2007; van Dorp and Lane, 2011). In some the sharing of know-how and innovations can be formalised through a process of open innovation (Enkel et al, 2009), which has three core processes:

- The outside-in process, where the organisation enriches their own knowledge base through external knowledge sourcing;
- The inside-out process, where the organisation gains by bringing ideas to market and multiplying technology by transferring ideas to the outside environment;

- The coupled process, where there is co-creation with (mainly) complementary partners through alliances, cooperation, and joint ventures during which give and take are crucial for success.

So, how do the ideas of CoPs and NoPs apply to OEP in general and to the case of the OU in particular as a leading participant in this domain?

Individuals and organisations as communities and networks of open educational practice?

A significant feature of communities and networks is sharing and openness in transactions. While there may be tensions between the requirements of educational institutions and individual educational practitioners in being open and in sharing educational resources, collective and cooperative activities between people and institutions are likely to be a key factor in the sustainability of such practices. Indeed, as noted by Gassmann et al (2010) “*Institutional openness is becoming increasingly popular in practice and academia: open innovation, open R&D and open business models.*” But this begs the question of what constitutes leadership and how is it recognised when the process (openness) is congruent with the domain (open education)? One way is to evaluate leadership against the three key aspects of CoPs and the three core processes of open innovation.

Leadership in joint enterprise

Being the first to do something new is a form of leadership. As the first ‘open university’, the OU has been setting the agenda as to what their purpose(s) are. The mission of the OU (open as to people, places, methods and ideas) was given to it at its outset and has been a constant reference point for all those that have followed. To a certain degree there has, to date, only been one main community/network for ODeL institutions as there have only been a limited number of institutions heavily involved in those practices. This is different to communities and networks around OER and MOOCs as these have involved much larger numbers of educational institutions many of which have different reasons for being involved. The OER movement has also largely been driven by shared values (doing the right thing) which fits in well with the OU’s values. And as an early adopter and important player it has helped in shaping the shared purposes. In contrast the MOOC movement appears to have been driven more by self-interest (doing things better). In this case the OU has been a late adopter and had little influence to date in leading discussion on a shared purpose, while it is still not clear what that shared purpose might be.

Leadership in mutual engagement

The OU was a founding member of both EADTU and ICDE. As such it (and key staff members) has been a leader in setting out norms, expectations and relationships in these communities/networks. This is particularly evidenced in both its leadership in the use of new technologies to support ODeL (the practice) and its leadership in researching what is, and what is not effective in open education (the scholarship). Its staff regularly and actively participate in projects and meetings of both bodies in order to foster open and distance education.

The OU was also a founding member of the Open Education (formerly Open Courseware) Consortium but the practices around OER and the organisations involved are much more varied than for ODeL. In fact it is in a minority subset as an ODeL provider. As the OER

movement has moved more into OEP the OU (and its peers) have been able to have influence but it is more difficult to label this as leadership. And this is even more the case with MOOCs and their crossover with online learning in general. Nevertheless one OER activity in which the OU and its staff have played a leading role is in the OER series of conferences. Through the SCORE project the OU was able to support and sustain the first few OER conferences beginning with OER10 (the 10 referring to 2010) and made it a fixture within the open education conference calendar and an important activity for nourishing an OER CoP in the UK in particular.

Leadership in shared repertoire

As already noted the OU has been a pioneer in the use of technologies in ODeL. It has therefore been very influential in establishing the key ideas and modes of practice that underpin the work of all open universities. It has also been a leader in being accepted and evaluated alongside all other universities within national and regional quality assurance and research excellence frameworks. The 'normalising' of open universities within the higher education sector is not universal around the world but is an important achievement.

The OU has played a leading role in the use of tools and standards in the OER movement on the back of what it does for its own students. For example it was able to adopt and enhance an open source software platform - Moodle - for the benefit of all in that community/network. It has also used Moodle as the basis for its own free learning platform - OpenLearn - as well as for its community-facing sister platform - OpenLearn Create. Two significant features of both is the creation of OER in multiple formats for downloading and use on different devices and different platforms and the development of accessibility features in the OER meaning that they are inclusive of those with certain disabilities. This has included participating in related communities/networks of practice related to software development in general and open source software development in particular. The OU, through its subsidiary, FutureLearn, has also been working at creating a world leading MOOC platform that serves learners better than other platforms and offers advantages to partner organisations who are now using it to deliver for-fee taught courses.

Leadership in open innovation

This has been mostly demonstrated through the OU's adoption of Moodle which has been a major factor in that particular community/network of practice as well as those involved in open and distance education and OERs. Both OpenLearn and OpenLearn Create have been the key channels (amongst others) for showcasing ODeL in general and OER in particular. By putting so much of what it does out there for others to see and use has led to a large number of projects and partnerships but also a significant number of organisations that just use the resources for their own benefit. Indeed a number of projects, partnerships and alliances have arisen, been made possible, or made more effective by the OU having two leading educational platforms.

Reflections

This chapter has described what leadership in OEP looks like and how that can be viewed through the theoretical lenses of CoPs and NoPs, although even the distinctions between CoPs and NoPs are not clear cut. It is much harder to evidence the degree of influence and impact any claimed leadership may have.

First, there are many related and overlapping CoPs/NoPs for open education, open learning and online learning and that these may operate at national and/or international levels. Some people and organisations belong to just one. Others, like the OU are in many. This may mean their influence is more widely distributed but it may also be diluted or focused on less 'influential' CoPs/NoPs in the field of education.

Second, open education can be seen as nice to have because it fits with certain values but may not be essential to most educational organisations except if it improves their performance in some way. Equally, open education is not always a priority for policy makers and other stakeholders.

Third, while it is possible to track individual academic influence through citations of journal articles there is no simple way to track influence and impact on policies practices. This is especially so with OER where people are free to take away and not obliged to say why and what they did next. In contrast it is possible to identify the leaders within certain institutions, of which I am one in the OU.

Indeed it could be argued that a successful community or network is one with many different leaders at many different places and times and with no one individual or organisation standing out as the leader in affecting change.

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