

## The dark side of the knowledge commons?: Open educational media and novel spheres of control

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**Abstract:** Enabled by ICTs, the open provision of educational **resources (OER)**, for consultation, use and re-modification by **communities** of users for non-commercial purposes, is associated with a movement that emerged in the early 2000s and which has its roots on liberal education and on the principle of justice located in transfer of non material goods. Following the uptake of many institutional projects ranging from lecture podcasts, curricular materials and free online courses - both complementing and challenging the legitimacy of archives that reside in other public culture domains, as learning resources - international NGOs, funding and educational policy bodies, have been working towards standardizing the ways in which these resources are created and shared. Combining notions of mediation with cultural political economy and the philosophy of education, this paper aims to introduce a critique of the open access/content movement in education, leading to three core paradoxes: a) a novel strand of techno-legal and cultural determinism surrounding the education commons b) the simultaneous circumvention and endorsement of institutional authorities in education; c) and the concurrent questioning and privileging of a market-driven education economy.

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*N.B.: Please note that paper is a summary of a longer, in progress, paper and concepts as well as evidence may not be explained fully in this form. The paper aims to form the basis for an interactive discussion and feedback. Please do not cite, or quote directly from this version.*

### Introduction

Open Education Resources (OER) is a term widely known to describe digitised learning and courseware materials published in the public domain for educators, students and self-learners to use and re-modify for non-commercial purposes within domains of teaching, learning and research (OECD, 2007). The term is associated with the emergence of a movement that grew since the early 2000s to promote ideals about liberal education and principles of justice, located in the right of access to education and in the transfer of non-material goods. Major stakeholders in the movement nowadays include numerous charitable foundations (The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in the US, funding projects internationally) and open-access/software advocacy groups (including the Creative Commons), as well as funding and policy implementation bodies, including JISC in the UK, the European Commission's elearning directorate, OECD's and UNESCO's directorates for education and the Information Society respectively, as well as universities and colleges, consortia and non-profit organizations in the domain of culture and distance education.

With pioneering projects from MIT and the Open University in the UK, hundreds of

higher education institutions across the globe have published textbooks, online journals and training notes, multimodal, curricular and learning objects, and, occasionally, all free online courses over the last decade. Social media platforms (e.g. within YouTube.edu, iTunesU) also have provided a popular avenue for broadcasting lecture podcasts and for increasing institutional reputation. A recent wave of initiatives has sprung from a dozen elite universities, including Stanford, Princeton, Harvard, and the Massachusetts and California Institutes of Technology, Edinburgh University aiming to develop free, massive open online courses (MOOCs) through commercial platforms such as Udacity, Coursera and edX. At the same, open media facilitated by popular and well-known community-led and grassroots initiatives (e.g. Wikimedia), public domain and Commons archives (e.g. Flickr, see Open Archives Initiative), and alternative, open study communities (e.g., Wikieducator, Peer-to-Peer University, University of the People) have been gaining some legitimacy in the mainstream, for reference, self-study and the cultivation of internet and digital literacies.

Corresponding to the divergence of OER landscape, several bodies have announced policy guidelines for the implementation of OER in higher education, attempting formally to standardise the ways in which these resources are created and shared within the sector (see Caswell et al. 2008; Hilton III et al. 2010). Three interrelated phenomena are worth noting in this respect. First, in recent years more emphasis is put in the production of educational outputs, which can be seen as part of the institutional educational habitus, alongside scholarly materials and research, leading to novel directions for the mediatization of education. Second, more resources have become available in what we can call the 'field of education', beyond the realm of formal institutions. And third, participation in digital culture is widely seen to be facilitating networks of improvement and learning, beyond formal contexts.

I would argue that educational outputs, and open educational resources, are part of a wider publishing field, with specific ontologies and relations which can be located within central *processes of mediation* (Carey, 1989, Thompson, 1995; Silverstone, 1999, Couldry, 2006/2008, Dortner, 2008). Scholars have taken the concept of mediation and mediatization (of practices and meanings) in numerous directions, emphasizing however the multiple factors that shape meaning, and the open-ended nature of interpretation (cf., Thumim, 2008). In this paper I deploy the concept of mediation as an orientation to unravel the multiple social positions – and tensions – associated with the terms openness and education and to point the ways in which open resources operate within novel forms of power, competition and reward. Insights are based upon a critical discursive review of seminal, official documents that characterize the movement, and a series of interviews with stakeholders, including faculty, educational technologists and students who have engaged in the development and/or interpretation of such projects. The insights presented here are a summary of these analyses. In the developing the critique that follows, I also draw upon critical approaches to the philosophy of education and technology (see for example Giroux, 1997; Kellner, 2004; Kellner and Share, 2005).

My critique of the open education movement, presented here is exemplified in the form of three paradoxes: a) a novel strand of techno-legal determinism surrounding the open commons b) the simultaneous evasion and endorsement of institutional authorities in education; c) and the simultaneous questioning and privileging of a market-driven education economy.

### **Opening access to the knowledge society: novel spheres of legal and socio-technical determinism**

The idea of open education is rooted on existing notions of liberal education, the

inclusion of alternative or convivial curricula and emphasis on participation rather than acquisition (see Friere, 1970, Paavola, *et al.*, 2004). Located in the F(L)OSS ideals, the OER movement also mobilises deep-seated ideal of public access to information and resources is a right that is located to the principle of justice in transfer of goods, including voluntary exchange and gifts. Likewise, endeavours that promote open access to culture and pedagogy as *resources*, focus their concerns on assumed restricted access (or no access) to formal educational institutions (e.g. in low income countries) and on the emancipation from hierarchies of control required in systems which condition admittance to knowledge. Seminal documents appear to emphasise circumventing access to formal institutions through open access to resources (Atkins et al.: 2007: 1-5; Hylén, 2006) as a principal aim, alongside 'innovative approaches to remove barriers to the creation; use, re-use and sharing of high-quality content'. Institutions are called to perform an ethical mission of widen participation through providing access (to a limited amount of) learning resources without the requirement to enroll in the systems of formal higher education. Financed by international and charitable organizations in the West however, the OER movement also encourages strategic alliances that promote task forces for the deployment of the Open educational resources (and practices). These nonetheless, are more inclined to devote more attention to what is perceived as the ethical task of making pedagogical knowledge available for those that may need to gain from it outside of the traditional forms of institutional control, than to foster grassroots educational reform locally. Hence most of the attention is paid to 'building technical capacity' and the deployment of global standards for adopting open licenses (facilitated, mostly, by Creative Commons).

Often, as with the development of Creative Commons, the language of endorsement is motivated by a novel articulation of technological, legal and economic thinking (Kelty, 2004). One on hand, a specialist audience in the West is addressed, mostly comprising those in educational technology and management, whose concerns also include financial sustainability, the search of alternative models of funding for public (and private) education, and the need to raise institutional profiles (cf., Santos, 2008; Lane, 2012). On the other, notions of 'education' and its association with 'culture' as well as 'cultural' or in this case, 'pedagogical' norms, are often used strategically to determine the limits of legality or quality. Identity and difference are mostly used as a means to influence people's behavior for adopting more standardised legal and technical practices in mediating or publishing curricular, and interpretative resources (around pedagogical content) openly. Although tensions in the practices of sharing and the 'uses' of pedagogical media among faculty, teachers and learners are discussed in some research studies in the field (Alevizou, 2012; Petridis et al, 2008), the notions of 'publication' and interpretation of 'public pedagogy' are rarely addressed; notions of subjectivity in creative interpretation embedded in practices of consultation, 'citation' or 'attribution' against tensions of plagiarism and context have not been fully fleshed out; again the nuances of creativity and tensions around moral rights, ownership or 'credit' that condition the publication of pedagogical content around the world around, or within novel pressures of digital exposure, are also rarely been addressed (see Hattaka, 2009; Unwin, 2005).

Likewise, despite the fact that critiques of the movement in respect to its possible 'imperialism' (c.f. Cormier, 2009) are being addressed by some initiatives, the instrumentalisation of cross-cultural and institutional collaboration, is endorsed by both policies and initiatives; this is often framed as a solution to 'asymmetries' and 'differences' (Santos et al., 2010, Hattaka, 2009). Little attention is paid to the demand of consideration of the tensions between the universality of pedagogical knowledge and the particular conditions of its production and enunciation (Canclini, 2009). Issues such as this are generally dealt with in reductionist ways: The terms 'translations', 'versions'

and 'adaptation' punctuate the treatment of cultural aspects, which seem to be addressed without any specificity, as 'localization' is what conditions the 'reuse' of materials produced predominantly in English-speaking countries (see also Ferreira, 2012).

Several advocates in the field have raised concerns (see D'Antony and Savage, 2009) regarding such issues, and particularly pointing to notions of perspective, relevance and value of local knowledge or local educational contexts. Some programmes in the Global South, such as the Open Knowledge Network frame disadvantage users as 'active producers and innovators' (Heeks, 2008) for collecting, sharing and disseminating local knowledge, focusing on lively-hood appropriate issues, such as health, education, agriculture and rights. These emphasise the human element, which could be supported by flexible, technical solutions. While there exist some positive examples of technologically and culturally shaped approaches that can be used to pursue principles of social justice and equality, a number of limitations can be borne to bear. As Neil Selwyn (2011) among others, points out, many such interventions are seen to be endorsing 'official solutions' on the part of international organizations or development bodies who have the power to develop expensive schemes, but also can influence or determine the nature of technology, technologically facilitated-knowledge production and its uses. Much of the 'participation' and 'inclusion' discourse embedded in many such social policy interventions can be seen as driven by official supply-side needs and assumptions (Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005).

In the English-speaking West, the legal and cultural determinism is accompanied by the technologically conditioned, attachment of Web 2.0 to subaltern participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Strategies to encourage the greater use of web 2.0 tools and social media in higher education in the OECD countries, towards the mid to late 2000s, has been rooted on the premise that by enabling technologically mediated creativity and collaboration, will assist in transparently tracing specific processes in the evaluation and creation of resources - which in turn, *may* help to improve learning (see Pedro, 2003; Selwyn, 2007: 91; Franklin and van Harmelen, 2007). Accordingly, accompanying policies surrounding open education, have shifted beyond just increasing *open access*, and towards the facilitation of more *participatory* and *transparent* socio-technical infrastructures in knowledge sharing *around* teaching and learning (Iiyosh and Kumar, 2008); the aspiration is again that these *may improve* pedagogical outcomes.

Two key dimensions underline the projected notions of improvement: the first lies in the projected value of self-directed and auto-didactic learning that could potential obviate the superiority of institutional structures; and the second, in the endorsement and idealization of online communities, as learning communities.

*Community* is a central discursive trope for entitlement of alternative mediation modes for knowledge, information sharing and learning (Atkins et al, 2007; Brown and Adler, 2008; Hylén, 2006; Iloshi and Kumar, 2009). This conception of OER emphasises the formation of communities comprised of students and academics, rather than mere access to pedagogical content (Brown and Adler 2008). This perspective appears to work against calls for 'improving access and transfer of knowledge' (Hylén 2006). Likewise, Open learning is not only wider public access to materials or information; uncovering the processes of *learning in public* [online] *spaces* is used as means to deliver the that would *improve processes* of learning and teaching: "key tenet of open education is that education can be improved by making educational assets visible and accessible and by harnessing the collective wisdom of a community of practice and reflection" (Iiyosh and Kumar, 2008: 10). Within this context *transparency*, is seen a catalyst for interaction and participation that supports open learning in multiple disciplines and

institutional contexts.

Certainly, the *participation* metaphor emphasizes peripheral and self-motivating *involvement in various cultural practices* and involves the mobilization of alternative knowledge and learning resources (Paavola, *et al.*, 2004). In this metaphor, knowledge is accessible only by cultural and pedagogic mediation, such as learning by doing, through situated cognition, and through dialogues within communities of practice (Wegner, 1998) and interest. The outputs of such ‘public participation’ and thus public learning, function as a stimulus, as way to promote a more self-reflective culture, an impetus for critical thinking, negotiation and amenable revision. Yet, this kind of social, public learning is, also, seen as a technological solution to enhance capacity of traditional institutions; it is deemed efficient only if conducted in a structured educational setting – an additional mode of delivery to traditional teaching, rather than challenging the dominance of institutions (Brown and Adler 2008; Macintosh *et al.*, 2011). Likewise, although ideas about reflective pedagogies and the improvement in the state of education as a whole often feature in these debates, the emergence of knowledge necessitating novel systems and configurations of power and domination, are rarely being addressed.

Insights from interviews with both faculty and students reveal that the processes of embedding such technological practices in formal educational contexts, create novel and very nuanced tensions surrounding the easy boundaries of openness and surveillance, collaboration and attribution, credit, context and ownership, self-representation and self promotion, trust, and reward, experienced by both teachers and students. In other words, learning in public, raises many issues, pointing to pedagogical and professional ambivalence, rather than highly projected value (for a wider discussion of these issues, see Selwyn, 2009; 2011; Hemmi *et al.*, 2009).

Likewise, while promise and possibilities are often the ingredients of a cyberspace hyper-pedagogy (Dwight & Garrison 2003) that gives priority to learner agency and is against a teleological value system and predetermined fixed ends, the very system itself appropriates the diverse and informal spheres of communication and creativity to enhance pre-determined and rational or instrumental educational ends for enhancing information-society-ready skills and institutional expertise. Agency and autonomy are often reduced to more choice in market relations. Many initiatives conform to official expectations and agendas of what is required to gain employment, ‘transferrable’ skills and competitive advantage in the Knowledge Economy. OER proposes to produce a ‘well-educated workforce with the requisite competitive skills’ (Brown and Adler 2008, p16), endorsing the ‘link between educational attainment and economic activity’ (Downes, 2011, see also Wiley, 2007), and aligning the learning subject seamlessly with a functioning information society. In this sense, the discourses surrounding Open Education are also aligned with the demands of neo-liberalism in higher education. A novel definition of quality assurance privileging, rather than questioning institutional control, is also part of the newer agendas.

### **Neoliberal agendas: the endorsement of openness as a marketing apparatus that promotes educational authorities**

Public places for learning are frequently described as ‘robust local ecosystems of resources supporting innovation and productiveness’ (Brown and Adler 2008:16), often naturalizing the demands of the market for higher education. The effectiveness of OER is frequently articulated in terms of the ability to ‘reduce the costs associated with reproducing and maintaining online courses’ (Macintosh *et al.*, 2011:8); at the same

time, the emphasis on re-use and adaptation of resources appears to also suggest the need for standardization of formats and licenses, as learners and faculty, or [assumably diverse] audiences of educational media could benefit from the same resources. Within this context, the deployment of Online and Distance Learning and cross-institutional collaboration as strategies to foster development of Open Education are endorsed. Adopting Open Education [through resources and practices] is often promoted as an incentive and a response to demands of global competition and the market and as a means to withstand global competition in the education:

The Bologna Process could become a driver for cross-border collaborative development and sharing of study material in Europe, particularly through Joint Programmes and Degrees.

Global competition in Higher Education and decline in student numbers in Europe due to demographic trends. This is one of the incentives for the experimentation of Open and Distance Teaching University with 'e-tasters' to attract students. (OLCOS, 2007: p. 111).

Increasingly, talk about OER is centred on the premise that OER can become the armor of institutions faced up with global competition, and the learner participates according to who and what dictates market demands. If the ethical roots OER are located in the principle of social justice - un-attained because of structural inequalities in formal educational systems (and institutions) – and if its initial practical mission has been to challenge the dominance or authority of such systems and institutions, then its recent drivers for implementation, adhere notions of centralized control and management that seek to promote the neo-liberal restructuring of HE; augmentation of current modes of instructional delivery, institutional endorsement and accreditation and quality assurance feature prominently in these developments.

Within this context, the implementation of institutional accreditation is considered to raise the perception of OER quality to correspond to that of traditional provision (Macintosh et al., 2011). Some assert that quality assurance from institutional endorsement and accreditation is fundamental to the entire OER project (Taylor, 2011). This places OER in a compliant position to that of the academy, being measured to the standard set by management. Further, institutional influence (or brand legacy) is endorsed by many, who highlight confidence and trust in specific OER producers as a major factor in their use (see also, Clements and Pawlowski, 2012). Institutional affiliation is often made explicit in OER, most notably in MIT's OpenCourseWare website (MIT 2012), but also in organisations that claim independence from the academy. Significantly, initiatives such as the north American portals 'Udacity', EdX and Coursera promote free online content by explicitly publicising the legacy of the institutions that the content comes from, albeit endorsing peer collaboration among students, and self-learners. Despite the general claims to openness and independence, these instances suggest that major stakeholders in OER have a tendency to revert, paradoxically, to the authority of organizations, systems and structures in the production of reliable academic 'content'.

Aside of quality in content, the instrumentalisation of openness is also connected to normative assumptions about the role of technology in fostering quality assurance in the delivery of pedagogical design. As I discussed earlier, the open mediation of pedagogical knowledge is used to necessitate possibilities surrounding the pursuance of educational alongside pedagogical *effectiveness*, albeit with measures that are yet to be qualified

empirically: “the next step in the *revolutionary* potential of the OER movement is in using technology to make *instruction*, as well as materials, accessible to the widest possible audience of learners and, at the same time, *improve* teaching and learning” (Project Director, OLI). OER may be viewed as the latest in a number of initiatives that seek to standardize pedagogic design in the curricular delivery (or widely known as ‘learning design’, (see for example, Conole, 2009; Dalziel, 2009). An additional view as I discussed above, is encouraging the making of routine practices surrounding teaching shareable – a practice that is believed to address to solution of problems in teaching practices. Several practice-based initiatives and evaluative projects have sprung out – largely funded within elearning programmes, both within the UK and EU contexts. The *Open Education Quality Initiative* (OPAL) (<http://oer-quality.org/>) more specifically, has explored the idea of practice in some depth. Its initial vision shows strong roots in the learning design approach: ‘The vision of open educational *practice* includes a move from a *resource-based learning* and *outcomes-based* assessment, to a *learning process* in which *social processes, validation and reflection* are at the heart of education, and learners become *experts* in judging, *reflection*, innovation within a domain and navigation through domain knowledge’ (OPAL, 2010: 46 emphasis added). This definition has been revised slightly to, produce what I would consider an ambivalent statement: ‘a *collaborative practice* in which resources are shared by making them openly available, and pedagogical practices are employed which rely on *social interaction, knowledge creation, peer- learning and shared learning practices*’ (OPAL, 2011a: 4) with ‘the intent to *improve quality and innovate education*’ (OPAL, 2011b: 4, emphasis added). Fundamentally however, the assessment of the social, the reflective and the collaborative, are based on pre-inscribed quality assurance measures. Although subaltern cultural practices are inscribed to what is considered as a positive force to pedagogy, the practice of teaching of teaching and learning that participants are called upon to innovate are prescriptive of a bureaucratic and technocratic view of quality assurance, which continues to emphasize institutional brands and eLearning readiness.

The question then is how these notions relate to wider discussions (and the critique of) quality assurance. In fact, quality assurance in a higher education context has been variously critiqued as a policy instrument of state regulation, accompanied by increased bureaucratisation, and managerialism, leading to the fall of trust in the academe and consumer-centred institutions (Singh, 2010, Levidow, 2002). Beyond the preoccupation with standardized measures of external evaluations on institutions and programmes, versions of social accountability in academic or pedagogical improvement may invite more perspectives for critical analysis on how ongoing political and educational tensions are being negotiated given the imperatives of contextual environments and local purposes (see also Singh, 2010). Yet the issue of improvement lies in the adoption of reflective practices that is bound to a teleological view of technology and innovation, which as I have outlined is in contrast with the ideals of open education. As Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux (2004: 268) have put it, the central threat is not what new technologies enable, “but that such technologies, when not shaped by ethical considerations, collective debate, and dialogical approaches, lose whatever potential they might have for linking education to critical thinking and learning to democratic social change... the real issue is whether such technology in its various pedagogical uses ... is governed by a technocratic rationality that undermines human freedom and democratic values” (see also Giroux, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Since the early 2000s the term OER has gained increased attention for the potential it

signifies to obviate demographic, economic and cultural educational boundaries, through free access, redistribution on a global scale (Atkins et al., 2007). It is also aligned with novel versions of neoliberalism driving higher education 'markets' to new alliances with welfare economics and connected to un-problematized notions of 'learning innovation' bounded on self-direction, autonomy and peer critique.

A vision of teaching and learning culture as a tool however, evacuates it of its properly symbolic content of learning and pedagogy, and replaces it with a merely practical one. In doing so, it sacrifices an understanding of how subjectivities are remade or re-negotiated when and if norms and practices change. Institutional advocates in the field maintain and encourage a particular set of practices with respect to particular notions of community, of openness and educational entitlement. The vision of an instrumental educational property system, grounded in a very familiar, if often criticized discourse of equality, freedom, and progress (see Coombe and Herman, 2004; Kelty, 2004) may well be seen as veiled attempt to impose a particular practice on as much of the world as possible. Rather than opening up any true space for alternative cultural practices, these 'official' practices may also re-inscribe the same responsibility and accountability that educational authorities and corporate structures have traditionally assumed.

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