

Openness: Student perceptions

Michelle Harrison

Learning Design and Innovation, Thompson Rivers University Open learning, mharrison@tru.ca

Abstract

This short paper describes a research project which aims at investigating how students conceive and use open educational practices (OEP). A recent definition by Cronin (2017) emphasizes collaboration, participation and learner empowerment to encompass “collaborative practices that include the creation, use, and reuse of OER, as well as pedagogical practices employing participatory technologies and social networks for interaction, peer-learning, knowledge creation, and empowerment of learners” (2017, p. 4). Researchers and educators alike have considered the role of OEP in more effectively engaging learners in the co-creation of knowledge, critically considering how digital practices and open platforms can be used in practice.

Early research on OEP focused on adoption and development of OER (Cronin & MacLaren, 2018), but has recently shifted student perceptions of impact (Jhangiani, Dastur, Le Grand, & Penner, 2018, Lin, 2019) and improved student learning and empowerment (Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter, 2018). However, there are gaps in our understanding of learner experiences in other dimensions of openness, such as negotiating identity, privacy, visibility, literacy and the co-construction of knowledge. As educators we need to consider how the structures of these spaces will influence the open teaching practices we are using, both in how they may make our spaces permeable, and in how they might make them more impenetrable. If we want our learners to be able to explore what we as educators see as the benefits of open practices, such as co-creation and sharing of knowledge, then we need to explore both their perceptions and direct learning experiences.

The focus of this project will be on students' perceptions of openness in education, exploring their identities as open educational practitioners and how they negotiate their open educational spaces. Participants will be situated in an online graduate program (including multiple courses) designed around open educational practices, including open platforms and open educational resources, and endeavouring to include learners in critical digital pedagogical practices. To explore learner practices, the following research questions will be explored using a virtual ethnographic case (Hine, 2008):

- What are learners' understanding of open educational practice? How do they see themselves navigating open platforms, open digital pedagogies and practices and critical digital perspectives?
- What practices, values and/or strategies are shared by learners who are working within an open educational practice framework?

Keywords

Open educational practices (OEP), student perceptions, open participatory technologies

Research Context

Though there has been a long history and discussion of openness in education (Morgan, 2016), over the past decade there has been a move from educators and researchers to embrace and explore what are being termed open education practices (OEP). Early definitions of OEP were often grounded in the development and adoption of open education resources (OER) in teaching and learning contexts, but have evolved to consider the role open practice could have in creating more equitable, accessible and transformational learning experiences (Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter, 2018; Lambert, 2018). Though there is not one overarching characterisation of open education practice (OEP), a recent definition by Cronin emphasizes such aspects as collaboration, participation and learner empowerment, encompassing “collaborative practices that include the creation, use, and reuse of OER, as well as pedagogical practices employing participatory technologies and social networks for interaction, peer-learning, knowledge creation, and empowerment of learners” (2017, p. 4). If, as educators, we want to focus on how to embrace OEP to focus on what can be considered the transformational aspects of openness, we need to consider what types of pedagogical practices might encourage this.

Like OEP, open pedagogy has varying and evolving definitions, but common elements are student agency, transparency, and the possibilities created through open networks and opening traditional educational boundaries (Cronin & MacLaren, 2018; Jhangiani & DeRosa, 2017). Open pedagogy challenges the traditional roles of learners and teachers, often by using networked and digital technologies to promote more collaborative and participatory engagement of learners. As highlighted by DeRosa and Robinson (2017), open pedagogy can use “OER as a jumping-off point for remaking our courses so that they become not just repositories for content, but platforms for learning, collaboration, and engagement with the world outside the classroom” (p. 118). Paskevicius (2017) also points to OEP to “provide an impetus for innovative teaching and learning processes” (p. 126). To meet this potential, both educators and learners need to critically consider what engaging with openness might mean for practice, which includes working with open platforms and tools, developing critical technological literacies and adopting open pedagogical and learning strategies. But what does this look like in practice? How are learners engaging critically with these spaces, and how do they consider their own relationship with openness?

As highlighted by Cronin and MacLaren (2018), many empirical studies on OEP use have focused on the practices and policies that support the development of OER and open textbooks, such as curriculum development, quality assurance and open publishing. Recent research has evolved to include a focus on OEP frameworks that address improved student learning and empowerment, using other lenses to consider the impact and transformation of teaching practice. It has also considered student perceptions of OER adoption and use (Jhangiani et al., 2018; Lin, 2019) but there is a gap in our understanding of learner experiences in other dimensions of openness, such as negotiating identity, privacy, visibility, literacy and the co-construction of knowledge. OEP research into the incorporation and implementation of open platforms and tools with open educational practices is also lacking. Downes (2019) suggests that, with the rise of artificial intelligence, open data, and cloud computing, pedagogical considerations will be more about using and creating content rather than consuming it. Jhangiani & DeRosa (2017) echo this when they indicate open pedagogy is also “a process of designing architectures and using tools for learning that enable students to shape the public knowledge commons of which they are a part” (para. 13). As educators we need to consider how the structures of these spaces will influence the open teaching practices we are using, both in how they may make our spaces permeable, and in how they might make them more impenetrable. We need to critically examine the idealized version of “technologically mediated openness” (Oliver, 2015) that is often associated with online, networked learning space, to consider what kinds of exclusions and closed-ness can be introduced. In addition, Cronin (2018) highlights that “Openness is not a one-time decision and it is not universally experienced; it is always complex, personal, contextual, and continually negotiated” (p. 291). This points to a need to explore these open spaces from a learner context, examining learner perceptions of their use and how we as educators can more effectively incorporate them into our practice. If we want our learners to be able to explore what we as educators see as the benefits of open practices, such as co-creation and sharing of knowledge, then we need to explore both their perceptions and direct learning experiences.

Aims and Objectives

This study focuses on students' perceptions of openness in education, exploring their identities as open educational practitioners and how they negotiate their open educational spaces. In particular I hope to explore their uses of open educational tools and how they how they consider private/public spaces, and how the inherent openness of the platforms may both enable or inhibit their learning practices. This study is in the early stages and will be situated in an online graduate program (including multiple courses) that embraces open educational practices, such as the use of open platforms and open educational resources, and endeavours to include learners in critical digital pedagogical practices. As participants will be engaging with different tools and resources in different space/time configurations, one focus will be to better understand how learners navigate and use open platforms. To explore learner practices the following research questions will be explored using a virtual ethnographic case (Hine, 2008):

- What are learners' understanding of open educational practice? How do they see themselves navigating open platforms, open digital pedagogies and practices and critical digital perspectives?
- What practices, values and/or strategies are shared by learners who are working within an open educational practice framework?

Design

As this project aims to explore not only student perceptions, but practices and strategies used by learners in open spaces, an ethnographic case study approach (Simons, 2009) will be used. Methods for the exploration of online spaces, particularly educational online, open spaces are still relatively under-developed and exploratory. As

outlined by Dodge (2005), our online spaces are “not a single, homogenous and continuous phenomenon, but a myriad of rapidly evolving digital spaces, channels and media, each providing a distinct form of virtual interaction and communication.” Virtual ethnography (Hine, 2017) offers researchers a way to go beyond the “mapping of the technological landscape” to “capture the subjective experience of living in such a landscape” (p. 325).

Participants will be recruited from three open, online graduate courses at an open, online institution. Data collection methods will use a modified version of web-sphere analysis and “network ethnography” outlined by Schneider and Foot (2005), where online practices are viewed and explored through the examination of web-objects, such as texts, links and sites. For each of the courses, analysis of texts, structures/features and field research (participant interviews and questionnaires) will be combined to provide a detailed description of the relations between participants and spaces. A detailed examination of the course spaces and linked social media spaces, including both the physical or virtual and the activities that happen within them, will help describe the visible and invisible practices and perspectives of learners. This will include a common participant observation approach that uses a combination of online surveys and interviews, combined with systematic analysis of online communications. Visuals and maps will be used to trace the networks of spaces, including conceptual linking of the webpages, screens, images, weblinks and readings that constitute the framing of the open activities.

The researcher hopes that, through this detailed examination of the spaces and their associated practices, we can get a better understanding of how our learners negotiate the complex landscape of working and learning in an open space. Using a similar design which explored student perceptions of learning in cMOOCs, another type of open course, Saadatmand & Kumpulainen (2014) found that though learners were challenged in managing the open spaces, they were able to participate actively in generation of knowledge and to share their own content. They were able to make tangible recommendations for learners and designers working in this space and it is hoped that this project will find further insights into practice. If we truly want to embrace the aspirational aspects of open educational practice, we will need to critically examine what types of spaces support learners to become partners in their own OEP journeys.

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