

*Article*

# Open Educational Resources and Rhetorical Paradox in the Neoliberal Univers(ity)

Nora Almeida

## ABSTRACT

As a phenomenon and a quandary, openness has provoked conversations about inequities within higher education systems, particularly in regards to information access, social inclusion, and pedagogical practice. But whether or not open education can address these inequities, and to what effect, depends on what we mean by “open” and specifically, whether openness reflexively acknowledges the fraught political, economic, and ethical dimensions of higher education and of knowledge production processes. This essay explores the ideological and rhetorical underpinnings of the open educational resource (OER) movement in the context of the neoliberal university. This essay also addresses the conflation of value and values in higher education—particularly how OER production processes and scholarship labor are valued. Lastly, this essay explores whether OER initiatives provide an opportunity to reimagine pedagogical practices, to reconsider authority paradigms, and potentially, to dismantle and redress exclusionary educational practices in and outside of the classroom. Through a critique of neoliberalism as critically limiting, an exploration of autonomy, and a refutation of the precept that OER can magically solve social inequalities in higher education, the author ultimately advocates for a reconsideration of OER in context and argues that educators should prioritize conversations about what openness means within their local educational communities.

## INTRODUCTION

It is hard to overstate how much “open” educational resources, “open” access, “open” source, “open” data, and other flavors of “openness” have dominated recent conversations about the future of higher education. Practically, openness has to do with the use of intellectual property licenses and the internet to make instructional and research materials broadly accessible to those within and outside of higher education communities. Ideologically, openness is intimately tied up with social justice and the assumption that the internet and higher education are in the business of fixing social disparities. The very idea that higher education and scholarship should, or could, be open—a prospect which suggests both transparency and inclusiveness—is both controversial and potentially revolutionary. Anant Agarwal, an MIT professor and the entrepreneur behind the edX open educational resource platform, has referred to open education as “the single biggest change in education since the printing press.”<sup>1</sup> Open education advocate, David Wiley and others have suggested that by “empowering [individuals] and leveling [the playing field]” open education has the potential to fundamentally change “the structure and practice of higher education.”<sup>2</sup> Others have lauded openness as “key to the building of peace, sustainable social and economic development, and intercultural dialogue.”<sup>3</sup> While many have questioned whether or not open education truly “constitute[s] a revolution in teaching and learning”<sup>4</sup> and cautioned that the field of open education still “remains significantly under-theorized,”<sup>5</sup> there is no doubt that openness, panacea or not, has become a bonafide phenomenon. And I worry that openness, much like other complex educational phenomena, has become something that a lot of us talk about without really knowing what we’re talking about. Of course openness is more than a buzzword, but it is also a buzzword and as such, is dangerously at risk of being appropriated, misused, and emptied.

In her 2014 talk, “From Open to Justice” at the first international OpenCon, education writer and self-described “recovering academic,” Audrey Watters, discusses the problem of *openwashing* and argues that, “industry forces are quick to wrap

---

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, “Why the future lies in Open Educational Resources,” *Communication and Information*. (n.d.) Accessed December 4, 2015, [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/world\\_open\\_education\\_resources\\_congress/#.Vmh049IrdU](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/world_open_education_resources_congress/#.Vmh049IrdU)

<sup>2</sup> David Wiley and John Hilton III, “Special Issue Editorial: Openness and the Future of Higher Education,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 10, no.5 (2009): 1.

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO, “Why the future lies in Open Educational Resources.”

<sup>4</sup> Mike Neary and Joss Winn, “Open Education: Common(s), Commonism and the new Common Wealth,” *Ephemera* 12, no. 4 (2012): 408.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Knox, “Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement,” *Teaching In Higher Education* 18, no. 8 (2013): 822.

themselves in language and imagery in the hopes it makes them appear more palatable, more friendly, more progressive. More ‘green,’ for example, more ‘open.’”<sup>6</sup> Then she asks a simple question: “what does open mean?”

Does “open” mean openly licensed content or code? And, again, which license is really “open”? Does “open” mean “made public”? Does “open” mean shared? Does “open” mean “accessible”? Accessible how? To whom? Does “open” mean editable? Negotiable? Does “open” mean “free”? Does “open” mean “open-ended”? Does “open” mean transparent? Does “open” mean “open-minded”? “Open” to new ideas and to intellectual exchange? Open to interpretation? Does “open” mean open to participation — by everyone equally? Open doors? Open opportunity? Open to suggestion? Or does it mean “open for business”?<sup>7</sup>

The open education movement has been around for long enough (the first Global Open Educational Resources Forum in 2002 was almost 15 years ago) that openness can mean all of these things. And even if we do know what we’re talking about, *which* open we mean, and recognize that there are subtle variations and paradoxes inherent in openness, we don’t always know how to acknowledge these in a way that both illuminates the potential of openness to change higher education and all of the problems with the way that openness, the word and the idea, has been bandied about.

As a phenomenon and a quandary, openness has provoked conversations about inequities within higher education systems, particularly in regards to information access, social inclusion, and pedagogical practice. But whether or not open education can address these inequities, and to what effect, depends on what we mean by “open” and specifically, whether openness reflexively acknowledges the fraught political, economic, and ethical dimensions of higher education and of resource production processes. The purpose of this essay is to explore the ideological and rhetorical underpinnings of the open educational resource (OER) movement in the context of the neoliberal university. This essay will also address the conflation of value and values in higher education in terms of how OER production processes and scholarship labor are valued. Lastly, this essay will explore whether OER initiatives provide an opportunity to reimagine pedagogical practices, to reconsider authority paradigms, and potentially, to dismantle and redress exclusionary educational practices in and outside of the classroom.

---

<sup>6</sup> Audrey Watters, “From “Open” to Justice,” Presentation at Open Con 2014, Washington DC, November 6, 2014, Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://hackededucation.com/2014/11/16/from-open-to-justice/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## UTOPIA, NEOLIBERALISM, AND PRIVILEGE

Open education has presented itself as a response to a crisis, which John Seely Brown and Richard P. Adler in their article, “Minds on Fire: Open Education, the Tail, and Learning 2.0,” recast as a “perfect storm of opportunity” arising out of a “growing global demand for education,” the general inadequacy of “current methods of teaching and learning,” and the capacity for information sharing enabled by the internet.<sup>8</sup> While emphasizing OER as a market response that is intimately tied to “21st century” job training, Brown and Adler envision the global inheritors of open education as self-directed, passionate students who “either wan[t] to become member[s] of a particular community of practice or just want to learn about, make, or perform something.”<sup>9</sup> The value of the ‘community of practice’ depicted here is directly measured in relation to the capacity for its constituents to compete in a global marketplace. This “re-signification” of “the social [i.e. community] function of higher education”<sup>10</sup> as a “promotion of national competitiveness and the global market” is neither unique nor new, but merely reflects the increasingly “market-oriented nature of university curricula and the symbiotic relationship between research universities and industry.”<sup>11</sup> Brown and Adler, whose article has been cited more than 1000 times as I write this, presume an unrealistic degree of acculturation and information literacy of the outsiders who might benefit from OER. However, they are not alone in their almost utopian vision of openness to solve complex problems plaguing higher education and (by extension) the marketplace. In fact, their article is almost prototypical of a certain strand of “open” rhetoric, which has contributed to the status of the OER as a cultural, economic, and technocratic innovation and to the creation of the “open” brand.

Elsewhere, openness is presented as an alternative to corporate scholarly communications paradigms and a rejection of egalitarian (if not neoliberalist) models of education. This can best be observed in literature that discuss OER as public goods.<sup>12</sup> In Ilkka Tuomi’s cautious analysis of “Open Educational Resources and the Transformation of Education,” she argues that through the process of reuse and recontextualization, the OER model “leads to new models of value creation” that can’t be measured using

---

<sup>8</sup> John Seely Brown and Richard P. Adler, “Minds on Fire: Open Education, the Long Tail, and Learning 2.0,” *EDUCAUSE Review* 43, no 1 (2008): 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Tatiana Suspitsyna, “Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship: An Analysis of the U.S. Department of Education Discourse,” *Journal of Higher Education* 83, no.1 (2014): 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> See: Kansa, 2013; Neary & Winn, 2012; Smith & Casserly, 2006; Tuomi, 2013.

market tools.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Tuomi undercuts the kind of neoliberal rhetoric that confuses commercial value and social values in much OER literature. UNESCO and the Cape Town Open Education Declaration, oft cited foundational OER touchstones, emphasize “universal access” to education as a core tenet of the OER movement and discuss the potential for OER to incite pedagogical reform but don’t explicitly reject a neoliberal formulation of educational value.<sup>14</sup> This emphasis on globalism and OER as a social equalizer and pedagogical disrupter is shared amongst almost all OER advocates, whether they believe that openness is the key to undercutting the increasingly neoliberalist agenda of the academy or whether they believe that everyone deserves an equal shot at becoming players in a competitive, global marketplace.

In terms of application, we can observe two different models of OER implementation: in the first model, OERs are introduced as vehicles for resource sharing, a means of lowering resource costs, or as instruments of localized pedagogical reform; in the second model, OER supplants higher educational experiences altogether. Taken in tandem, these models perpetuate a “two-tiered education system”<sup>15</sup> where some have access to contextualized resources that are situated in local educational communities and others have resources but no educational context through which to approach them. While OER can “widen access to learning opportunities” they cannot replace “a well-funded public education system.”<sup>16</sup> Research has shown that when decontextualized from a community, from a discourse, and from an infrastructure of support, OER are less pedagogically effective.<sup>17</sup> This finding seems to run counter to the precept that OER can fill a global demand for comprehensive education that leads to social mobility. To promote OER as a wholesale alternative to higher education is thus,

---

<sup>13</sup> Ilkka Tuomi, “Open Education Resources and the Transformation of Education,” *European Journal of Education* 48, no. 1 (2013): 61.

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO, “Why the Future Lies in Open Educational Resources.”

<sup>15</sup> Knox, “Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement,” 824.

<sup>16</sup> Tony Bates, “The Implications of ‘Open’ for Course and Program Design: Towards a Paradigm shift?” (2015), Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://opentextbc.ca/teachinginadigitalage/chapter/10-10-the-implications-of-open-for-course-and-program-design/>

<sup>17</sup> See: Sarah Crissinger, “A Critical Take on OER practices: Interrogating Commercialization, Colonialism, and Content,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2015), accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/a-critical-take-on-oer-practices-interrogating-commercialization-colonialism-and-content/>; Emily Drabinski, et al, “Notes from Open Access, Labor, and Knowledge Production.” (2015) accessed December 4, 2015, <https://etherpad.wikimedia.org/p/B->; Audrey Watters. “From “Open” to Justice.” Presentation at Open Con 2014, Washington DC, November 6, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://hackeducation.com/2014/11/16/from-open-to-justice/>

to devalue context based education and disregard the parts of educational experience that can't be transmitted, out of context, and in pieces over the internet. While almost no proponents of OER have suggested that these resources will altogether replace traditional higher education for those who already have access to it, many do presume that those without access, those who are largely less acculturated and more marginalized, will benefit. Some have suggested that support services and context might be developed through leaderless, online community building. While this is certainly technologically and ideologically possible, the extent to which disenfranchised, individual learners have the capacity to recognize that "content is socially constructed through conversations [...] through grounded interactions [...] around problems or actions"<sup>18</sup> and organize channels for collaboration is likely overestimated. Such assumptions about the promise of OER and the self-efficacy of learners, while well intentioned, propagate a two-tiered educational system under the guise of liberation that merely replicates inequities inherent in our current education system while using the language of emancipation.

Giroux identifies the "challenge of developing a discourse of both critique and possibility"<sup>19</sup> as one of the most insurmountable issues facing educators, in part because of the co-opting and erosion of language itself. Under such constraints, how can we liberate the OER movement and openness itself from the neoliberal rhetoric that precludes a reconsideration of "relationships among knowledge, authority, and power?"<sup>20</sup> And why has a movement that at its core questions who has the right to access and contribute to scholarship not prompted a sufficient critical confrontation of these relationships already?

Sarah Kember suggests that we might start by "recogniz[ing] the extent to which questions of access and ethics have become conflated."<sup>21</sup> One of the ideological failures of the OER movement stems from the assumption that access alone can solve systemic issues of social inequality in higher education, even as we know that egalitarianism has as much to do with codification and the privileging of certain cultures and rhetorical modes as it does with access. Jeremy Knox and others have illustrated that these privileged (i.e. Western) cultures and rhetorical norms are only reified when we "defin[e] the object of education [as] the enhancement of human life."<sup>22</sup> Untangling access and ethics requires fundamentally reconsidering some of the universal claims

---

<sup>18</sup> Brown and Adler. "Minds on Fire," 18.

<sup>19</sup> Henry A Giroux, "Neoliberalism's War Against the Radical Imagination," *Tikkun* 29, no. 3 (2014): 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Kember, "Opening Out from Open Access: Writing and Publishing in Response to Neoliberalism," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, (2014) Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://adanewmedia.org/2014/04/issue4-kember/>

<sup>22</sup> Knox, "Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement," 822.

that the OER movement has made about social inclusion. It involves questioning the ‘relationships among knowledge, authority, and power’ that contribute to neoliberalism, social inequity, and to the problems with dominant systems of academic knowledge production that prompted the OER movement in the first place. This also means—particularly if we recognize the critical importance of “situating” educational materials and experience in local contexts—reconsidering the pedagogical efficacy and reusability of Western OER and questioning whether a global approach towards higher education is critically valid.<sup>23</sup>

It seems that beyond its pedagogical application, an investigation of what we mean by local in relation to both OER materials and OER rhetoric and ideology might be a measured first step towards understanding who is excluded from or underserved in our *specific* education communities. This is particularly important given the fact that ‘local’—much like ‘open’— is a term that is often uncritically applied to suggest authenticity or to superficially combat exploitation associated with global marketplaces (think: “local” organic produce). There has already been significant critical progress made towards defining ‘local’ in the field of museum studies in ways that are applicable to the OER movement. Some theorists have reconceptualized museum curation as a “social practice” that considers the complex and evolving relationships that exists between particular peoples and objects in terms of cultural history and tradition.<sup>24</sup> This formulation of curation as a practice grounded in a nuanced understanding of the local could be used to helpfully foreground the “implications [of OER adoption] for indigenous and/or disadvantaged groups—plus distinctions of class, race, ethnicity and gender.”<sup>25</sup> Maree Donna Simpson and Teresa Swist, who consider the importance of ‘curating’ OER in relation to work-integrated learning (WIL) practices in rural Australia, advocate for an “interup[tion] [of] discourses of marketization and commodification which often take quick-fix approaches to educational innovation” and propose that OER in WIL contexts must be “in tune with the complexity, artifacts, co-creation and social-ecology” of WIL practices.<sup>26</sup> This example suggests that while we may begin to address problems with resource access through global technological innovation, the ethical agenda that the OER movement has aligned itself with must continually be re-articulated and critically re-addressed in terms of local educational and socio-linguistic practices, traditions, and communities.

---

<sup>23</sup> Crissinger, “A Critical Take on OER practices.”

<sup>24</sup> Christina Kreps, “Curatorship as Social Practice,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 46, no. 3 (2010): 312.

<sup>25</sup> Maree Donna Simpson and Teresa Swist, “Curating Work-Integrated Learning: ‘Taking Care’ of Disciplinary Heritage, Local Institutional Contexts and Wellbeing via the Open Educational Resources Movement,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 17, no. 1 (2016): 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 4, 5.

## VALUE AND VALUATION

The value of OER as public goods cannot (and need not) emerge at the expense of critical, locally situated learning. Additionally, it is important to separate OER and openness from “the notion of ‘free’, which it isn’t.”<sup>27</sup> This is more complex than it seems since so much of scholarship value and, indeed, scholarship materiality has been defined in terms of intellectual property, which is the essential (although not only) difference that separates OER from other kinds of educational resources. The Free Culture movement has problematically contributed to the classification of intangible “ideas, information and knowledge [...] *in terms* of freedom, liberty, human rights, policy, intervention, and regulation” (emphasis mine).<sup>28</sup> It is virtually impossibility, given these *terms* and the increasingly abstract treatment of intellectual property, to untangle open educational resources from unrealistic and fraught social justice agendas. This relegation of OER to the status of the immaterial, which etymologically suggests both a process of liberation from a corporeal context and a state of ideological diminishment, only further erodes the means we have for measuring or even recognizing the labor involved in the production and maintenance of these educational resources. Mike Neary and Josh Winn argue that “[t]he reification of ‘the commons’ as a site of non-scarce, replicable and accessible educational resources is to mistake the freedom of things for the freedom of labor.”<sup>29</sup> Freeing educational resources from a revenue driven scholarly communications market, does not mean that OER, which are the “product of intellectual work”<sup>30</sup> are free nor does it mean that OER, as a brand, can’t be commoditized. We can’t allow principles of free access and an ethos of social equality rhetorically erase the academic labor involved in creating OER. We also can’t diminish the often ‘invisible’ labor involved in the development of a technological infrastructure that ensures OER are discoverable, reusable, and viable.<sup>31</sup> This labor isn’t free and as it often manifests itself locally, it again underscores the importance of resituating OER rhetoric in direct relation to the communities who produce and use it.

The “devaluation” of labor surrounding OER creation is exacerbated by the fact that OER are “not rewarded in the current tenure system” and further that, “adjuncts might be expected to create learning objects” without compensation.<sup>32</sup> It is notable that resistance to openness and to the production and/or adoption of OER by university faculty has largely been attributed to concerns about workload, skepticism about the

---

<sup>27</sup> Drabinski and Jackson, “Notes from Open Access.”

<sup>28</sup> Neary and Winn, “Open Education: Common(s), Commonism and the new Common Wealth,” 409.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 409.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 409.

<sup>31</sup> Crissinger, “A Critical Take on OER practice.”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



academic viability of OER materials and platforms, and misgivings about intellectual property rights including fears of appropriation. And not to confuse a corpse for the corpus, but it may be worth considering how much nostalgia for corporeal materiality and the prestige of traditional scholarly publishing avenues—metrics, paper, mastheads—color perceptions of openness. These concerns and perceptions are often reified when academic institutions fail to support and recognize the scholarly value of OER and the labor involved in producing them. If conversations about the future of higher education are also conversations about openness then the onus is on us, librarians and academics, to ensure that these conversations include discussions of scholarship labor and how that labor should be valued by our institutions.

While some institutions do supply support in the form of funding or course release for faculty who produce OER, almost none count this work as scholarship and some may do so only to the extent that they perceive these resources will generate a financial return on their investment. The problem here is not the enterprise of reputation building or the acquisition of wealth itself. “Who doesn’t want more wealth?” Eric Kansa asks in an analysis of openness and neoliberalism, “[h]owever we need to ask about wealth creation *for whom* and *under what conditions*?”<sup>33</sup> If the OER movement, by some accounts, hopes to oppose the “corporate personification of institutions and the objectification of their staff and students”<sup>34</sup> this certainly can’t happen in a climate where scholarly work is evaluated in direct relation to potential revenue—a process which implicitly limits academic freedom, overemphasizes “accountability schemes,”<sup>35</sup> and diminishes intellectual autonomy in favor of “monetiz[ed] innovation.”<sup>36</sup> We also can’t overvalue the potential for OER to upend current systems overnight. As much as we want to be “the rebels blasting at the exhaust vents of Elsevier’s Death Star,”<sup>37</sup> we will likely be better served by igniting strategic conversations about intellectual property, scholarship labor, and tenure and promotion processes at our own campuses. And we need to advocate for OER models that recognize value of faculty labor and technological infrastructure as a precursor to implementing an OER initiative. This kind of advocacy is not only realistic but, as a precept, is less rhetorically vulnerable to both neoliberal co-option and to overly idealized notions of OER as a vehicle for educational revolution.

---

<sup>33</sup> Eric Kansa, “It’s the Neoliberalism, Stupid: Why Instrumentalist Arguments for Open Access, Open Data, and Open Science are not enough,” *Digging Digitally* (blog), December 11, 2013, <http://alexandriaarchive.org/blog/>

<sup>34</sup> Neary and Winn, “Open Education: Common(s), Commonism and the new Common Wealth,” 409.

<sup>35</sup> Giroux, “Neoliberalism’s War Against the Radical Imagination,” 9.

<sup>36</sup> Kansa, “It’s the Neoliberalism, Stupid.”

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

## PEDAGOGY AND POWER

In rhetoric surrounding the OER movement, distinctions between resources, platforms, and pedagogy are often collapsed. This is particularly true in the context of online courses where “content replaces the teacher.”<sup>38</sup> While most OER proponents discuss the social dimensions of knowledge construction and the potential for internet tools (sometimes built into OER) or classroom activities to serve a social function in connecting learners more meaningfully to resources and to each other, there is frequently an obfuscation of tools and processes in these discussions. In their article, “Materials in the classroom ecology,” Guerrettaz and Johnston study the role that materials, and textbooks in particular, occupy in classrooms and find that a textbook can take on unintended functions like affecting the “structure of the curriculum” and shaping “classroom interaction.”<sup>39</sup> Textbooks can also serve in some contexts as “arbiter[s] of validity”<sup>40</sup> that justify or support an instructor’s knowledge claims. Materials can impact the ecology of a classroom the extent that, “designers of the materials c[an] also be seen as participants by proxy.”<sup>41</sup> While we often think of the course material as the object of analysis, it is evident that materials can also shape discourse and play a role in defining analytical perspectives and pedagogical orientation.

In online pedagogical environments, learning design also importantly influences the extent to which learners can collaborate, construct knowledge, and meaningfully interact with resources. In online and hybrid course contexts, technological design principles, which “provid[e] a way to set out and describe the intent in learning material” and importantly govern human-computer interaction, largely dictate the social and interactive capacity learners have in these environments.<sup>42</sup> It is a mistake to divorce instructional platforms from classroom authority paradigms or to consider educational technology as a “neutral” force.<sup>43</sup> Instead, we must recognize that design dictates student agency and instructor choices and that educational technology platforms are part of a growing, lucrative marketplace. Further, it is essential to

---

<sup>38</sup> Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel, “If Freire Made a MOOC: Open Education as Resistance,” *Hybrid Pedagogy*, (2014) Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/freire-made-mooc-open-education-resistance/>

<sup>39</sup> Anne Marie Guerrettaz and Bill Johnston, “Materials in the Classroom Ecology,” *Modern Language Journal* 97, no.3 (2013): 792.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 785.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 792.

<sup>42</sup> Eileen Scanlon, Patrick McAndrew, and Tim O’Shea, “Designing for Educational Technology to Enhance the Experience of Learners in Distance Education: How Open Educational Resources, Learning Design and Moocs are Influencing Learning,” *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* (2015): 9.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

acknowledge the role and accompanying power dynamics of the instructor or learning designer in these online educational contexts. Teachers, even the relatively anonymous teachers of MOOCs, and educational companies exercise power when they “selec[t] and embe[d] the tools that enable students to interact with the course material and with each other.”<sup>44</sup>

The powerful role that materials and platforms play in shaping interactions and constructing authority lend credence to the idea that OER can be used to insight pedagogical change both in cases where OER supplement courses and where OER *are* courses. Open platforms and practices generally “sit well alongside what constitutes good pedagogy and more learning- and learner-centered approaches such as inquiry-based learning, scenario-based learning, dialogical and reflective learning, and more constructivist and situated pedagogies.”<sup>45</sup> And there is some evidence that suggests educators are reconsidering pedagogical practices when they introduce open materials into their traditional, hybrid, and online courses. In a study conducted by Bliss, Robinson, Hilton, and Wiley on “College Teacher and Student Perceptions of Open Educational Resources,” the authors found that seventy-five percent of the teachers they surveyed “reported some change in instructional practice” and while we can’t measure whether this change resulted in pedagogical enhancement, it is worth noting that more than fifty-five percent of their survey respondents reported spending more time preparing for their courses after adopting an OER; respondents also reported an increase in use of technology in their classrooms and a tendency to incorporate more active learning activities.<sup>46</sup>

This is not to suggest, however, that the use of OER automatically leads to a more considered or critical pedagogical orientation. A student-centered, constructivist environment does not automatically accompany OER adoption and is certainly not a byproduct of open, online education. Student-centered environments must be intentionally fostered and power dynamics must always be negotiated since, “social structures (and injustices) do not disappear in collaborative communities — collaborative communities construct their own power dynamics that necessarily privilege particular individuals or groups over others.”<sup>47</sup> Additionally, in wholly online

---

<sup>44</sup> Mary Stewart, “Designing for Emergence: The Role of the Instructor in Student-Centered Learning,” *Hybrid Pedagogy*, (2014) Accessed April 26, 2016, <http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/designing-emergence-role-instructor-student-centered-learning/>

<sup>45</sup>Gráinne Conole, “Editorial: Fostering Social Inclusion Through Open Educational Resources (OER),” *Distance Education* 33, no. 2 (2012): 131.

<sup>46</sup> T.J. Bliss, Jared Robinson, John Hilton and David A. Wiley, “An OER COUP: College Teacher and Student Perceptions of Open Educational Resources,” *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* (2013): 9.

<sup>47</sup> Stewart, “Designing for Emergence.”

education environments—particularly those serving a dispersed, global student population—the idea that OER should be grounded in a local context is turned on its head. While critical pedagogues often advocate for technological and instructional models that help online instructors “meet students in their world,”<sup>48</sup> literature on digital pedagogy often glosses over the fact that this ‘world’ does not constitute a discrete cultural or geographic context but a potential myriad of contexts with different traditions, educational and rhetorical norms, and demographic realities. While this is also the case (to some degree) in any education environment, the capacity for difference inherent in open, online environments and the implications for pedagogical praxis, instructional design, and OER adoption should not be discounted.

Many digital educators committed to critical pedagogy introduce student knowledge production practices and in particular, modes of digital storytelling, as a means to begin to explore the various local contexts from which an online community might emerge.<sup>49</sup> Theorists have also pointed to research on networked publics as a means to define how a disparate, globally distributed group of people might begin to collectively create a culture and effectively contribute to a knowledge base. When students participate in “digital media production and analysis” this also has the potential to effect “relations of power” in terms of how knowledge creation happens.<sup>50</sup> However, there are problems with this formulation, which inherently glosses over problems with technological neutrality and with digital literacy (not to mention the digital divide or disparities in access to digital spaces). Digital ethnographers have also cautioned against confusing digital artifacts produced by students with “realist representations of ‘actual’ lives” and caution that as with OER, student produced content should be subjected to analysis.<sup>51</sup> While engaging students as knowledge producers may constitute a viable avenue for community building and a means to collectively investigate the various local contexts that inform a networked public, it is essential that educators also “avoid the dangerous pitfalls of narrow interpretations of complex lives and art-making processes” by subjecting student artifacts and course materials to iterative critique.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Barnard, “Building Castles in the Air: Critical Digital Pedagogy and the Pursuit of Praxis,” *Hybrid Pedagogy*, (2015) Accessed May 18, 2016  
<http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/building-castles-in-the-air-critical-digital-pedagogy-and-the-pursuit-of-praxis/>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Gallagher, Anne Wessels, and Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou, “Becoming a Networked Public: Digital Ethnography, Youth and Global Research Collectives,” *Ethnography & Education* 8, no. 2 (2013): 177.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

We cannot gloss over the role digital educational environments and dynamics play in shaping OER in terms of pedagogical potential. Additionally, a disproportionate focus on the cost of educational resources may, in fact, “stunt” the potential pedagogical utility of OER.<sup>53</sup> Crissinger singles out textbooks, “a stagnant, oppressive format” which are often paradoxically cited as “*the example*”<sup>54</sup> of OER, in order to refute the notion that the use of open resource automatically leads to innovative pedagogy. Knox similarly critiques the OER movement for its failure to adequately address the pedagogical implications of openness and argues that, “the inclusion of a pedagogical strategy or teaching theory in [some models] of OER learning seems to be thin on the ground.”<sup>55</sup> This is not to say that OER can’t be an impetus for pedagogical change, but only that a critical pedagogical approach must be developed through interactions between students, teachers, platforms, and materials rather than derived from material in isolation.

A lot of the pedagogical promise of OER has to do with the dynamic and iterative nature of learning objects that are co-constructed and, at least potentially, imbued with multiple critical perspectives. OER learners can “borrow cognitive capabilities from their social and technical environment,”<sup>56</sup> an environment that is exponentially larger and more diverse than that of a traditional university classroom. Additionally, “the creation and refinement of both learning content and the underlying pedagogical approaches can benefit from the distributed co-creation model enabled by open licenses” that is, if adoption and reuse actually lead to refinement of content and a reconsideration of pedagogical strategy.<sup>57</sup> Research has shown, however, that “learners and teachers are not using and repurposing OER extensively.”<sup>58</sup> The lack of OER adoption and reuse may be symptomatic of some of the issues with workload and institutional support already identified above, or may point to an implicit failure of educators to consider how OER they create can be situated in other educational contexts, for other audiences.

Perhaps, as with the sometimes disproportionate focus ways that OER can make educational resources more affordable, the “OER movement has overemphasized the removal of barriers [to access ...and] as a result of this focus, there is a distinct lack of consideration for how learning might take place once these obstacles are overcome.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Crissinger, “A Critical take on OER practices.”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Knox, “Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement,” 825.

<sup>56</sup> Tuomi, “Open Education Resources and the Transformation of Education,” 69.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Gráinne Conole, “Editorial: Fostering Social Inclusion Through Open Educational Resources (OER),” 131.

<sup>59</sup> Knox, “Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement,” 824.

While Tuomi's vision of an "open fountain model"<sup>60</sup> where OER increase in value and actually become richer resources the more they are used is ideologically compelling, this model may not accurately reflect the ways that OER are currently being used (and reused) or adequately acknowledge the labor involved in recontextualizing an existing OER to meet the needs of a new group of learners. It is essential that we resist a content-farm ideology in both the way that we formulate an understanding of pedagogical context and value labor involved in resource production.

The potential for OER to insight pedagogical change is often presented alongside the notion that OER can work to disrupt the authority paradigms that dictate who can produce educational resources, who can use them and in what ways, and whose perspectives are represented and privileged in educational environments. While emancipatory language surrounding the OER movement is often problematically reductive and paradoxically framed, the OER movement ideologically emphasizes the autonomy of the individual learner in ways that could be critically useful to explore. Knox suggests that a helpful way for the "OER movement to engage with more subtle notions of power" might be to explicitly engage in a "critique of autonomy" in discussions about OER ideology and empowerment.<sup>61</sup> These conversations need not be limited to the academics and technocrats who 'theorize' OER but can also be brought into local conversations with students and educators. Stewart recommends that instructors engage their students in a critique of online learning environments in order to expose how design decisions are "dictated by the physical or virtual constraints of the course and the political and social values of the institution and community."<sup>62</sup> Crissinger introduces the possibility of having students develop OER as a way to promote an exploration of the social dimensions of knowledge production while critiquing issues of labor, value, and authority. In local conversations with stakeholders at our campuses we can foster inquiries about "whose knowledge matters" to ensure that faculty consider authority and context in addition to content and cost when selecting materials for use in their classrooms.<sup>63</sup> This, again, underscores the importance of resituating OER rhetoric in direct relation to the communities who produce and use these resources.

Sean Michael Morris and Jessie Stommel argue that openness can "function as a form of resistance"<sup>64</sup> by disrupting the traditional roles to which teachers, students, and materials are relegated. While resistance and disruption are often cited as potential benefits of open education, there is overall a lack of discussion in OER literature about what exactly is being resisted beyond social abstractions like inequality or oppression.

---

<sup>60</sup> Tuomi, "Open Education Resources and the Transformation of Education," 61.

<sup>61</sup> Knox, "Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement," 827.

<sup>62</sup> Stewart, "Designing for Emergence."

<sup>63</sup> Crissinger, "A Critical Take on OER practices."

<sup>64</sup> Morris and Stommel, "If Freire Made a MOOC."

While OER promote autonomy and individual agency, this does not necessarily assume that individuals who use OER automatically gain critical agency or that authority paradigms and the root causes of injustices are actually called into question. When the role of education is formulated in direct relationship to neoliberal ideals, the capacity for power disruption is ultimately negated as learners are only empowered “in the production of the self as human capital” and the self is subsumed in the “role of the consumer; a subject in permanent deficit.”<sup>65</sup> If OER discourse fails to consider empowerment outside of a neoliberal framework, then autonomous action is directed only in the reconsideration of the self in relation to “established regimes of knowledge,”<sup>66</sup> rather than directed towards a critique of those regimes.

While some proponents of the OER movement argue that by changing knowledge production platforms and providing marginalized groups with access to scholarly conversations we can transform “systems of production and the possibilities for individual development and expression”<sup>67</sup> without calling neoliberalism into question. However, if we don’t resist neoliberal formulations of education then we are not fully acknowledging the complete socio-ideological context in which OER exist. Social inequality and the fact that “some groups are systematically disadvantaged and less likely to be heard than others, because historically their voices have been considered unimportant”<sup>68</sup> cannot be addressed if we cannot confront the complex relationship between educational systems, global markets, and social values. These relationships are deeply tied to current knowledge regimes and must be examined if we hope to actually redress exclusionary educational practices.

## CONCLUSION

Part of the difficulty of discussing open education is that there is no way to rhetorically uncomplicate what the movement means. OER do have value, can help educators reconsider pedagogical approaches, can practically increase access to educational resources, and in some cases, can be employed to question the systems of power that are at the root of social inequalities in higher education. OER can also lead to the exploitation of knowledge producers, can reinforce a Western-centric perspective that leads to forms of educational colonialism, can confuse autonomy for liberty, and can privilege a neoliberal formulation of education that precludes real social change. In a vacuum, OER are impotent and so is abstract, decontextualized rhetoric about the promise of the OER movement. If, however, we take the critical opportunity that OER

---

<sup>65</sup> Knox, “Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement,” 829.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 829.

<sup>67</sup> Tuomi, “Open Education Resources and the Transformation of Education,” 73.

<sup>68</sup> Suspitsyna, “Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship,” 65.

have presented to reflect on educational practices and to consider the implications of OER in context—by this I mean, *locally*—we may uncover problems we previously could not see and provoke modest pedagogical and social reforms. We might ultimately advocate for a reconsideration not of ethics, but of basic ideology and language. We might prioritize discussions about what openness means and can mean as a way of getting to a place where, at the very least, we all understand the parameters of the debate. And most of all, we can be realistic about the promise of OER in combating neoliberalism and social injustice. If we can't be saviors, we can, at least, try to be thoughtful educators.



## REFERENCES

- Barnard, Stephen. "Building Castles in the Air: Critical Digital Pedagogy and the Pursuit of Praxis." *Hybrid Pedagogy*. (2015) Accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/building-castles-in-the-air-critical-digital-pedagogy-and-the-pursuit-of-praxis/>
- Bates, Tony. "The Implications of 'Open' for Course and Program Design: Towards a Paradigm shift?" (2015). Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://opentextbc.ca/teachinginadigitalage/chapter/10-10-the-implications-of-open-for-course-and-program-design/>
- Bliss, T. J., Jared Robinson, John Hilton and David A. Wiley. "An OER COUP: College Teacher and Student Perceptions of Open Educational Resources." *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* (2013): 1-25.
- Brown, John Seely and Richard P. Adler. "Minds on Fire: Open Education, the Long Tail, and Learning 2.0." *EDUCAUSE Review* 43, no 1 (2008): 16-32.
- "Cape Town Open Education Declaration." (2007). Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.capetowndeclaration.org/read-the-declaration>
- Cassery, Catherine M. "The Economics of Open Educational Resources." *Educational Technology* 47, no. 6 (2007): 14-19.
- Conole, Gráinne. "Editorial: Fostering Social Inclusion Through Open Educational Resources (OER)." *Distance Education* 33, no. 2 (2012): 131-134.
- Crissinger, Sarah. "A Critical take on OER practices: Interrogating Commercialization, Colonialism, and Content." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2015) Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/a-critical-take-on-oer-practices-interrogating-commercialization-colonialism-and-content/>
- Drabinski, Emily and Korey Jackson. "Notes from Open Access, Labor, and Knowledge Production." (2015). Accessed December 4, 2015 from <https://etherpad.wikimedia.org/p/B-Hoffman>
- Gallagher, Kathleen, Anne Wessels, and Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou. "Becoming a Networked Public: Digital Ethnography, Youth and Global Research Collectives." *Ethnography & Education* 8, no. 2 (2013): 177-193.

- Giroux, Henry. A. "Neoliberalism's War Against the Radical Imagination." *Tikkun* 29, no. 3 (2014): 9.
- Guerrettaz, Anne Marie and Bill Johnston. "Materials in the Classroom Ecology." *Modern Language Journal* 97, no.3 (2013): 779-796.
- Kansa, Eric. "It's the Neoliberalism, Stupid: Why Instrumentalist Arguments for Open Access, Open Data, and Open Science are not enough." *Digging Digitally* (blog), December 11, 2013, <http://alexandriaarchive.org/blog/>
- Kember, Sarah. "Opening Out from Open Access: Writing and Publishing in Response to Neoliberalism." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, (2014) Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://adanewmedia.org/2014/04/issue4-kember/>
- Knox, Jeremy. "Five Critiques of the Open Educational Resources Movement." *Teaching in Higher Education* 18, no. 8 (2013): 821-832.
- Kreps, Christina. "Curatorship as Social Practice." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 46, no. 3 (2010): 311-323.
- Morris, Sean Michael and Jesse Stommel. "If Freire Made a MOOC: Open Education as Resistance." *Hybrid Pedagogy*. (2014) Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/freire-made-mooc-open-education-resistance/>
- Neary, Mike and Joss Winn. "Open Education: Common(s), Commonism and the new Common Wealth." *Ephemera* 12, no. 4 (2012): 406-422.
- Richter, Thomas and Maggie McPherson. "Open Educational Resources: Education for the World?" *Distance Education* 33, no. 2 (2012): 201-219.
- Scanlon, Eileen, Patrick McAndrew, and Tim O'Shea. "Designing for Educational Technology to Enhance the Experience of Learners in Distance Education: How Open Educational Resources, Learning Design and MOOCs are influencing Learning." *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* (2015): 1-9.
- Simpson, Maree Donna, and Teresa Swist. "Curating Work-Integrated Learning: 'Taking Care' of Disciplinary Heritage, Local Institutional Contexts and Wellbeing via the Open Educational Resources Movement." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 17, no. 1 (2016): 1-8.

- Smith, Marshall S. and Catherine M. Casserly. "The Promise of Open Educational Resources." *Change* 38, no.5 (2006): 8.
- Stewart, Mary. "Designing for Emergence: The Role of the Instructor in Student-Centered Learning," *Hybrid Pedagogy*. (2014) Accessed April 26, 2016, <http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/designing-emergence-role-instructor-student-centered-learning/>
- Suspitsyna, Tatiana. "Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship: An Analysis of the U.S. Department of Education Discourse." *Journal of Higher Education* 83, no.1 (2014): 49-72.
- Tuomi, Ilkka. "Open Education Resources and the Transformation of Education." *European Journal of Education* 48, no. 1 (2013): 58-78.
- UNESCO. "Why the future lies in Open Educational Resources." *Communication and Information*. (n.d.) Accessed December 4, 2015, [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/world\\_open\\_education\\_resources\\_congress/#.Vmh049IrdU](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/world_open_education_resources_congress/#.Vmh049IrdU)
- Watters, Audrey. "From "Open" to Justice." Presentation at Open Con 2014, Washington DC, November 6, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2015, <http://hackededucation.com/2014/11/16/from-open-to-justice/>
- Wiley, David and John Hilton III. "Special Issue Editorial: Openness and the Future of Higher Education." *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 10, no.5 (2009): 1-2.