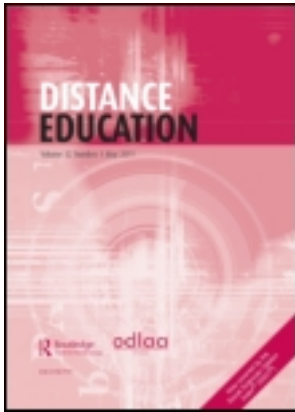


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Distance Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdie20>

Politics, practices, and possibilities of open educational resources

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Version of record first published: 24 Jul 2012

To cite this article: Liam Phelan (2012): Politics, practices, and possibilities of open educational resources, *Distance Education*, 33:2, 279-282

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2012.692070>

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REFLECTION

Politics, practices, and possibilities of open educational resources

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(Received 1 November 2011; final version received 20 May 2012)

In this article, I reflect on the politics, practices and possibilities of the open educational resources (OER). OER raise important implications for current and potential students, for postsecondary education institutions, and for those currently teaching in higher education. The key questions raised by OER centre on the role of teaching in learning, the potential for a shift in societal conceptualizations of learners from didactic to autodidactic beings, and what roles teachers may play in a potentially radical broadening of access to postsecondary education.

Keywords: open educational resources movement; OER; autodidacticism; certification of learning; lifelong learning; postsecondary education

From didacticism to autodidacticism?

I wonder if, over the next few years, we will witness a change in societal understandings of what it means to be a learner: from someone who (as a young adult) “goes to uni,” for example, and engages with what is offered there, to someone who is creative and driven in their approach to their learning, so much so, in fact, that they succeed in seeking out and pulling together a coherent learning program for themselves outside a tertiary institutional setting, which they then pursue through to a self-defined conclusion. And then, what if that achievement was validated formally, so as to be recognized socially?

The open educational resources (OER) movement may provide a pathway to that possible future. However, the prospects for such a shift also raise important questions about if and how that future might unfold. Could it happen? Will it happen? Is it desirable?

My reflections here focus on the politics, practices, and possibilities of OER. Part of the impetus for this focus is the International Council for Open and Distance Education’s (ICDE) 24th Biennial World Conference, held in early October 2011 in Bali, Indonesia (ICDE, 2011). This piece is informed in part by several presentations at the conference.

Politics

The politics of open education deserve attention, and a key distinction between distance and open education—perhaps a nuance that is easily overlooked—is worth

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making explicit. Open education historically and currently embodies a very clearly defined politics, centered strongly in a commitment to access and equity. In contrast, distance education programs may or may not be grounded in a commitment to access and equity. The current proliferation of postgraduate coursework programs offered online by bricks-and-mortar universities for substantial fees exemplifies distance education structured around a for-profit business model.

The politics of access and equity is even starker with regard to OER. Making learning materials freely available to all with adequate Internet access at least suggests a potentially radical broadening of access to learning. However, as with distance education, it may not necessarily be so. While neither the first nor the only university to do so, the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has famously sought to make all the materials it gives its students available online, accessible to anyone with Internet access (MIT, 2011). However, if learners want a qualification from MIT, they will need to enroll at MIT for the opportunity. Moreover, without a scholarship, students will need to pay to do so. Perhaps the outcome in this instance is OER as marketing rather than OER as education revolution. However, there may be an important lesson worth noting here too. By making all the materials their students receive freely available, is MIT suggesting that quality learning processes and outcomes, that is, MIT degrees, require more than simply access to learning materials, even quality materials? Does learning require teaching? Alternatively, is teaching optional for learning? The implications for the effective use of OER are surely apparent.

Practices

In contrast to the MIT approach, the OER University project (Taylor & MacKintosh, 2011) is a partnership of five accredited tertiary institutions, which seeks to provide low-cost pathways for students to achieve recognized credentials. Students would learn using OER materials, and pay only for assessment of their assignments for academic credit. The potential for OER to contribute to massively reduced education costs and therefore much greater access to educational opportunities is commonly cited as a rationale for OER (e.g., Daniel, 2011; Taylor, 2007). Moreover, the cost-saving rationale is a prominent driver for the OER University project. However, the OER University project also draws on the community service mission common to many tertiary institutions, and it calls for individual academic volunteers too, to provide some support and guidance to otherwise autodidactic students.

The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya's Campus for Peace and Solidarity offers a radical further alternative. This institution offers recognized degree programs as well as community development-style education materials by distance. One example is materials designed and shared to support safe birthing practices among expectant girls in remote communities in low-income countries of Latin America (Vinyamata, 2011). This program was initiated in response to high—and easily avoidable—rates of maternal mortality in childbirth in remote areas where state health services are non-existent and, for whatever reasons, traditional community practices such as older women supporting first-time expectant mothers are not available. Through this and other projects, the Campus for Peace and Solidarity is producing OER and delivering distance education in a manner that is vitally important, but far removed from the traditional university model.

Possibilities

Coming back to traditional postsecondary learning, perhaps OER will in fact usher in radically new and broadly accessible learning opportunities. Certification of informal learning is an interesting challenge in this context. But why certify learning at all? The OER University project would certify learning because learners engaging in the OER University will have the option of using credentials awarded through the OER University as credit toward formal qualifications offered by participating universities.

Certification also allows informal learning to be recognized and valued socially. Recognition of learning is important in many contexts, for example, in seeking employment. Separate to the familiar, formal tertiary institution model, the Mozilla Foundation (creators of free software including the Firefox web browser) is experimenting with digital *Open Badges*, as a way to provide certification—and social recognition—for informal learning completed using OER (Mozilla Foundation, 2011). This is how it would work.

Students who have (1) learned using OER and (2) created a portfolio that demonstrates achievement in a particular area would submit their portfolio for assessment to a qualified assessor. For a minimal fee, the assessor would review the student portfolios. If the portfolios were judged to demonstrate accomplishment, the students would be awarded a digital badge certifying accomplishment in that area. However, the Mozilla experiment goes a step further: the students could then attach the digital badge to their CV. As well as trusting in the certification of learning represented by the digital badge, potential employers reviewing the applicant's CV could click on it to also see evidence of accomplishment directly, that is, review the applicant's portfolio for themselves (Plotkin, 2011).

The Mozilla Foundation certification process outside the tertiary education sector is still evolving, and it raises many questions. Nevertheless, the idea suggests many possibilities.

Teaching autodidacticism

Fundamentally, OER raise for me a question about common understandings of what it means to be a learner. This is the question that drives this reflection and it is related to, but distinct from, questions of access, equity, and the financial cost of education provision. For many in the academy, life experiences of formal education have been extremely privileged: a great deal of support through good preschool, primary, and secondary public schools, access to quality public tertiary education, and postgraduate education too. We are all well within the estimated 5% or less of the world's population with access to postsecondary education (Pannekoek, 2011).

If—or as—this radically different societal conceptualization of what it means to be a learner—using OER autodidactically—becomes normal, rather than exceptional, we will truly be part of a revolution in education. I want people to have access to the education they need and want. I want them to have the chance to succeed too. The OER movement may be creating a path to a possible and desirable, inspiring and even thrilling future that may allow for that. However, that future is not guaranteed. Moreover, it seems to me the prospect of such a future raises important questions about what it means to be a learner, and how we might support learners to engage in high-quality postsecondary education using OER.

Let me leave you with just a few interesting (I think) questions that the proliferation and promise of OER raise:

- Is teaching necessary for learning, or is it simply helpful? And if teaching expertise is necessary for learning, can it be wholly front-end loaded, that is, into the design of learning materials, which are then available for wholly autodidactic learners to use as they will?
- Does the proliferation of OER materials online inspire or require (or both?, or neither?) a shift in societal conceptualizations of learners from didactic to autodidactic beings?
- And if newly proliferating OER are related in some way to a change in societal understandings of what it means to be a learner, how might this shift connect to longer-evolving understandings of lifelong learning (e.g., Boud, 2000)?
- If OER do offer a radical broadening of access to postsecondary education, what roles might we—those of us already in the academy and engaged in open and/or distance education—play in supporting that broadening of access? Do we see ourselves as materials producers? As voluntary academic tutors? As assessors and examiners of work produced by self-taught students? What role—if any—might we play in supporting informal students (citizens?) to become effective autodidacts?

Notes on contributor

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