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For whom, and for what? Not-yetness and thinking beyond open content

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Abstract

This article traces a line through contemporary critical perspectives on open online education, which challenge an emphasis on content and access that gives too much weight to instrumental goals of education. This article offers the concept of ‘not-yetness’ as a productive lens for examining alternative meanings of openness. Not-yetness emerged as a response to a dominant discourse of technology in education—including technologies of openness—that has been characterised by rhetoric of control, efficiency, and enhancement. Not-yetness invites a rethinking of online learning and digital education in terms of risk, uncertainty, and messiness and brings our attention to the variability of open education contexts and learners. Using examples of a ‘federated wiki’ and ‘agents beyond the course’, the article shows how higher education pedagogies can and should engage with boundary-crossings between openness and closure, and demonstrates the value of the perspectives that such engagements bring to the fore.

Keywords: boundaries; risk; critical perspectives; open education; online learning; digital education; not-yetness; complexity; emergence

Introduction

In open education practice and research, there has been a persistent assumption that openness is an absolute positive (Bayne, Knox, & Ross, 2015). The result of this assumption has been the investment of time and energy in solving problems of access to educational resources, to the exclusion of other considerations. Treating openness as an absolute good has also generated a preponderance of its use as a ‘buzzword’ to describe a whole range of digital practices, some of which are seen as antithetical to a vision of positive educational change:

[Original advocates of openness] are despondent about the reinterpretation of openness to mean ‘free’ or ‘online’ without some of the reuse liberties they had envisaged. Concerns are expressed about the commercial interests that are now using openness as a marketing tool. . . . At this very moment of victory it seems that the narrative around openness is being usurped by others. . . . (Weller, 2014, p. 3)

This paper draws together three key critical arguments countering a utopian view of openness, namely that:

- 1) there is a false binary between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ which needs to be challenged;
- 2) an overemphasis on access to content homogenises learners and their contexts;
- 3) open educational practice does not attend sufficiently to issues of power and inclusion.

In response to these critiques, we propose that open educational theory and practice needs more attention to issues of multiplicity, uncertainty and transition—framed here in terms of ‘boundary

crossings'. The concept of 'not-yetness', developed to respond to issues of oversimplification in digital education policy and practice, offers an approach to meeting this need.

False binary between open and closed

Discourses of openness in education are structured around a series of binary positions that can be misleading—with 'closed' associated with hierarchy, repression, exclusion; while 'openness' represents creativity, innovation and flexibility. In addition, the negativity associated with closure is attached firmly to the idea of formal education. Gourlay (2015) identifies a fantasy of openness as "total liberation from the perceived constraints of formal study, the rigours of assessment and engagement with expertise and established bodies of (contestable) knowledge, all of which are activities deemed hierarchical and repressive of creativity" (p. 317). Oliver (2015) points out that in insisting on the absolute value of openness, all other forms of education are positioned as:

conservative, exclusionary or controlling of learners or knowledge...The risk with such polarised accounts is that education is inevitably bad, because it is and can only ever be 'closed'. (p. 367)

Attempting to move away from this unhelpful polarisation, Edwards (2015) argues that "all forms of openness entail forms of closed-ness" (p. 253)—in other words, that choices around practices always involve "selecting" and "occluding other possibilities" (p. 255). He frames the digital as reconfiguring rather than overcoming this reality (ibid). For Edwards, therefore, educators cannot claim openness as an educational value in its own right, and closedness as its antithesis, but must instead decide "what forms of openness and closed-ness are justifiable" (ibid).

If openness and closedness are not absolutes, and do not represent opposite spectrums of theory or practice, educators need strategies and conceptual resources for paying attention to and deciding what forms of openness are appropriate for the settings in which they operate. These considerations are both pedagogical and ideological, as the following two sections illustrate.

Homogenisation of learners and contexts

Utopian perspectives on openness are largely underpinned by a key assumption: that people are innately disposed to self-educate, and that individuals simply require *access to content* in order to learn. This is a contestable claim in a number of respects, not least because what it means to be an educated person has varied considerably over places and times, and because education also involves the disciplining of the human subject through, for example, the 'hidden curriculum' of schooling. In this respect, decontextualized and deinstitutionalized open content can mask the conditions of its production and the assumptions it makes about learners and learning.

If education is more than a delivery of content, then an exclusive focus on the content of open education and how accessible and affordable it is gives too much weight to instrumental goals of content creation and dissemination. In the dominant discourse about openness, open content and Open Educational Resources (OERs) in particular embed values of access, standardization, and deinstitutionalization. Their "emphasis on replication" presumes the uniformity of learners (Knox, 2013a, p. 29).

Metaphorically, the current focus on content means that an 'all-you-can-eat' ethos underpins the drive towards openness-as-access, with little attention paid to the situations or appetites of the diners. To focus on the diversity of learners would make openness and its goals more open to interpretation and to contestation. It would raise the question of what, precisely, is transformed or transformative about OERs, and might prompt us to view them as aligned with unhelpful "politics of complexity reduction" (Gough, 2012, p. 47). As McArthur (2012) puts it, complexity reduction

leads to “bad” rather than “virtuous” mess: “Seeking to force the inherently messy into a respectable tidy form can result in something that distorts, hides or falsifies the actual social world” (p. 421). Promises of simplicity—access, standardization, deinstitutionalization—come at a cost.

Issues of power and inclusion

A perception that the main issue facing open education is how to separate content from elitist, restrictive, or exclusionary processes and make it more widely and freely available has been driven by what Dalsgaard and Thestrup (2015) describe as the “ideological” motive for openness. However, critiques of Open Educational Resources (OERs) question whether these “reproduce historically asymmetric power relations” (Olakulehin & Singh, 2013, p. 33). Amiel and Soares (2016) observe the need for advocates of openness to be vigilant:

to avoid constantly replicating inequalities in terms of those who produce, develop skills and revenue, and actively participate in the commons, and those who are passive observers mostly assimilating the offerings that are made available. (p. 1)

They offer the “one-way flow of English-language content to other groups” (p. 2) as an example of replicated inequality which persists in the context of OERs. These are issues that cannot be addressed with what Naidu (2016) calls a “jaundiced” and “narrow focus on free and open access to educational resources” (p. 1).

Ironically, insisting that “access alone” is enough (Knox, 2013b) actually deepens existing disadvantage by ignoring the processes through which OERs are taken up and used. As an example, research indicates that there are differences in how women in the Global South access, use, and experience barriers to finding and accessing OERs compared with both their male and Global North counterparts (Perryman & de los Arcos, 2016, p. 170), and such differences are deeply entrenched and require attention to social, economic and structural factors, leading the authors to recommend (amongst other things) that “all OER and [Open Educational Practice] projects operating in the Global South should have a gender equality component” (p. 179). In other words, access is emphatically *not* enough unless it is seen in a very broad context of social inclusion and social justice. As Rolfe (2015) puts it,

Anyone with an internet connection can access global higher education content and tuition. However, these developments have outpaced our critical thinking around the fundamental principles of how to deliver an education that is ethically sound. (no page)

The need for this kind of critical thinking cannot be overstated. Moves in this direction have included calls for openness to be framed in terms of “practices” (Ehlers, 2011) and “processes” (Knox, 2013b). These could pay more attention to “architectures” of openness (Ehlers, 2011, p. 3) and work to expose “social, economic, political and educational factors that have influenced the production of technology infrastructures, as well as the forms of open education that are subsequently made possible” (Knox 2013b, p. 27). Framing openness in terms of what we are calling ‘not-yetness’ contributes an additional focus—that of grappling with the uncertainty and complexity which accompanies educational and technological change. Having examined three arguments that complicate a straightforwardly utopian view of openness, we now proceed to explore how these arguments might be usefully taken up by reframing open education as a practice of boundary-crossing, and propose how such boundary crossing can be understood through a framework of ‘not-yetness’.

Open education as boundary crossing

To reframe the conversation about openness and push beyond openness-as-access, we need to pay attention to other possible forms of openness rather than stop at questions of whether something is open or not, or how broadly to define openness. bell hooks (1994) reminds us that openness can be understood in a range of ways, for example as the result of a mindset in which students are co-explorers in education and the classroom is seen as a space of transgressing hegemonic boundaries:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (p. 207)

hooks' openness involves the inclusion of many voices and the recognition of the ways in which social realities—including open educational programs and processes—are political and often inequitable. This extends well beyond the notion of openness-as-access to views of openness as a “practice of freedom” (ibid), and acknowledges that such freedom may lead students and practitioners to cross boundaries between experiences and mindsets that are open and closed.

Oliver (2015, pp. 8–9) noted that boundary crossing is expected in any social institution, including education, and “instead of trying to establish whether something is ‘open or not, the focus should then be on the instances of boundary crossing that take place, and consequently the kinds of “openness” that characterise a system or institution.” The focus on boundary crossing invites critical reflections on the nature of borders between concepts and approaches, say, between openness and closedness. Anzaldua (1987, p. 3), in her seminal work deconstructing the physical, psychological, and cultural borders and borderlands between the US and Mexico, said that “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. . . a borderland is a vague and undetermined placed created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.” As Anzaldua's writings suggest, openness and closedness are in constant tension and in flux, and educators should explore and embrace the complexities that accompany modes of openness.

Not-yetness: a lens for analysing openness

We propose “not-yetness” as a lens for critically exploring openness and boundary crossing between openness and closedness. The concept of not-yetness emerged as a response to a dominant discourse of technology in education (including technologies of openness) that has been characterised by rhetoric of control, efficiency, and enhancement, and underplaying more “disruptive, disturbing and generative dimensions” (Bayne, 2014, p. 3). Emerging technologies in education, as defined by Veletsianos (2010) are those which are “not yet fully understood” and “not yet fully researched, or researched in a mature way” (p. 15). Technologies can readily be viewed in this way, but we argue that many forms of teaching and educational practice, and learner and teacher identities, can also be seen to be in states of not-yetness (Ross & Collier, 2016).

The need to maintain pedagogical space for uncertainty is an appropriate response to what Barnett and Hallam (1999) call higher education's “conditions of radical and enduring uncertainty, unpredictability, challengeability and contestability” (p. 142). The rhetoric of openness in education has come, ironically, to represent a much more constrained set of possibilities and practices than many researchers and educators might have expected in the years leading up to the explosion of high profile initiatives in areas such as massive online courses and open educational resources.

Framing openness in terms of not-yetness means accepting risk and uncertainty as dimensions of technologies and practices which are still unknown and in flux. Not-yetness offers approaches that “help us stay open to what may be genuinely surprising about what happens when online learning and teaching meets emerging technologies” (Ross & Collier, 2016), and it therefore suggests some characteristics that are undervalued when we understand openness primarily in terms of access, standardisation, and de-institutionalization:

- diversity and context;
- emergence and open-endedness;
- authority and authorship;
- blurring of formal and informal learning.

Not-yetness draws our attention back to context, to variability, and is therefore able to work against the tendencies of OERs to assume a one-size-fits-all approach. There is a real need for such attention, as even when standardisation is recognised as problematic, solutions are often superficial. For example, a recent blog post on the US government web site (whitehouse.gov) discusses the potential flexibility of OERs to address diversity by tailoring features while “retaining fundamental content”:

an open-source model could empower educators to collaborate on and adapt textbooks across local and international borders, retaining fundamental content while tailoring certain features, like names in math word problems, to reflect students’ ethnic diversity and culture. (Culatta, Ison & Weiss, 2015)

This assumption of fundamental content as something akin to a room, stable and solid but able to be made appealing to anyone with some modest redecoration, indicates the power of the rhetoric of openness-as-access discussed above. The complexities and messiness of learning are swept under a metaphorical rug as we celebrate that our students can enter the room at all.

In addition to using the idea of not-yetness to examine practices and assumptions around OERs, not-yetness can create conceptual space for alternative modes of openness in digital education. OER proponents regularly note that mere adoption or creation of resources should not be the focus of an OER movement. Weller (2014) calls for “open pedagogy [that] makes use of open content, such as open educational resources, videos, podcasts, etc., but also places an emphasis on the network and the learner’s connections within this” (p. 10). While this can be a useful starting point, we should look for kinds of openness that call into question the very approaches we use, “taking. . . an interest in the fundamental relations of power that influence the social order and the formation of human subjectivity” (Farrow, 2015). Morris and Stommel (2014) argue that “openness can function as a form of resistance both within and outside the walls of institutions. But open education is no panacea. Hierarchies must be dismantled—and that dismantling made into part of the process of education—if its potentials are to be realized”.

Not-yetness asks, as Olakulehin & Singh (2013, p. 38) ask, “What curriculum and pedagogic designs are strong enough to challenge the dominant forces that determine the meaning, interpretation and outcomes of openness?” What kinds of spaces and practices, and in particular digital spaces and practices, invite critical reflexivity about openness and closedness?

In asking these questions, we can look to examples of how educators can use openness as a framework for critical inquiry about the *for what* and *for whom* of open education.

For instance, federated wiki¹ [1] provides an example of an alternative mode of openness that crosses boundaries between openness and closedness. Traditional wikis, collaborative writing spaces in which users are able to add and edit content, are often upheld as exemplar open

¹ Caulfield, M. <http://hapgood.us>

technology. However, wikis are built on servers that host one version, one copy, of a wiki page that can be served up to users for viewing and editing. Caulfield (2016a) argues that, because of that architecture and their primary design for collaboration, wikis promote consensus around dominant voices: “personal voice is meant to be minimized. Voices are meant to be merged” to a singular representation of a topic or idea. With the openness of collaboration comes a closedness to individual voice and multiple perspectives on topics.

Caulfield proposes a federated wiki as a wiki infrastructure that upends collaboration-by-consensus by allowing an individual to maintain their own copy of a wiki page that they can edit and individually control (Caulfield, 2016b). Unlike traditional wikis, federated wiki pages resolve to multiple servers but remain connected so that individuals’ copies stay linked to other copies. Federated wikis allow individuals to manage and control content while also freely sharing the content that they add and manage: a form of boundary crossing.

Beyond the affordances of federated wikis to allow individuals to intentionally navigate between openness and closedness, the use of federated wikis encourages teachers and learners to call into question how openness is shaped by the technologies we use. This, in turn, provokes useful questions about what we exchange for open collaboration and ask us, as teachers and technologists, to be transparent and critical about these choices, and sensitive to the risks and compromises they entail.

Engaging critically with openness requires approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment that welcome risk-taking, but also understand the possible risks well. Some common forms of open digital practices can be personally risky for students, especially those that involve reflection and self-expression, like blogging. With blogging the foundational notion is one of personal engagement in a digital environment for the gaze of another or others, and blogs are typically accepted as at least semi-public environments. Indeed, many teachers value them for exactly this reason: they provoke an awareness of audience and voice (Walker, 2005), and communities of learners can inspire and encourage one another (Ladyshevsky & Gardner, 2008). However, student bloggers rarely have the option to experiment with identity, or set their own limits on their exposure (Ross, 2012). So, part of the process of developing pedagogies that involve openness is considering how environments and practices can support students to set such limits (which we might productively think of as ‘closures’).

Part of the reason such limits may be needed is because of the unpredictable nature of the audience and how it might respond—what Bayne and Ross (2013) refer to as “contamination” (following Lewis and Kahn in their 2010 work on posthumanist pedagogy), where:

qualities of safety and control are abandoned in favour of an openness to ‘contamination’—best understood here as the unexpected interventions and interruptions from agents beyond the course. This kind of ‘contamination’ can take multiple forms: some are unwelcome (spamming), some are hoped for (external commentary on students’ blogs), some are inevitable. . . and others are more or less planned. . . (p. 100)

Agents beyond the course may be strangers, and they may even not be humans (the rise of Twitter bots is one example of increasingly prevalent non-human agents). As such agents are not “controllable”, McKenna and McAvinia (2011) describe how students may react by trying out identities as ‘readers’ of their own writing on the open web, making decisions based on an awareness of audience:

The students were, in part, accommodating an imagined reader and, in part, positioning themselves as readers in order to analyse their writing and a strong sense of audience was generally evident. Some students even made direct appeals for feedback from an anticipated, but unknown audience. (McKenna and McAvinia, 2011, p. 57)

In other words, exposing teaching and students' learning to an unknown audience can lead to consequences that are unpredictable both in terms of how that audience might respond, and in terms of how students will shape and position themselves as what MacNeill refers to as open practitioners—"able to express themselves and interact appropriately and openly, not just be consumers of open resources" (MacNeill, 2015). However, encounters with human and technological agents beyond the course (Bayne & Ross, 2013, p. 99) means the range of appropriate interactions may be more diverse, and more surprising, than educators imagine.

This section began with a discussion of not-yetness in relation to openness, arguing that openness in education needs to be seen in terms of criticality, power relations, risk and the unknown. These considerations are not commonly associated with open education, especially when the emphasis remains firmly on content and resources. However, new things become possible when online educators understand openness as a quality of relationship amongst students, teachers, technologies, texts, and the 'unknown audience'. We conclude with some thoughts about how a 'not-yetness' orientation to openness can generate fruitful futures for open education.

Conclusion

This article has presented the concept of not-yetness and aligned it with critical perspectives on open education which challenge oversimplified, idealised visions of openness. There are other perspectives which can be useful in combination with not-yetness—for example, Dalsgaard and Thestrup's (2015) three pedagogical dimensions of openness: transparency between students; communication between students and the outside world; and interdependent relationships between educational institutions and external practices (pp. 85–6). Above all, not-yetness offers conceptual support for accepting and allowing context, variability, and uncertainty to inform open education, and it helps problematize an overemphasis on access to content.

We end with a call for educators, technologists and educational researchers to address and work with the risks and complexities that come along with open practices beyond open content—not to minimise the risk or resolve the complexity, but to understand these factors as part of the challenge of boundary work that involves openness and closures. The examples of federated wikis, and supporting students to engage with 'agents beyond the course', demonstrate how such boundary work can play out in practice, and emphasise how concepts like not-yetness can help us get an appropriate handle on the possibilities of digital education and its multiple relationships with openness.

For educators, a shift to thinking about openness as boundary work might result in approaches to design, assessment and collaboration that take better account of the unpredictability of gains and losses that come with decisions around openness. In addition, there may be direct applications for not-yetness in classroom activity and in discussions with students. Teachers in disciplines where critical and interpretive discourse may be comfortable in the classroom may find the notion of not-yetness appealing as a framework for exploring openness. Classroom conversation and curriculum could include opportunities for discussion of the not-yetness of the open practices and resources at use in the class, and what possibilities those uses open and close for students. In disciplines where open educational resources might be adopted primarily for their instrumental purposes (retention, reducing costs, progress toward specific metrics), teachers may look for ways to bring distinctiveness and emergence to practices around those open educational resources. Might students, for example, create a "study guide" wiki to accompany an open math textbook as a way to introduce multiple perspectives on the interplay of math and students' lives?

To close, we encourage educators to explore the uncertainty of their open practices, and offer these three questions as supports for such exploration. When considering particular forms of openness as part of a pedagogical approach or strategy, educators might ask, perhaps along with their students:

1. What space is in these practices for distinctiveness, diversity, open-endedness?
2. How much uncertainty can this approach to openness accommodate?
3. What closures come along with these practices? What is in the borderlands?

In addressing questions around open-endedness, uncertainty and closures, we can create more critical space for our open educational practices, and challenge some of the constraints occasioned by an overemphasis on the content of open education.

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