

#BreakOpen Breaking Open

Ethics, Epistemology, Equity, and Power

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [the OER18 conference news feed \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Xs\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Xs) on February 1, 2018.

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The year is 2045. SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) 4 has been achieved for 10 years now; there is equal and equitable education for all. This was done through a consortium of major technology companies, coming together, partnering with the United Nations and the OECD, and generously agreeing to invest in electrifying and connecting the entire globe in order for everyone to have free access to information. Save for a few non-participating areas, everyone is connected. Universities, now completely privatised institutes, are only available to the

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extremely wealthy, as free open online education meets the needs of the masses. The cost of physical infrastructure was an unnecessary overhead on a mass scale There are only few outliers in the [PISA \[https://www.oecd.org/pisa/\]](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/) rankings. In addition, the [tracking software to aid formative assessment \[https://edtechbooks.org/-eWi\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-eWi) is much more efficient than a physical educator. It detects deviation from the expected trends of learning, and rectifies it earlier on. Dropout costs have been eradicated by forecasting what a learner will like and what a learner will succeed in. Personal data is now openly accessible to optimise user experience, which makes it much easier for the companies to predict learners' success. The education platforms fully gamify their content and all learning, as it would bore learners otherwise; competition among themselves helps learners to stay alert. [65% of all future jobs have not been seen yet \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Kfh\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Kfh) but the 'Big Three' tech companies (two in the US, one in China) are doing their best to spit out a flexible workforce. Everyone subscribes to the new system; everyone is educated on the Anglo-Chinese canon of best practices in their disciplines; what could be better than free access to knowledge and information?

However, in the cyber revolution, many local knowledge institutes who could not compete with free-of-charge educational models of the revolution, either went bankrupt or were amalgamated into the giants. As a result, the main source of knowledge, what constitutes knowledge, and how we test learning gains, is now defined by the three tech giants. The educational content they provide are purely instrumental, in order to create the workforce the world needs. [Surveillance footage and algorithms built into learning environments \[https://edtechbooks.org/-skS\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-skS) determine what profession best

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suits you, somewhat removing individual agency. Learners try to meet in physical spaces, but without support from institutions or educators. The access to free information and services comes at a price. You are not selling your soul or your kidney, but pretty much everything else. Your freedom, your privacy, your deepest darkest secrets, from [your conversations on Tinder \[https://edtechbooks.org/-AoF\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-AoF) to the thoughts you told your therapist. No more surprises, on either side, in 2045.

Despite efforts to open education, the levels of inequality are the highest they have ever been. Why? Because despite open education, the [knowledge that is made open to everyone is best utilised by those who already had wealth and power \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Edv\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Edv). The Knowledge Gap theory argues that as information is increased in a society, it is absorbed differently by recipients [depending on their socio-economic status \[https://edtechbooks.org/-TTnb\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-TTnb). Those with higher socio-economic status are better aligned to extracting higher benefit from the educational possibilities available.

At OER18, a group of global educators (authors of this post from Canada, Egypt, Germany, Ireland, and South Africa, joined by Martin Weller from UK and Jamison Miller from US) will facilitate a hybrid workshop titled *Breaking open: Conversations about ethics, epistemology, equity and power*. In this post, we briefly explore these four themes in relation to open education, and extend an invitation for your participation in the workshop — either in-person or virtually. Rather than explain them in detail, we offer some food for thought, and invite readers to contribute their own thoughts ahead of OER18.

i) Ethics

Education is inherently an
ethical and political act.

Michael Apple

“Michael Apple quote - #altc keynote” flickr photo by
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Overemphasis on participation in MOOCs is an ethical question that represents other ethical questions for open: who gets to decide the framing of open for others? Whose values and norms are dominant and how might they marginalize different others?

Knox criticises what researchers deem as [“correct involvement”](#)

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[in the MOOC, as it rejects difference](#)

[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-boi\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-boi). Students that participate very little are negatively termed “[lurkers](#)”

[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-boi\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-boi), when that could be the way they learn best. Knox terms this “[immunisation](#)”

[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-boi\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-boi), which he defines as the regulation of the external and unfamiliar, rather than

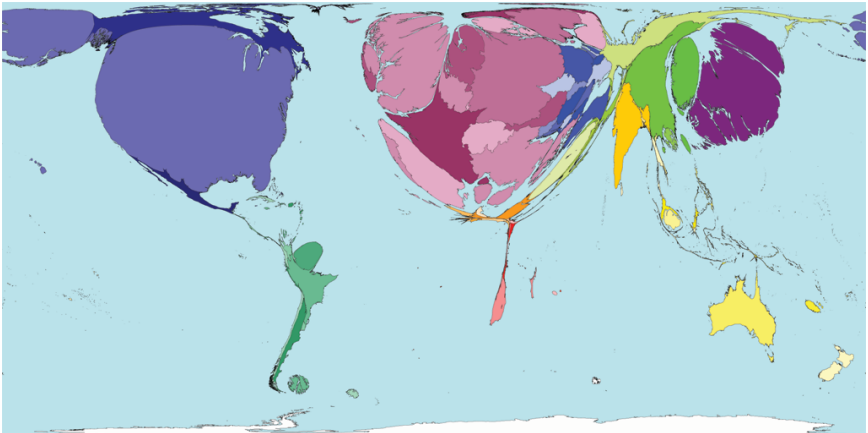
[acknowledging and embracing the difference](#)

[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-xUd\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-xUd). However, the completion rates

of these courses tend to be 6.5% to 7.5%, indicating that the presumed normative student is not a representation of the majority of students. In fact, [the “lurker” is a better](#)

[representative of the majority](#) [\[https://edtechbooks.org/-boi\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-boi).

ii) Epistemology



World scaled by number of documents in Web of Science by authors living there (CC BY-NC-ND Worldmapper.org / Sasi Group & Mark Newman)

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Every quote below is itself a provocation; all are written by an African scholar or is one referring to the situation of the global South. They flow so well together we did not need to insert any text in between. Note that the articles cited by Nobes were originally written in French, a reminder that all the world's knowledge is not originally written in English.

*"... a conception of open access that is limited to the legal and technical questions of the accessibility of science without thinking about the relationship between center and periphery **can become a source of epistemic alienation and neocolonialism in the South**". Piron et al. (2017) (quoted, translated, in Nobes, [2017 \[http://journalologik.uk/?p=149\]](http://journalologik.uk/?p=149))*

"The idea that open access may have the effects of neocolonialism is incomprehensible to people blind to epistemological diversity, who reduce the proclaimed universalism of Western science to the impoverished model of the standards imposed by the Web of Science model. For these people, the invisibility of a publication in their numerical reference space (located in the center of the world-system) is equivalent to its non-existence. The idea that valid and relevant knowledge can exist in another form and independently of the world-system that fascinates them is unthinkable." Piron et al. (2017) (quoted, translated, in Nobes, [2017 \[http://journalologik.uk/?p=149\]](http://journalologik.uk/?p=149))

"The resulting consequences are, in particular, the teachers of the Southern countries who quote and read only writers from the North and impose them on their students and the libraries of our universities who do everything to subscribe to Western scholarly journals while they do not deal with our problems.

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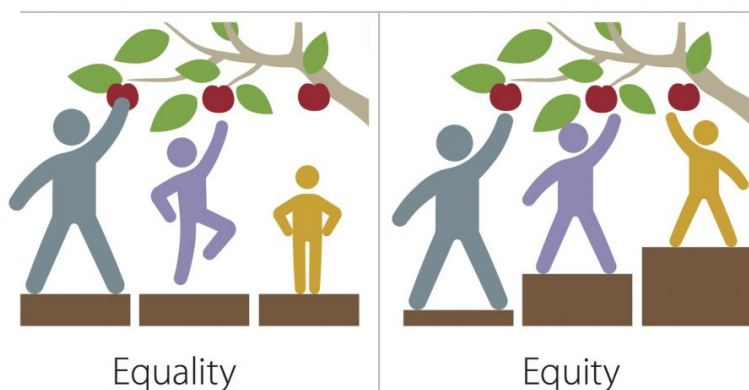
(Mboa Nkoudou, 2016 [<https://edtechbooks.org/-FFQ>], quoted, translated, in Nobes 2017 [<http://journalologik.uk/?p=149>])”

OER creation has an impact on asserting epistemic stance:

“creation and sharing of OER can be a way of asserting an epistemic stance, or one’s own unique (individual or collective) perspective of knowledge. This is vital for people from marginalised communities whose histories and knowledge have been sidelined or suppressed by colonial or hegemonic powers. The internet as a communication platform, and OER as an educational resource that can be freely shared, provide an opportunity for educators in the Global South to contribute their own ideas, give voice to their own perspectives and participate in a global conversation” (Arinto et al., 2017 [<https://edtechbooks.org/-SMs>])

iii) Equity

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What does equity mean for “open”? “Equity vs Equality” flickr photo by MN Pollution Control Agency
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The image above is meant to differentiate between equity and equality...But even that metaphor is problematic. For the most part, has openness focused on giving everyone the same access to the same apple? Has our approach to open assumed that people had an equal capacity to jump up and reach for the apple of their choice? What are the different needs of people with disabilities, and how do we nurture agency while respecting difference, rather than create dependencies?

Would access to an open online course to a university graduate, and to someone with no tertiary education, translate to equal opportunities for both?

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“While the quantity of available OER is growing, this is not necessarily of value to educators Added to this is the question of the appropriateness of the available OER for an educator’s or student’s specific use. Several of the ROER4D sub-projects found that educators and students use online materials based on their perceived relevance, regardless of whether they are openly licensed. A key aspect of relevance is language. Most of the globally available OER are in English, which means that they need to be translated for use in contexts where the medium of instruction is different.” (Arinto et al, 2017 [<https://edtechbooks.org/-SMs>])

While we see only little, if any, institutional recognition for the issue of this oligopoly of English OER and MOOCs, there are some laudable efforts to create awareness and recognition of a more diverse and rich landscape of materials that are not originally created in English. [Tannis Morgan](https://twitter.com/tanbob) [<https://twitter.com/tanbob>], for example, has not only pointed out these issues, [she also curates and displays OER to raise awareness](https://edtechbooks.org/-RPU) [<https://edtechbooks.org/-RPU>].

“Beyond providing access to educational resources, the power of OER as a means for achieving social inclusion lies in its potential to transform teaching into a more participatory process. In particular, adapting OER (for example by translating it into a local language, customising it to suit a particular set of students or combining several OER to make a new resource) broadens an educator’s understanding of what teaching entails beyond “delivering” instruction, encourages reflection on how to engage students more, and promotes collaboration with other educators as well as with students.” (Arinto et al, 2017 [<https://edtechbooks.org/-SMs>])

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However:

“...ROER4D studies indicate limited adaptation of OER by educators and students. In the cross-regional survey (de Oliveira et al., Chapter 3), only 18% of educators and 6% of students reported having participated in adapting or modifying OER at least once. Educators and students generally use OER “as is” (verbatim), which is the most basic form of reuse, equivalent to simply “copying” content. The factors that account for this relatively low degree of participation in OER-based practice include technical skills (including fluency in English), pedagogical practices, institutional policies and support mechanisms.” (Arinto et al, [2017](#) [<https://edtechbooks.org/-SMs>]).

iv) Power

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“Values and practices - which legitimate certain interests and not others - contribute just as much to global imbalances as material disparities do.” (Czerniewicz, [2013](#)
[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-nsc\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-nsc))

To what extent does openness follow [principles of just design, as highlighted here \[https://edtechbooks.org/-tWjc\]](#), such as asking: who participates in the process, who benefits and who

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gets harmed? To what extent do we question the actual impact of open beyond intentions, and to what extent does open truly dismantle and transform existing global power hierarchies rather than reproducing them in a different form? To what extent is the work of open participatory and done with humility, rather than patronizing and charitable in nature?

Who is allowed access to MOOCs, and who gives this access, also expands the Digital Divide and creates unequal power relations. Countries such as Iran, Cuba, and Somalia, for example, [have faced bans \[https://edtechbooks.org/-GTv\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-GTv) from accessing MOOCs due to USA sanctions. Thus the USA has control over who can access “open” education and who cannot, as they host the major servers of Edx and Coursera. Additionally, due to the server locations of many platforms, the US government has access to your data. This may be condoned by American citizens, but is not consented by other countries.

Developing country universities are often limited to producing MOOCs on platforms that require exorbitant partnering fees, or that vet which universities join based on criteria of quality or rankings (which are mostly western) as partners, with a few exceptions. Africans (and others from developing countries) become the [consumers of Western knowledge, methods and practice, rather than adapters and contributors \[https://edtechbooks.org/-cXp\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-cXp).

Funders and sponsors also exercise power when mandating licensing conditions for outputs of funded projects; sometimes mandating a CC-BY license constitutes a form of asserting hegemony and power and not attended to local contexts or needs (academics genuinely concerned about CC-BY). Why not

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give grantees the autonomy to decide on which open licence suits their needs and contexts?

Invitation to participate

Let's start this conversation ahead of our OER18 workshop: time zones and synchronous conversations are inequitable. We also hope to create spaces where more people can contribute related thoughts and resources ahead of and beyond OER18 - which we will curate and help disseminate, with attribution, using the license of your choice. :)

Our provocative question is this:

How do we use openness to exclude, overpower and/or oppress marginalized individuals, communities, knowledge systems?

We invite you to submit provocations or commentary in any form, using the hashtag **#BreakOpen** [<https://edtechbooks.org/-rbd>] on any (or any combination) of our 4 themes: **ethics**, **epistemology**, **equity** or **power** over the coming two weeks.

Provocations may be in the form of tweets, videos, images, blog posts, poems, links to existing articles, evidence-based research, philosophical essays, (scripts of) theater plays, short films, cartoons, sketches, etc. If you would prefer to submit a provocation that is not in English, please be so kind and provide us with closed captioning or a transcript (unless, of course, not providing these is part of your provocation).

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We also invite you to join the upcoming workshop at OER18 entitled *Breaking open: Conversations about ethics, epistemology, equity and power* (facilitated by Maha Bali, Taskeen Adam, Catherine Cronin, Christian Friedrich, Sukaina Walji, Christina Hendricks, Martin Weller and Jamison Miller). There will be opportunities for virtual participation, so the conversation in the room isn't only made up of people attending OER18.

Additional context for this OER18 workshop

This session builds continuity and dialogue across time and space, and across several open education conferences. The first workshop in this particular series was conducted at **OpenEd17** [<https://edtechbooks.org/-xKJ>] with a majority North American audience and a more general question: "[How can we destroy the Open Education Movement?](https://edtechbooks.org/-PoV)" [<https://edtechbooks.org/-PoV>]. That session was designed in response to travel restrictions to the United States at the time and the session facilitators' consideration of appropriate ethical responses to these. Working to provide the same level of participation for in-person and virtual participants (as much as possible) was a key ethical concern driving the session. Both on-site and virtual participants provided a range of provocative responses to the guiding question. But even then, the majority came from North America, meaning this range was limited.

OER18 [<https://edtechbooks.org/-uuz>] in Bristol, UK, will be the second session in this series, engaging in the same critical framework but with a modified focus, a more global audience,

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and a broader range of workshop facilitators. The OER18 session also follows up on many of the themes and ideas generated at [OER17 in London, where the theme was ‘The Politics of Open’](https://edtechbooks.org/rNV) [https://edtechbooks.org/rNV].

A third session is planned for **OEGlobal** [https://edtechbooks.org/-WpC] in Delft, Netherlands, offering an opportunity to build on the conversation further with a different, and truly global, audience. The contributions of people before, during and after these sessions will be curated to allow for comparison and contrast between perspectives on how we have been “breaking open” and what steps would help to address these problems.

The session format for OER18 has a twist in our plan to use “provocations”, similar to [Towards Openness](http://towards-openness.org) [http://towards-openness.org] workshops done in the past. If you are looking for examples of a provocation as it was used in previous workshops, please feel free to check some of them out here: <https://edtechbooks.org/WYZ> Please also note that while most previous provocations for Towards Openness have been recorded in a video format, this is not a necessity! As noted above, provocations may be in any form.

Finally, we also wish to connect with existing conversations in this area — within and beyond open education conferences. Please use the [#BreakOpen](https://edtechbooks.org/rbd) [https://edtechbooks.org/rbd] [#oer18](https://edtechbooks.org/hashtag/oer18) hashtags along with existing hashtags so that conversations and communities can be connected. We have already noted the [#TowardsOpenness](https://edtechbooks.org/uni) [https://edtechbooks.org/uni] hashtag, and thanks to Frances Bell for noting the [#critoeop](https://edtechbooks.org/XwL) [https://edtechbooks.org/XwL]

hashtag, among others.

Suggested Citation

Cronin, C., Bali, M., Adam, T., Friedrich, C., Walji, S., & Hendricks, C. (2019). #BreakOpen Breaking Open: Ethics, Epistemology, Equity, and Power. In R. Kimmons, *EdTech in the Wild: critical blog posts*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/wild/breakopen>

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Kimmons, R. (2019). *EdTech in the Wild: critical blog posts*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/wild>



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