Open Ends?

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Brian Lamb's blog \[https://abject.ca/open-ends/\]](https://abject.ca/open-ends/) on April 3, 2015.

In the run-up to her keynote for the [OER15 Conference \[http://oer15.oerconf.org/\]](http://oer15.oerconf.org/)— which I hope to see in person — [Sheila MacNeill asks for examples \[https://edtechbooks.org/-amD\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-amD) and ideas concerning the "mainstreaming" of OER and open educational practice in higher education. I'm really looking forward to seeing how Sheila ends up addressing the question, following on [important questions \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Twp\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Twp) and valuable [reality checks \[https://edtechbooks.org/-RLi\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-RLi) she's already presented.

As I mulled over a few ways of responding to her query [*I started this post weeks ago*], I happened to read [Tony Hirst's statement of Academic Philosophy \[https://edtechbooks.org/-LKj\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-LKj). I was particularly struck by Tony's definition of open practice: "driven by the idea of learning in public, with the aim of communicating academic knowledge into, and as part of, wider communities of practice, modeling learning behaviour through demonstrating my own learning processes, and originating new ideas in a challengeable and open way as part of my own learning journey."

Tony's statement frames the benefit of open practice as something that is publicly engaged, that broadens the impact of academic works, and that brings long-held ideals of scholarship up to date to utilize the contemporary environment. I suspect most attendees of OER15 understand these benefits, and have first-hand experiences of them. So maybe I am bashing a straw man when I contrast Tony's statement with so much of our rhetoric, where just getting something to "open" seems to be the end goal in itself. That if we can just get a Creative Commons license (without that nasty NC clause, natch…) on more materials, surface more research and learning on the open web, then we will have at that point found success. I support those goals myself, and happily work to promote and implement them. They are very good things to do and they result in real benefits [https://edtechbooks.org/-uFV].

That said, imagine you are someone who has not had an amazing experience of openness [https://edtechbooks.org/-vVv]. You are a practitioner with head down, dealing with the professional and personal pressures most of us are fighting through. What benefits are offered by "going open"? I think for most people the first words that pop into mind with a proposed move to open are "hassle", "uncertainty" and "more work".

I came to open education as something of a refugee, fleeing the wreckage of misguided Learning Objects projects in which the goals of sharing and collaboration were torpedoed by notions of control, ownership and exclusion. I struggled with Learning Object Repositories and Learning Management Systems, while at the same time was truly having enlightening rewarding fun amongst a loose nascent network of educational bloggers [https://edtechbooks.org/-qQr]. The pragmatic advantages of "just sharing" [https://edtechbooks.org/-zGTn] were so obvious. It still baffles me how the serious people [http://abject.ca/tamed/] in the field could not see them. Then there was the human side… I could feel the joy and energy of organic emergent practices in my bones.

I started to gravitate to the open education movement because there were people there who also felt this way. There were plenty of serious people in the movement as well, and it seemed to me that while OER made progress on the intellectual property problems we repeated the fundamental errors of Learning Objects in many other respects. Maybe that's why I've thought of open as a necessary condition or means, but nothing like the desired end.

It does not help here in 2015 that "open" has been used in so many ways that it may not even function as a viable term anymore. In the opening chapter of *The Battle for Open* [https://edtechbooks.org/-ymw], Martin Weller outlines one of the most problematic points of demarcation:

> …for many of the proponents of openness its key attribute is about freedom – for individuals to access content, to reuse it in ways they see fit, to develop new methods of working and to take advantage of the opportunities the digital, networked world offers. The more commercial interpretation of openness may see it as an initial tactic to gain users on a proprietary platform, or as a means of accessing government funding.

For a while, I thought one way to sharpen the value proposition of open to prospective allies would be to emphasize "freedom", to make "freedom" something more than an "attribute of openness". But I have to admit, when I've floated that idea to people in conversation nobody seems too enthused. "Freedom" is a term that carries its own baggage (I find it impossible to avoid using quote marks for "freedom" in 2015), and the word has already proven vulnerable to abuses and absurdities [https://edtechbooks.org/-Gub].

I know this post is muddled. You'd think that after more than a decade of living inside this space I'd have a little more focus. I really enjoyed Martin's book for that reason, as he lays out these contradictions with clarity, and even makes them read fresh to my tired eyes. Towards the

end of *The Battle of Open*, he outlines some credible outcomes likely to emerge from open practices, most of which should resonate with educators and their institutions. One is the ability for higher education to demonstrate its worth to society, as in "a digital, networked age, erecting boundaries around the institution is harmful because it speaks of isolation." Another is the development of literacies and practical skills that will be necessary for our graduates. "Open practice allows students to engage in the type of tasks and develop the type of skills they may need in any type of employment, without reducing a university education to merely vocational training." Authentic and experiential learning needs to embed openness when it comes to the development of these abilities. I would add that genuine engagement with networked practice is also essential if we hope as citizens to develop an informed worldview on issues such as privacy and surveillance, intellectual property, and the economic effects of digital disruptions — not to mention [coming to grips with the nature of digital communication itself \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Utv\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Utv). And finally, while Martin is justifiably cautious about making extravagant claims of reduced costs, the [benefits here are real and demonstrable \[https://edtechbooks.org/-RgI\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-RgI).

OER is killing education shared CC by empeiria [https://edtechbooks.org/-RXuQ]

I note that some kind of re-alignment of focus seems to already be underway. In 2015, we hear less about Open Educational Resources as a goal, and more about supporting open educational practice. I see that while the URL and hashtag of the conference remains "OER15" the opening sentence on [the conference website](https://oer15.oerconf.org/) [https://oer15.oerconf.org/] describes the event as this year's "Open Education Conference (OER15)". And what once was the OpenCourseWare Consortium's annual conference is now called the ["Open Education Global Conference" \[https://edtechbooks.org/-QAu\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-QAu). And the consortium itself has rebranded itself as the Open Education Consortium. (I hasten to add there is also that *other* [Open Education Conference \[https://edtechbooks.org/-enZ\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-enZ), which is back in Van Rock City this year.)

So I end my response to Sheila's query with a question of my own. Would the cause of open be better served if we go further in this direction, and stop talking about "open" as a goal and instead focus on using it as a tactic to support allies who care about authentic,

engaged, accessible, sustainable, and relevant public education?
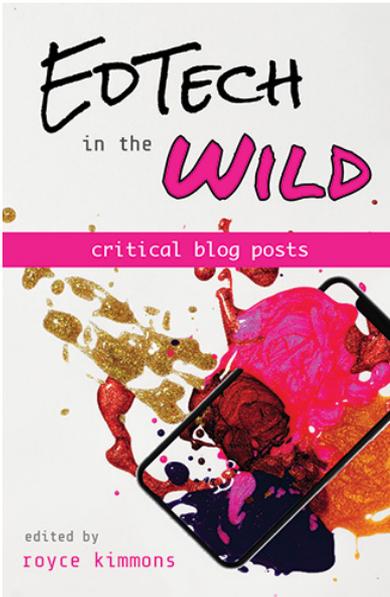
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