

Open all hours: Opening-up education to inspire future learners and teachers.

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ABSTRACT

The global open education movement involves a variety of initiatives ranging from access to educational resources, to short courses and degree programmes. We are presently in a situation where the technological advances and global demands have outpaced our thinking behind the practice, and the question arises, how do the cultural and ethical values that are the mainstay of a campus-based education translate to these new opportunities online?

This paper reviews the literature and reveals several dimensions relevant to the ethical debate, such as inclusivity and learner diversity. Free open courses clearly attract global participants in large numbers, albeit requiring internet access and a good level of motivation to learn. Open educational resources are shared within communities to supplement learning and teaching. The different forms of initiative present different sets of challenges, and new paradigms for online learning are emerging as are changing roles for both the learner and the teacher.

Background

The global open education movement transcends geographic boundaries by harnessing the opportunities afforded by the internet, to open up classrooms to share knowledge, resources and even access to teachers. The possibilities are varied, from open educational resources (OERs) that are learning materials and assets shared freely under open licenses (1), to open classes attracting large audiences in so-called massive open courses (MOOCs) (2). Those involved in both proclaim these initiatives are for the public good and reform education equality, and providers typically claim that MOOCs will “empower people with education that will improve their lives” (Coursera.org).

We find ourselves in a situation where technology and demand is disrupting our traditional understanding of education. This is challenged further with public institutions increasingly having to rub shoulders, and sometimes entering into agreements with, private providers in order to deliver open education online. As a basis for exploring the changing landscape, it is interesting to place the work in the context of the ethical foundations of education. Peters (1971) describes an ethical education as one that is concerned with the ‘manner’ and ‘matter’ of delivery, the how and the what (3). Equality and fairness are long established underlying principles within the theoretical model, and Peters discusses a time where there was a clear balance of power in the relationship between teachers and students. So how does open education challenge this ethical thinking, and what can we learn from this?

Methodology

The methodology adopted to answer these questions involved a review of

literature relating to ethics, MOOCs and open education. A previous study had found that the literature was sparse, so in addition to just relaying the findings of empirical studies, a narrative synthesis of literature review articles was also carried out to draw out salient areas of opinion and debate. The research identified several themes, which were organised into a holistic view of the important ethical dimensions.

Discussion and Implications

Sophisticated technology has captured the imagination of learners with some MOOCs attracting tens of thousands of participants from around the globe (4). Evidence increasingly shows that MOOCs support learner diversity but on a small scale, and it is acknowledged that they deliver to primarily exclusive and well-qualified participants (5). In terms of the 'matter' and what types of resources are being shared, it is recognised that some open content requires a good internet connection to access, and poor digital literacy skills are disadvantaging learners in developing countries (6). However, open resources that can be packaged and used off-line offer a more flexible opportunity, and OERs and open text-books can bring down the costs of education significantly and therefore assist those from less socio-economically advantaged groups (7).

So open education can make learning more accessible and equitable, but there are problems to solve. What is also interesting is that open education is radically changing the identities of learners and teachers. In order to achieve Peters' notion of an ethical education, teachers assumed the role of knowledgeable authority figures, entrusted with nurturing the student (3). In the online learning scenario offered by open courses, this no longer holds true. In connectivist (C) MOOCs the teachers (more often called facilitators) and learners co-operate as equal partners around common tasks, facilitated by social networking discussions and debate. There is a shift of power and identify, with difficulties for both the facilitator in managing the sometimes overwhelming level of activity within the social networks, and in being party to some critical discussion, and also for the learners who reportedly feel outside of the group (8). In the xMOOCs, the teacher may still assume an authority stance in that they may feature in course video content, but many on-campus tasks such as assessing and feeding back are either peer-led or integral to the platform.

Open education clearly is inspiring learners and teachers alike, and perhaps it is time to reflect to ensure it can continue to be radical in doing so. There are many more ethical aspects to consider in relation to the 'manner' and 'matter' of education that arose from the narrative synthesis of review articles undertaken as part of this work. These other dimensions included the need to consider the intellectual property ownership of materials produced; the implications of gathering vast amounts of student personal data via xMOOCs, and how academic quality could be assured (4). Trying to understand the social contexts of online learners is problematic since the courses are self-selecting populations, as are those who offer to participate in any research. To genuinely explore the socio-ethical boundaries of open education, future research needs to involve those who are not accessing these opportunities, for whatever reason.

Interestingly, Winn and Neary perceive open education to be in an almost gridlocked state in terms of what it can further achieve; it demonstrably enhances accessibility to learning and provides close engagement between learners and teachers online, but it does not nearly enough challenge education establishments to consider the freedom of the people operating within them to really transform society, and “not simply to make available new knowledge in less restricted 'open' forms as OERs” (9). It feels like a similar point to which openness has reached in achieving equality, and more a critical and radical course of action is required to really push the boundaries and ensure future generations of learners and teachers can genuinely experience an equal and fair share of education.

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