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Epilogue: Open Education, Social Practices, and Ecologies of Hope

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Steven L. Thorne

Epilogue: Open Education, social practices, and ecologies of hope

Introduction

- 1 The post-enlightenment vision of public education has as its core mission the creation of knowledge through investigation and the dissemination of knowledge through curricula, course materials, and teaching, with the overarching goal of serving as a cognitively and socially progressive force in human societies. Many elite universities worldwide, and the majority of universities outside of the United States, are primarily or fully supported by public and governmental funds, a condition that evokes a tacit commitment to serve the needs of both local and globally distributed communities. For more than a decade, some of the world's top-ranked universities have invited the global public to freely access the very curricular content that previously had only been available to a privileged few. Under the umbrella term Open Education (OE), which refers to the advancement of education through "open technology, open content and open knowledge" (Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2007), this movement encourages universities, as well as educators at other institutional levels, to serve the greater public good through the sharing of topical and thematic learning objects as well as intact course materials and curricula.
- 2 As referenced by Blyth (in press), Richard Baraniuk, a professor of computer engineering and a prominent figure in the OE movement, describes the paradigm shift that OE has begun to catalyze in terms of a set of widely shared values and beliefs.

The OE movement is based on a set of intuitions shared by a remarkably wide range of academics: that knowledge should be free and open to use and reuse; that collaboration should be easier, not harder; that people should receive credit and kudos for contributing to education and research; and that concepts and ideas are linked in unusual and surprising ways and not the simple linear forms that today's textbooks present. OE promises to fundamentally change the way authors, instructors, and students interact worldwide (Baraniuk, 2007: 229).

- 3 Additional benefits of the OE movement include the following: 1) it supports the higher democratic goal of serving human society at large, 2) it potentially raises the national and international visibility of the educational institutions, organizations, and the individual scholars and practitioners that contribute to the OE movement, 3) the public visibility of OE has the potential to help all educators keep curricular offerings up-to-date and focused on the most contemporary and important research findings, content, and pedagogical methods, and 4) Open Education Resources (OER) are generally governed by open licensing (eg, Creative Commons licensing), which typically allows not only the use of intact OER, but their modification, remixing, and redistribution. This latter process of editing, tailoring, or expanding existing materials (Littlejohn, 2003) has spawned an emerging interest in Open Educational Practices (OEP), which represent much of the focus of this important special issue (eg, Blyth & Dalola, 2016; Kurek, 2016; MacKinnon *et al.*; Reinhardt, 2016; Whyte, 2016; Zourou, 2016; see also Ehlers, 2011).

The genesis of open movements

- 4 The knowledge building and sharing functions of educational institutions (investigation, teaching, materials development) involve sophisticated linkages of knowledge emerging from basic research with pedagogically appropriate materials that enable successful learning outcomes. With an appreciation for the fact that curriculum development is a human and capital-intensive process, the concept of OE has had from its inception an international focus on sharing and collaboration. Contributors to the OE movement have been inspired by its potential for fostering positive social change. This vision that was earlier described by Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen (1999), who called for redefining the term "freedom"

as the "enhancement of human capacities" through educational opportunity. For many, Sen's vision serves as the moral and conceptual progenitor of contemporary OE efforts (see Atkins, Seely Brown & Hammond, 2007).

5 A global, grass-roots phenomenon, OE coalesced at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century when educators sought to create intellectual content that was accessible to the global Internet public. Viewed in its historical context, OE is an extension of the open source movement whose revolutionary idea was to give software developers free and open access to source code (Perens, 1999; Raymond, 2001). The open source movement was arguably the first attempt to embrace the power of the "crowd", encouraging self-regulating open systems of collective activity, and remains the most robust and widely known. The open data movement by the scientific community has created an infrastructure and community ethos that is built upon the sharing of data, methods, and research results in ways that allow for increased collaboration and scientific advancement. While conventional publishing venues such as refereed journals remain vitally important, rapidly emerging research trends, data sets, and tools for analysis are now frequently made available, increasingly as a requirement of funding agencies (such as the National Science Foundation in the US). More recent open movements include those focused on "open societies" and "open government" and as is the case with OE, there is an overarching emphasis on supporting social justice through democratizing access to information and knowledge. A number of transnational processes have been established that contribute to OE, such as open source software efforts in a wide range of educationally related domains, open data initiatives, and Creative Commons licensing designed to increase the number of resources that are freely and legally available in the public domain. As the OE movement took shape, it became apparent that the rise of informal learning on the Internet required a new generation of flexible materials. Soon, open educators began to think in terms of "open content" and "open design" (Conole, 2013) and in 2002, the term "open educational resources" (OER) was coined during a UNESCO meeting of the Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries (Johnstone, 2005). Today, the distinctive feature of OER is the open copyright license that promotes "4R" activities (Wiley & Green, 2012: 81; cited in Blyth, in press):

- Revising—adapting the OER to meet the needs of the end user.
- Remixing—combining or "mashing up" the OER with another OER to produce new materials.
- Reusing—using the original or derivative versions of the OER in a wide range of new contexts.
- Redistributing—sharing the original work or derivative versions with others.

6 Supported by an ethos that promotes openness of intellectual property, OE encourages collaboration between educational stakeholders, the creation of adaptable content, and contributions of curricular resources for less commonly taught languages that are less well served or entirely ignored by commercial publishers. During the first decade of the OE movement, advocates focused on the development and dissemination of cost-free materials in an attempt to reduce rising costs and increase access for communities and world regions with limited financial resources. During its second decade, however, the movement has begun to focus on empirical research to ascertain the impact of OE on student learning, including second and foreign language learning and less commonly taught languages (Blyth, 2012a, 2012b, in press; Thoms & Thoms, 2014), and to address the broader issue of Open Education Practices (OEP) and the social and economic context within which OER are created and circulate. It is this latter dimension of open education practices, with an emphasis on the term *practice*, that is the focus of the final section of the epilogue.

Open Education Practices and ecologies of possibility

7 The term *practice* is here used in the anthropological (Ortner, 1984) and sociological (Bourdieu, 1990) senses to describe socially structured, and socially structuring, patterns, resources, and constraints that organize human life activity. These can include acts of

classification, reasoning and logic, forms of rationality, types of economic exchange systems, and historically developed rules and tactics that inform how individuals and communities carry out life activity (eg, de Certeau, 1984). Essentially, social practices are ways of understanding and doing things in the world that fundamentally enable, but also constrain, what are perceived as possible actions. A serious question, and indeed a potentially crippling condition confronting the OE movement, is whether a use-value Open Education sharing economy can flourish, or even sustainably exist, within a macro context governed by an exchange-value and profit motivated capitalist system.

8 In a recent article examining an educational intervention designed to increase teacher agency in the context of a play-based curriculum, van Oers (2015: 19) begins with the observation that contemporary educational practices are caught in a contradiction between "cultural-economic exigencies," where a school's performance is often tied to the outcome of high stakes testing, and on the other hand, the widely held belief that schooling is a "value based endeavor to promote personal well-being and personal agency in pupils and teachers." Indeed, a historical perspective would suggest that institutional educational practice is highly resistant to change, with the negative exception, perhaps, of the increasing penetration by neoliberal ideology, which has become the naturalized economic reality across most of the world (Harvey, 2005). As van Oers notes, capital market forces have permeated state-sponsored schooling and resulted in many schools operating according to business models. The same trend has also long been visible in publicly funded universities. While the seemingly unassailable contemporary emphasis on bottom-line and exchange value economics in public education is quite disheartening, the OE movement illustrates a resistance force that has great potential to provide educators with new and/or increased social as well as material resources that support core aspects of their professional practice, and by extension, student learning.

9 One potentially helpful organizing metaphor through which to view OE and its potential is that of ecology. In 1999, Bonnie Nardi and Vicky O'Day published *Information ecologies: Using technology with heart*, which used biological and environmental ecology to frame and situate the advent of the Internet and the subsequent shifting relationships between human actors, technologies, and information. As stated by the authors,

We define an information ecology to be a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment. In information ecologies, the spotlight is not on technology, but on human activities that are served by technology (Nardy & O'Day, 1999, np).

10 In Nardi and O'Day's usage, a partial list of relational categories that comprise an information ecology include:

- System: Systems of sub-systems, all of which have stronger or weaker interrelationships and dependencies such that change in one area potentially affects the greater system.
- Diversity: Different species occupy and thrive in different niches. Competition may also arise and drive changes in the overall ecology.
- Keystone species: Some elements or agents of a system are critical to the survival of the ecology as a whole while others are more peripheral.
- Coevolution: Systems adjust to evolving constraints and affordances, new niches are formed, and some become more robust while others atrophy.

11 The metaphoric extension of Nardi and O'Day's information ecology illuminates a number of potentials and constraints at both micro- and macro-levels of relief. At the system and sub-systems level, OE can be argued to have catalyzed a revitalization of new developments within both open and for profit educational sectors. Entities and conglomerates that support massive open online courses (eg, Coursera, Class2Go, EdX, FutureLearn, Udacity, among others), for example, show hybridization between an ostensible social justice philosophy and for profit motives. OE has also increased the diversity and availability of educational resources as well as the forms and the quantity of collaborative dynamics possible, creating conditions under which many universities now support faculty to develop open access textbooks, and increasingly, support the adoption of OE curricular offerings in place of those produced by large publishing houses (eg, the widespread use of *Français interactif*, an OE first year

French language curriculum, see Blyth, 2012a). The keystone species element comprising the OE movement is, in fact, open education *practices* and specifically the humans who mediate and enable them, including end users such as teachers and students and academic administrators who acknowledge the production of OER as consequential intellectual labor. There remains, of course, a primary contradiction between profit motivated exchange value educational institutions and those networks and entities that exist to serve not-for-profit, open source, and open education agendas.

12 So, where do we go from here and what are possible ways forward? Perhaps this is where Nardi and O'Day's notion of co-evolutionary dynamics aligns with the contents of this special issue, with its emphasis on Open Educational Practices. In the end, it is the social practices created by OE contributors and participants that will make possible and scalable the social justice commitments that the Open Education movement represents. While we cannot readily change our broader economic system, we can amplify existing and invent new social practices of sharing and collaboration in the areas of education and human development.

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