

Open education as a ‘heterotopia of desire’

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The movement towards ‘openness’ in education has tended to position itself as inherently democratising, radical, egalitarian and critical of power-ful gatekeepers to learning. While ‘openness’ is often positioned as a critique, I will argue that its mainstream discourses – while appearing to oppose large-scale operations of power – in fact reinforce a fantasy of an all-powerful, panoptic institutional apparatus. The human subject is idealised as capable of generating higher order knowledge without recourse to expertise, a canon of knowledge or scaffolded development. This highlights an inherent contradiction between this movement and critical educational theory which opposes narratives of potential utopian futures, offering theoretical counterpositions and data which reveal diversity and complexity and resisting attempts at definition, typology and fixity. This argument will be advanced by referring to Gourlay and Oliver’s one-year longitudinal qualitative multimodal journaling and interview study of student day-to-day entanglements with technologies in higher education, which was combined with a shorter study focused on academic staff engagement (see article for full text reference). Drawing on sociomaterial perspectives, I will conclude that allegedly ‘radical’ claims of the ‘openness’ movement in education may in fact serve to reinforce rather than challenge utopic thinking, fantasies of the human, and monolithic social categories, fixity and power, and as such may be seen as indicative of a ‘heterotopia of desire’.

Keywords: OERs; Latour; Foucault; heterotopias; sociomateriality

Introduction

The Open Educational Resources (OERs) movement has been characterised by a series of claims surrounding its capacity to democratise higher education and learning, by granting open access to educational materials and resources online. Although laudable in intention, this movement and its claims based on the principle of access have been critiqued as over-simplistic and weakly theorised (e.g., Knox 2013b). This paper seeks to examine how OERs (for the

purposes of this paper the term is being used to include MOOCs) and resources have been ideologically positioned as inherently anti-hierarchical and therefore able to claim a critical position in relation to the ‘traditional’ university and forms of academic publication, which are via this formulation portrayed as exclusive, retrograde and reproductive of social privilege. Drawing on Latour’s (2004) meditation on the nature of political critique, I will propose that – where critique may appear to oppose large-scale operations of power – it may in fact reinforce unexamined assumptions, perpetuating a fantasy of an all-powerful, panoptic institutional apparatus, and conjuring fantasies of human potential as *sui generis*, unlimited and freefloating. I will propose that this is based on a fundamentally utopian belief in the existence of absolute power/knowledge and efficiency in education – a stance which may in fact underscore a belief in the simple, the unnuanced, the convergent, the unchanging and the absolute.

Critique and complexity

Latour (2004) provides a thought-provoking piece which challenges us to think more deeply about what underlies political critique as it concerns itself with challenging powerful and dominating structures in society, including state surveillance and limits on personal freedoms. He discusses what he sees as a disturbing tendency for radical doubt and critique to be over-applied in the political sphere, such as in right-wing conspiracy theory, or in the undermining of arguments surrounding environmentalism. He argues:

... it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes – society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism – while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. (Latour 2004, 229)

Arguably, the objects of such critique are regarded as large-scale and monolithic in their nature. Latour appears to suggest that these critiques overestimate the degree to which such forces are coherent, efficient and centrally coordinated by the authorities, and also alludes to conspiracy theories and

beliefs in ‘powerful agents hidden in the dark’ (Latour 2004, 229). Without trivialising resistance to surveillance and attacks on personal freedom, Latour questions what seems to underlie these positions; a fantasy of an all-powerful, panoptic apparatus capable of fully coordinated action on this basis.

Using Latour’s argument as a starting point, I would like to consider the relationship between this form of radical critique and academic critique in education. Arguably, critique within educational theory tends to position itself as a counterpoint to what it regards as over-simplistic thinking, with common objects of critique being generalisations, unsubstantiated yet dominant discourses and questionable binaries. Here the underlying analysis is one of complexity, as opposed to clear categorisation. Critical educational theory arguably positions itself in opposition to simplistic ideological narratives, seeking to undermine these with theoretical counterpositions and empirical data (in particular qualitative and ethnographic work), which reveal diversity and complexity. The tendency here is to resist attempts at definition, typology and fixity. Here, notions of the absolute are rejected in favour of the ‘messy’ and contingent unfolding of day-to-day social practice.

However, critique of educational structures and institutions may perhaps be seen to have more common ground with the type of conspiracy-based political critique Latour refers to. This paper will propose that the OER movement and the ideological claims made for it in some influential quarters is an instantiation of this phenomenon in the field of online education, positioning mainstream higher education as an agent of absolute power. However, before making this particular case, the theoretical basis for this argument will be developed with reference to the concept of utopias.

Mainstream ideologies of OERs

The OER movement has been vaunted as inherently democratising, anti-hierarchical and countercultural, with the university then positioned as representative of elitism, reproductive of privilege, exclusionary, hierarchical and therefore antithetical to these values. As a leading advocate of OERs, Downes envisages a ‘system of society and learning’ (2011, 3), which he describes as follows:

This to me is a society where knowledge and learning are public goods, freely created and shared, not hoarded or withheld in order to extract wealth or influence. This is what I aspire toward, this is what I work toward. (2011)

Clearly, Downes is not the only commentator on OERs, and there exist a wide range of perspectives on the issue in the literature and online. However, he is widely regarded as one of the key proponents of OERs (Weller 2014) and is highly influential in the field, frequently giving keynote speeches on the topic, in addition to publishing prolifically on his popular blog. For these reasons, I would like to focus on his perspectives for the purposes of this paper, as I would argue they are mainstream within the field of educational technology. He explores various dimensions of the concept of ‘free’ education, arguing that this can refer to either commercial aspect of educational provision or the extent to which the student ‘directs’ his/her learning. He sets this out as the following:

Directed learning vs self-directed learning (or, instructivism or constructivism; or, formal vs informal; or, control learning vs free learning) – or to put it another way – does the education system serve the interests of the providers, or of the learners? (Downes 2011, 7)

Downes’ analysis divides the options into a series of binaries, with ‘directed learning’, ‘instructivism’, ‘formal learning’ and ‘control learning’ being presented as associated with the interests of the providers. In contrast, the opposites of these are presented as serving the interests of the learners. In his subsequent discussion (2011), he critiques the notion of copyright and advocates freely sharing material online. What is striking throughout this discussion is the emphasis on ‘content’ – essentially texts of various kinds. ‘Access’ is also emphasised as key concept, and taken together these emphases seem to situate educational engagement particularly in this ‘material’ or ‘resource’, and the ability to gain unfettered access to it. Importance is also placed on production, the ‘creation’ of material, interaction and sharing as opposed to mere ‘broadcast’.

Knox has argued that, ‘In defining the object of education to be the enhancement of human life, the OER movement tends to naturalise an archetypal human condition: a set of idealised qualities to which learners are expected to adhere’ (2013a, 822). He points out that this vision is reliant on a utopian

fantasy of the innately self-directing, autonomous, freefloating subject, in opposition to the absolute and restrictive power of the institution. Downes' statement seems to substantiate Knox's point – that idealised values are attributed in this discourse to imagined participants, who are portrayed as being agents with apparently unlimited individual and collective intellectual potential to be unlocked through exposure to 'content', or informal discussion around it. In Downes' vision, this capacity for learning can be realised primarily via access to materials, and also by the interactive production of further content. The role of formal education and institutions is seen as rendering students 'passive and disempowered' (2011, 248). Downes contrasts this with the central goal of 'edupunk' and OERs, which for him is the involvement of the student in the creation of resources:

Edupunk, and for that matter OERs, are not and should not be thought of in the context of the traditional educational model, where students are passive recipients of 'instruction' and 'support' and 'learning resources'. Rather, it is the much more active conception where students are engaged in the actual creation of those resources ... this is exactly what corporations and institutions do *not* want edu- punks and proponents of OERs to do, and they have expended a great deal of effort to ensure that this does not become the mainstream of learning, to ensure students remain passive and disempowered. (Downes 2011, 248)

The joint creation of online open 'resources' is reified as the most valuable and meaningful activity for students to be engaged in, with all aspects of traditional education in contrast characterized as transmission-based.

This assertion achieves several things. Firstly, it is a tendency to reject any value of disciplinarity, expertise and existing canons or accumulation of expertise from the past. Instead, the emphasis is on knowledge as *sui generis*, or emergent via interaction with lay interlocutors in an informal and unstructured setting – although it should be noted that this may also involve interaction with experts. Critical interaction with/interrogation of a body of knowledge, texts, data sets or other artifacts accumulated over the centuries by traditional scholarship does not appear to be valued.

Secondly, the related notion of progression through levels of knowledge is also apparently rejected. As qualifications, formal preparation for study and

credentials are characterised as exclusionary gatekeeping mechanisms, then the implication is that higher order knowledge may straightforwardly emerge directly from the individual or spontaneously in informal interaction with others. The notion that individuals may require or want degrees or other formal qualifications for progression in careers is not discussed.

Thirdly and consequently, any form of teaching or facilitation appears to be rejected as hierarchical. Scaffolding of learning, explication, structured discussion, tasks, interactive activities and extended assessment tasks are all rejected as in some sense repressive, despite the increased mainstreaming of 'student-centred' pedagogies in formal higher education in recent years. 'Education' is instead reified into the distribution and joint production of lay online 'content' – as opposed to being the site of learning being seen as the guided mediation, and critical synthesis of texts – all of which arguably lies at the heart of 'traditional' education. A final point is that the fantasy of OERs as presented by Downes relies on an assumption that all participants' voices will be equally valued, and that the working of systemic power and privilege around categories such as gender, class and sexuality will be suspended in the inherently democratising space of OER-generated online interaction.

OERs as 'enacted utopias'?

The set of characterisations discussed above is of particular relevance not only to the idealised good/bad subject positions it appears to conjure, but also to broader discourses surrounding digital and online education, which are marked by a tendency to collapse the digital into either 'Brave New World' utopian 'fantasy' rhetoric (e.g., Barnes and Tynan 2007), frequently invoking the production of the graduate as neoliberal subject ready for the challenges of 'the knowledge economy' or alternatively a dystopian moral panic of collapsing standards, burgeoning plagiarism, lack of attention and 'dumbing down'. In both of these discourses (in addition to that of OERs), it can be argued that the university is reduced to a liminal site, an abstraction or a bundle of ideological signifiers which are not based on evidence from the particular, or from situated practice. 'The university' instead becomes a placeholder for notions of absolute power, in the way that 'the authorities' appear to do in Latour's argument. Similarly, the student or 'learner' is implicitly reduced in all of these conceptions to a type – the fearless digital

pioneer, the OER maverick or the lazy, ‘dumbed-down’ plagiarist.

A framing which might be used to discuss all of these abstractions is that of utopia. In this section, I will discuss this concept and will attempt to apply it to this area of educational thought and practice, in order to provide some theoretical purchase on how these abstractions and idealisations are being applied, and how they might operate and position social actors. Utopias are generally understood to denote idealised, perfect, imagined worlds. The essence of a utopia is that it does not exist – it is an abstraction, a dream which is seen as in some sense unrealistic and unattainable, rather than a ‘real-life’ social space or setting. In this sense, a utopia in the classic form is not situated in a particular place. It is noteworthy that the etymology of the word ‘utopia’ also appears to point to its essential ‘placelessness’ as a concept, as Peters and Freeman-Moir point out:

The concept and geneology of ‘utopia’ is a rich tapestry ... The term itself, coined by Sir Thomas More in the early sixteenth century, derives from two Greek words: Eutopia (meaning ‘good place’) and Outopia (meaning ‘no place’). (2006, 1)

This etymology resonates with the apparently abstracted and non-situated nature of utopias, and seems to reinforce their disembodied and decontextualised nature. This is reminiscent of Augé’s (2009) analysis of what he terms the ‘nonplaces’ of supermodernity, transit spaces such as airports which are stripped of situatedness and materiality. Foucault also highlights the ‘placeless’ nature of utopias:

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. (Foucault 1967/1984)

However, Foucault goes on to argue that the notion of utopia is not in fact confined to pure abstraction, but can be seen as inherent in various recent historical and contemporary social institutions and phenomena. He develops an alternative notion of the ‘heterotopia’, which he characterises as an ‘enacted utopia’:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places –

places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are some- thing like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously rep- resented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault [1967/1984](#))

He provides examples of spaces in society which deal with various ‘crises’ such as male adolescence (the nineteenth-century boarding school), or ‘deviant’ states such as old age (the retirement home). He goes on to explicate various possible features of these heterotopias – for the purposes of this paper, the most salient is what he identifies as their capacity to compensate for the per- ceived inadequacies of everyday spaces:

... their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation. (Foucault [1967/1984](#))

Interestingly given the focus on openness in the OER movement, Foucault acknowledges the notion that a heterotopia may appear ‘open’, but may in fact ‘hide curious exclusions’:

... here are others, on the contrary, that seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter into the heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion – we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded. (Foucault 1967/1984)

This appears to resonate with potential criticisms of the extent of ‘openness’ in OERs – there may be ‘curious exclusions’ based on gender, ethnicity or other reasons why participants may not be afforded equal access to resources and interaction (e.g., Gonzalez-Flor [2013](#)).

Gosling ([2014](#)) applies Foucault’s notion of the heterotopia to what he calls the ‘real, social and imagined space’ ([2014](#), 25) of a series of projects which sought to encourage ‘excellence’ in teaching in the UK university context and beyond. He argues that ‘such projects can become “enacted utopias” – that is

short-term actings-out of a particular vision of teaching in universities that is disconnected from the mainstream reality of academic life' (Gosling 2014). His analysis applies several of Foucault's subcategories of heterotopia – of crisis, deviation, illusion and compensation – to these projects which in various ways sat outside of the mainstream and came to represent a space where a range of educational beliefs and practices could be nurtured, beliefs and practices that were otherwise not valued or encouraged within the mainstream. He reports on an interview study into the perspectives of the project leaders and participants, revealing that they were seen as special, rarified, protected spaces of practice which could not be sustained easily in the mainstream university environment.

This concept could also be applied to the discourse of OERs described above – the idealised notions of the nature of education, learning and the human subject, OERs and the interactions they generate could be read as an attempt to create an 'enacted utopia' which is created and maintained in order to compensate for what is regarded as a morally imperfect and corrupt mainstream. The fantasy appears to be one of 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. The emphasis is instead reduced to access and the online generation of 'content' – which carries with it a further powerful fantasy of unfettered human potential which can be unlocked unproblematically in informal lay interaction. It also appears to allow its key proponents and participants to adopt an apparently countercultural 'maverick' identity which may confer some alternative prestige, as this stance gives the appearance of criticality. These fantasies may be achieved through the creation and maintenance of OERs and associated discussion spaces as 'perfect' spaces, free of the negative characteristics attributed to mainstream education. In this sense, they may (provisionally) be seen as heterotopias which are conjured to fulfill the compensatory function described by Foucault.

To sum up this section, as we saw above, at least some prominent voices in the OER movement appear to be staking their claims on the basis of an assumed clear opposition to the mainstream university, which is arguably conjured as a disembodied, abstracted space of absolute, coordinated and repressive power to be opposed. The OER response – as Knox has elaborated

– also rests on utopian fantasies of the OER participant as a rational and fully autonomous subject, decoupled from social and material contexts, able to conjure knowledge without engagement with long-term study or the ‘disempowering’ effects of expertise or teaching. This is not to say that there are no nuanced voices in the discourses surrounding OERs. Critical work in the area has begun to emerge (e.g., Knox 2013a,b; Rodriguez 2013). However, it seems fair to say that in the mainstream, claims around OERs have been dominated by a some- what ideological or partisan tone, based on what I have argued is essentially a utopian conception.

Returning to Latour, the proponents of OERs superficially appear to adopt a critical stance in relation to mainstream education, which is positioned as embodying the various negative attributes discussed above. However, I would argue that the stance has more in common with that of conspiracy theorists discussed by Latour – arguably rather too much sinister and all-encompassing agency is associated with formal education and institutions. Instead of creating an intellectual space for critical engagement, the argument is closed down and – I would argue – a fundamentally utopian belief in an absolute capacity and power of ‘the authorities’ is underscored, which paradoxically denies the complex web of agencies involved in day-to-day engagement with any form of digital education. This position is arguably founded largely on an emotive, anecdotal and rhetorical base, as opposed to being built on qualitative or ethnographic research which investigates student experiences of OERs, the online and the digital in higher education generally in any degree of granularity.

Latour also explores notions of utopias elsewhere, in his characterisation of Foucault’s panopticon as a ‘utopia of total megalomania’ (2005, 181). He contrasts this with what he calls the ‘oligopticon’. He describes oligoptica as sites which ‘... see too little to feed the megalomania of the inspector or the paranoia of the inspected, but what they see, they see it well’ (Latour 2005). The emphasis here is on close study of the particular and the situated. Drawing on this emphasis on the sociomaterial, the next section will propose an alternative conceptual framework for understanding student experiences and perspectives on online education and learning, illustrated by data from a one-year longitudinal qualitative study.

An alternative view: situatedness and the sociomaterial

As has been argued above, there is a tendency in mainstream discussions of open education to refer to abstract and somewhat utopian conceptions of ‘the university’ or ‘the institution’ as an all-powerful force of exclusion on one hand, and users of OERs as idealised autonomous subjects on the other. This has tended to lead to a stripping away of recognition of the complexities and nuances of processes of the ‘traditional’ university, the creation and delivery of OERs, and student engagement as embodied and situated social practices – all of which take place in particular settings which are complex assemblages of digital and embodied practice, human and nonhuman actors. In this respect, the assumption seems to be of absolute form of ‘context collapse’ (e.g., Meyrowitz 1985; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Davis and Jurgenson 2014) where all forms of social situatedness are negated or neutralised, and nuances surrounding agency are flattened.

However, qualitative and ethnographic work into student engagement with the digital reveals that day-to-day engagement with digital mediation and online education is – unsurprisingly – highly complex and intensely intertwined with the particular unfolding social and material settings in which social actors are situated. In a one-year UK government-funded study on student engagement with technologies (Gourlay and Oliver 2013) involving engaging adult post-graduate students in longitudinal multimodal journaling, it focused on how they engaged with the digital in textual practices for their studies. Ethics clearance was obtained, and 12 postgraduate student volunteers were recruited and gave informed consent, representing a cross-section of programmes, nationalities and modes of study at a specialist institution focused on education studies. Initial interviews were conducted to explore students’ experiences of and attitudes towards technologies in their studies. They were then provided with iPod Touch devices and asked to document their practices via multimodal longitudinal journaling, using a combination of photography, video, notes and diagrams. Two or three follow-up interviews were held in which the students discussed their journal artefacts and what they represented or referred to. This study focused on students enrolled in formal university study, most of whom were engaged as campus-based student but all interacting digitally with the university on a very frequent basis via the virtual learning environment (VLE), the library or access to their own documents and data. These data may be illuminating in relation to assumptions that students within the university system are

positioned as ‘passive’ recipients of content provided by a powerful and rather monolithic body in the form of the university.

As discussed below, the data undermine this assumption, and also mainstream binary or framework-based assumptions about student uses of technologies, which tend to reinforce notions of ‘digital dualism’ (e.g., Jurgenson 2011) where the digital is posited as separate realm from the material, and by extension cast doubt on the highly abstracted notions of the digital as decontextualising and abstracting force as discussed above. Instead of indicating a release or abstraction from material and social contexts via engagement with the digital, the data underscore the specific, situated, sociomaterial (e.g., Fenwick, Edwards, and Saw-chuck 2011) nature of the entanglements which constitute these social actors’ engagement, revealing participants who never appear as freefloating, fully autonomous subjects, but are instead always entangled in networks of situated, unfolding practice in complex interplay with nonhuman actors, space and temporality (Gourlay 2014). The student accounts of their digital practices do not refer to their subject positions or that of the university in terms of abstract notions of disempowerment, repression or passivity, but instead are highly detailed and particular accounts of progressing their studies in ‘micro’ stages which are described in terms of very particular sequences of practices situated temporally and materially, and in frequent interplay with practices not conventionally regarded as part of the ‘digital’.

An example is given below of a flowchart produced by a participant in the study to illustrate his production of an academic text in digital media. What is striking about this representation is the degree to which the student engages with the digital in constant interplay with the material, in a highly situated bricolage of micro-practices which cumulatively move towards the production of a digital text. This network consists of the participant himself, nonhuman actors in the form of digital devices, but also print literacy artefacts, material spaces, temporal frames and other social actors. This arena of practice is one which is ephemeral, materially bounded and constantly in a process of active renegotiation (Figure 1).

Juan discusses his practices in an interview:

I am mentally and physically organizing things, and then to a point where I’m

then ready to say, okay, now we can move onto the next stage or something. So certainly in this kind of thing I mean I would find one. For a book by them, find it in the library, find it there; then I'll do an initial reading, and then sort of bring it down a little bit further.

Here Juan's engagement with the digital may be seen as an unfolding network of distributed and situated agency, where he moves between the digital and artefacts

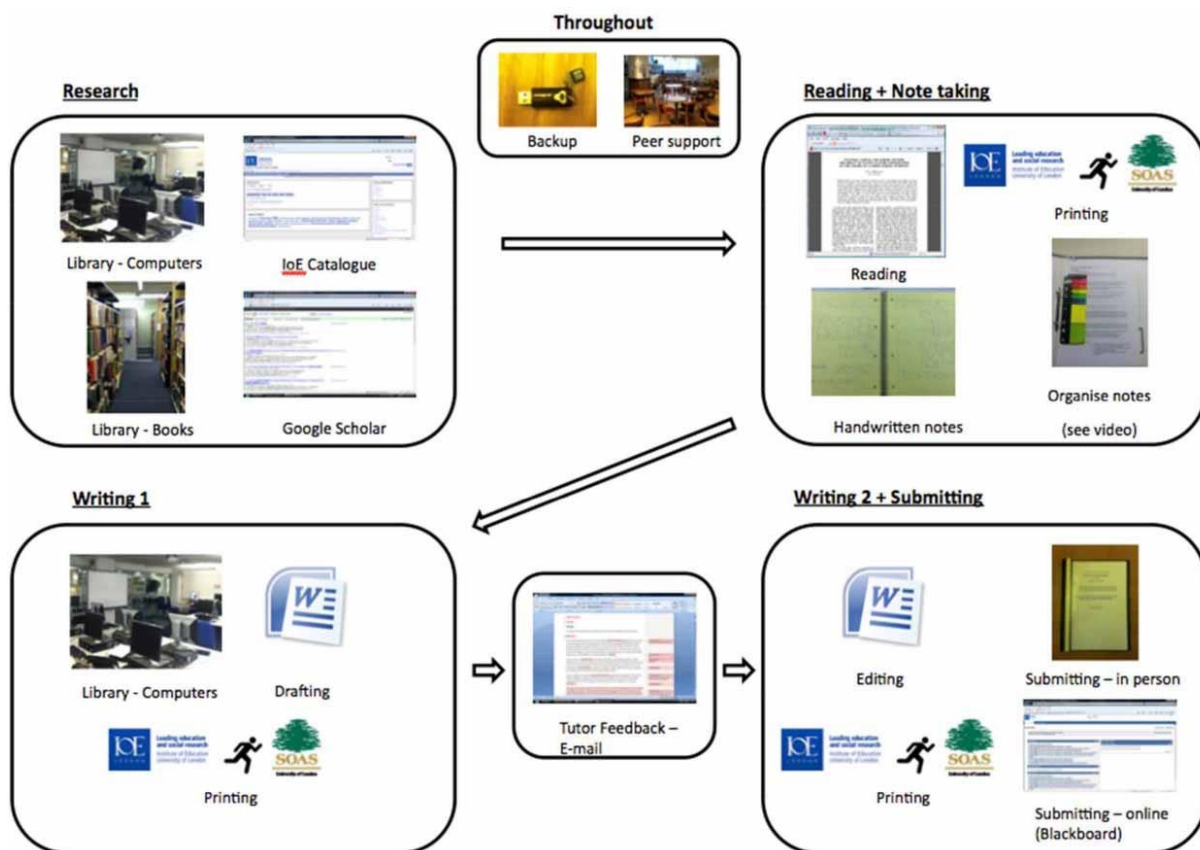


Figure 1. Juan's representation of his practices. of print literacy, and 'curates' his experience and interaction with the university

in small, considered steps. The intimacy of the physical is emphasised:

This is something where I like to photocopy it and highlight it, is it's a physical interaction, I suppose, with it, and then I suppose it's an ownership of it in that sense. And I feel...you know I would like something more of that where you've got ... sort of you can then sort of limit it down.

Here Juan refers to photocopying a text as conferring a sense of ownership

and limitation, elsewhere in the data students also referred to the importance of printing, highlighting and using post-it notes to interact with physical texts which they first encountered in digital media. This also seems to instantiate the small but important ways by which students in the study curated their engagement with digital interfaces in the university in ways which provided a sense of agency and creativity.

In the visual data generated by the students (most of whom were designated as ‘campus-based’), there are recurrent images depicting digital practices taking place in locations away from the university, such as this image provided by Nahid of his laptop on his bed ([Figure 2](#)):

The images were often taken in intimate domestic spaces (see Gourlay and Oliver [2013](#) for discussion of a student using her iPad in the bath). The

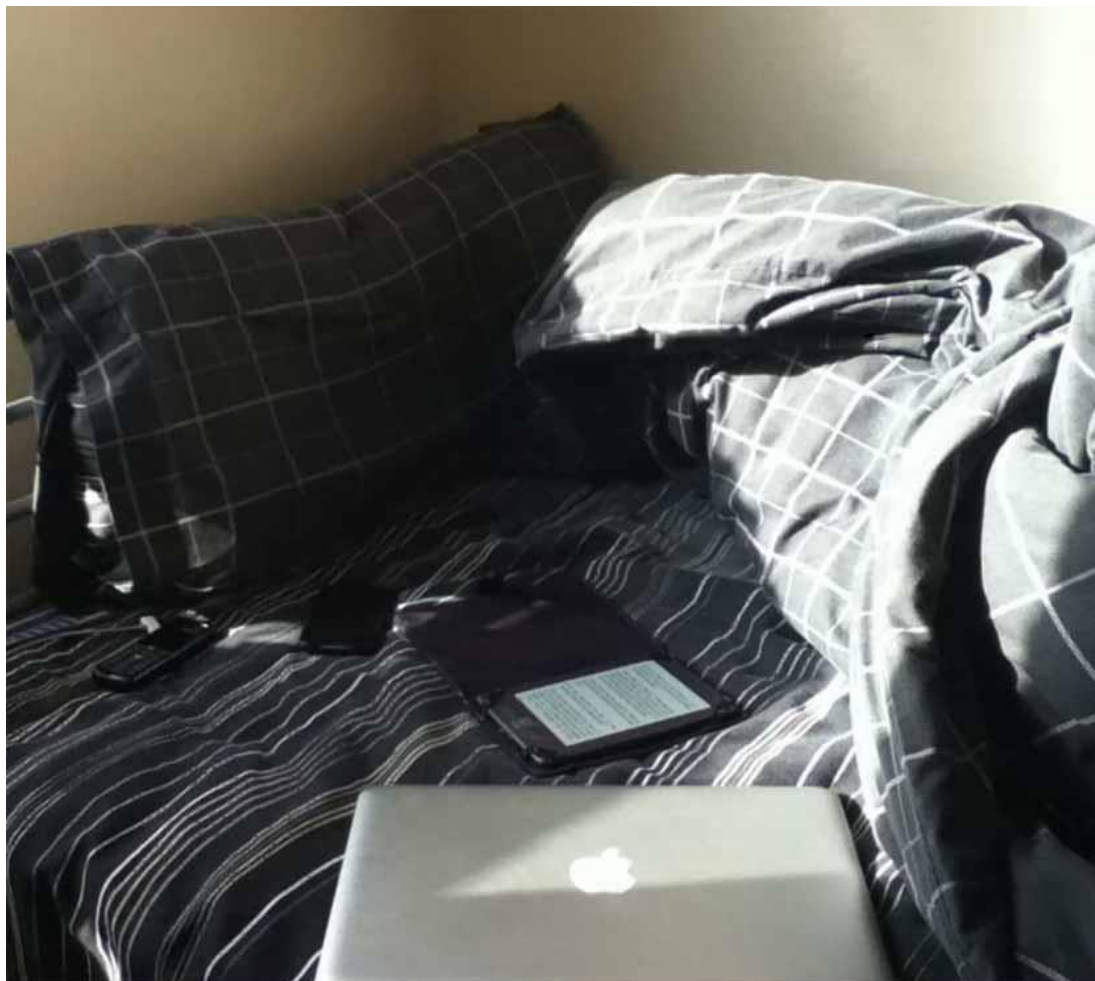


Figure 2. Nahid’s image of his bed.

prevalence of their flexible engagement with the digital university (often the VLE or library) from these private settings also seems to undermine the rather monolithic characterisation of the repressive university and passive student discussed above. Again, it could be argued that the student (along with the nonhuman actors of the bed, the laptop and so on) is in fact assembling ‘the university’ anew in each situated engagement. Images taken on public transport or in parks were also frequent in the data.

This view of student digital practice is perhaps the opposite of ideological and utopian – instead it is fine-grained, materially-situated and focused on the small, pragmatic steps taken by the participant in his daily study practices online – reminiscent of Latour’s ‘oligopticon’ view discussed above. Instead of appearing as a hapless and passive recipient, the students here report engagement with digital and material interfaces and representatives of ‘the traditional university’ in a highly agentive fashion – and in doing so create emergent and contingent spaces within which they can work and achieve their objectives in an individual and situated way. ‘Space’ or ‘context’ here is not abstracted, nor is it even a neutral backcloth, but instead it is co-constitutive with social action itself. This stands in stark contrast to the ‘passive’ and ‘disempowered’ students conjured by Downes to support and maintain his ‘enacted utopia’ of OERs. As Fenwick et al. observe:

Humans, and what they take to be their learning and social process, do not float, distinct, in container-like contexts of education, such as classrooms or community sites that can be conceptualised and dismissed as simply a wash of material stuff and spaces. The things that assemble these contexts, and incidentally the actions and bodies including human ones that are part of these assemblages, are continuously acting upon each other to bring forth and distribute, as well as to obscure and deny, knowledge. (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuck 2011, vii)

I would argue that this perspective – in common with other methodologies which focus on day-to-day study practices – is likely to provide us with a nuanced and rich data-based perspective on the experiences and perspectives of participants in OER resources and associated interactions, as opposed to basing analyses on largely unsubstantiated ideologically driven categories and generalisations.

However, it might be argued that these data only address some of the contentions of the mainstream OER movement surrounding student subject positions. As discussed above, Downes conjured a series of strong binaries between the formal system and OERs concerning teaching, with engagement with university-based provision described as ‘directed’, ‘instructivism’ and ‘control learning’ (Downes 2011, 7).

This not only positions university students in a passive, nonagentive role, but it also makes a series of assumptions about the nature of teaching and curriculum or course design in formal university settings. The ‘providers’ are characterised as serving their own interests via ‘control’. The study also included a shorter period of multimodal data collection and interviews involving four academic staff at the same institution, again exploring on their engagement with the digital, with a focus on the creation and development of teaching materials and courses online. These data also appear to undermine these assumptions both in terms of how their practice is situated, and also in terms of the nature and role of expertise.

The academics were asked to describe their practices in detail, and provided visual data in the same way as the student participants. Karl described how he and colleagues developed a module on teaching practice they inherited from another academic:

We adjusted it, I suppose what was interesting...and it was foreshortened because it was a smaller timeframe, so we were only seeing them really on this module from October to March. ... I could see what Mark had done – he’s left now. He’d adjusted it a little bit, he’d combined a couple of aspects of the online discussion, quite clever. Then I went through and did a bit more root and branch changing because we were developing the course and starting to identify what those step students needed. What they really needed was much more practice, it was very hard, that wasn’t something we were going to do online. There were things that we added to the VLE for them, videos, stuff that gave them more exposure to different types of practice.

It’s noteworthy that Karl describes a shared process of authorship with others, and places emphasis on the development of student practice through exposure to artefacts such as videos of classroom process. Gertrude also describes adapting a module on the VLE which she had taken over from

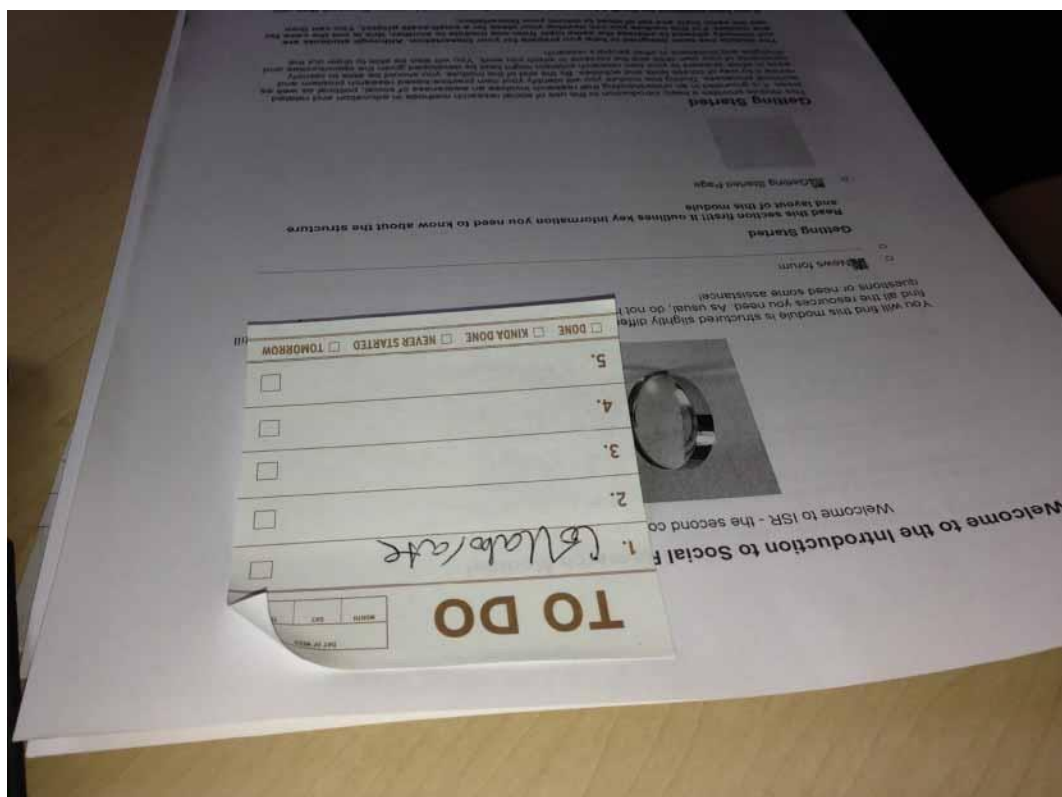
another academic who had created the earlier iteration. She describes a particular system she used for highlighting and categorising, working with cut, pasted and printed versions of the online VLE pages:

Initially it's just copying and pasting because I'm taking somebody else's module. ... So, the first stage was for me to get my sense of John's module and to understand its process. The next stage was to see its fitness for purpose and what needed to be amended and changed for the examination. The examination's got two questions. One's on reflection, the green tasks. And the other one is on a research proposal which is the blue tasks. And that's one of the reasons why I needed to highlight and differentiate those tasks was because I needed to say, right, all of those green tasks will come together and help you answer one exam question. All the blue tasks will help you to come together and write the second exam question. But you need something in the middle and that's what the orange ones are to, kind of, you know, challenge what it is that you know. So, hence that's where the structure started to emerge from that.

She provides an image showing how she also uses printed pages and post-it notes in this process ([Figure 3](#)).

Three points seem to arise here. With Gertrude again we see an approach to digital practice which is very particular to the individual, and involves careful interplay of digital and print representation in order to create digital texts and materials. The member of academic staff does not appear to be practicing in a manner which is dictated by the university as an agent of power or control. Instead she appears to be exercising a high degree of individual freedom in terms of her course design. Secondly, it is worth noting that both Gertrude and Karl's modules emerge from previous iterations, and also draw on a range of other texts, such as published materials and also videos. In this

Figure 3. Gertrude's photo of her course development printout.



regard, the notion of ‘authorship’ of the modules is blurred, multiple and distributed in terms of content, as opposed to representing the standpoint of a single ‘all-powerful’ and convergent expert of voice or view. Thirdly, they are task- based and therefore encourage discussion and divergence of opinion through interactive engagement in the VLE. In this respect – although these are offered as a formal university qualification – they does not seem to represent examples of ‘control learning’ as described by Downes.

Louise describes the process of creating another postgraduate module for teachers focusing on the development of pupils’ literacy:

There’s been quite a lot of discussion about the fact that we don’t really need to be experts in the content that we need to be experts in brokering content and thinking about how what there is is purposed appropriately to helping the teachers to engage with it for themselves.

Her emphasis on brokerage and creating a space for the student teachers to learn also does not seem to reflect a ‘control’ standpoint. However, interestingly she goes on to reflect on the relationships between materials and

expertise:

The reality of actually putting the programme together, it draws on what the team knows about how to design for the teachers to learn from, I mean, that's what the materials can't do. Um, and I think it really, it's an interesting, kind of, amalgam of the expertise and experience of the team and the materials that are out there, you know, some of which can be used judiciously, some of which are wonderful, some of which are redundant, and then what the team brings to it.

Here Louise seems to be drawing out the potential of her team's expertise to open up the materials and make them more accessible and meaningful to the student teachers. This is a more nuanced and balanced account of the role of expertise as multiple and facilitating, rather than one which regards the subject position of the expert as essentially disempowering or dominant.

The student and academic staff data together seem to present a rather different picture of how the creation of and engagement in digitally mediated activities in this university setting from the assumptions discussed above. It should be acknowledged that this was a small-scale study in one setting, and in that regard caution should be exercised in reaching strong conclusions. However, I would argue that implications can be drawn surrounding the validity of assumptions made about formal university online learning, in contrast to OERs.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, I have explored one particular account of OERs which I argue pre- sents a mainstream view, and have suggested this perspective relies on a strong set of value-laden binaries which on one hand position institutions as all-power- ful, monolithic and also somewhat malign in intention, placing students in passive roles with little agency. I have argued that these perspectives are lacking in nuance, and are unlikely to reflect the lived complex social phenomena at play in the context of formal university education. I have also suggested that although they offer their proponents an apparently critical subject position in relation to power and privilege in higher education, the strong and absolute nature of these beliefs does not in fact facilitate a nuanced understanding of agency and power in these complex settings. Using Latour's (2004) inquiry into the nature of critique as a starting

point, I went on to apply Foucault's concept of heterotopias to OERs, arguing that this framing gives us additional insight into how these have been constructed and maintained as a 'special' type of social and educational space, a rarified space which might compensate for inadequacies or hostility in the mainstream. Following this reading, mainstream OER proponents appear to be staking a claim that the beliefs and practices of egalitarianism, equality and higher order learning may take place more readily via interaction with OERs, in a way which is unavailable in hostile, repressive formal university settings.

However, I would suggest that there is at this time insufficient evidence for this strength of claim, with countervailing research evidence presented above on learner engagement and academic practice both pointing to much more complex picture of shifting, distributed sociomaterial agency between institutions, individuals, devices, texts and contexts. There is undoubtedly a need for much more focused, fine-grained ethnographic and qualitative work on learners' day-to-day experiences of engaging with OERs before firm conclusions can be reached, but the evidence in related research does not seem to point to type of binary and resultant engagement suggested by mainstream discourses of openness.

In this respect, OERs may in fact be better characterised as a new category of heterotopia, extending Foucault's taxonomy. They appear to have the features of a heterotopia of compensation – but would perhaps be better regarded as what I would call a heterotopia of desire – the passionate and laudable desire of their proponents for OERs to exhibit these characteristics, for this rarified and special space to exist, a necessary construct in order to maintain a particular world view and set of identity positions surrounding the nature of education, critique, learning and power. Although formal university structures (and indeed commercially produced MOOCs) should be rigorously critiqued in order to create this space, it appears that a somewhat exaggerated and unhelpful 'straw man' argument against all formal university online teaching has been invoked.

I would argue that – however seductive this heterotopia of desire– the true potential to challenge privilege and power in education lies elsewhere, and such a strong binary construct only serves to flatten critique in a manner analogous to that described by Latour (2004). Instead critique may be seen to

arise instead from the painstaking work of close research into day-to-day practice in the shifting, constantly unfolding socially situated contexts on online learning, an oligoptic lens which ‘sees well’ into sociomaterially and temporally situated practice as it unfolds. I would argue then in conclusion that a critique based on this type of evidence, nuance and acknowledgement of complexity would ultimately provide deeper insights upon which to base policy and practice decisions in this area of educational practice. The incisiveness of critique could then also be analysed in terms of the extent to which it challenges and seeks to overturn simplistic utopian thinking, and fantasies of monolithic social categories, fixity and power.

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