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2. Emancipation through Open Education: Rhetoric or Reality?

Andy Lane

Many claims have been made as to the potential freedoms offered through open education and how these freedoms may change or democratize higher education. However, are those freedoms truly helping those most in need of emancipation, and what freedoms do they provide for learners or teachers? This chapter tries to answer that question by firstly examining the various discourses surrounding education and emancipation and also open education. It notes that the framing of education and open education can be subject to differing perspectives and outlooks, including distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal education and the relationships between teachers and learners. The chapter then provides a critical overview of the emancipatory effects of open education on learners and teachers (and organizations) as instantiated in open universities, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and open educational resources (OER). It examines the key features and freedoms offered by these examples in relation to formal, non-formal and informal education and in relation to the existing modes of closed education and argues that despite the promise of open education it has had relatively little impact on these existing modes and that the reality will be less profound than the rhetoric suggests.

Introduction

Many claims have been made as to the potential of open education to change or democratize higher education but are they truly helping those most in need of emancipation, whether learners or teachers, who may still have little voice or agency within the educational settings they experience? This chapter tries to answer that question by (1) examining the various discourses surrounding education and emancipation and also open education; (2) providing a critical overview of the emancipatory effects of open education on learners and teachers (and organizations) as instantiated in open universities, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and open educational resources (OER); and (3) outlining the complex roles of open education as an emancipatory force.

Emancipation and Education

Emancipation has a variety of related definitions but the one most pertinent to this chapter is: *the fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions.*¹

Discussion about, and action around, emancipation has often been used in relation to the rights of specific, sizeable groups within society such as the emancipation of slaves (freedom from bondage) or the emancipation of women as part of the suffrage movement (freedom to vote in elections). It implies a power relationship whereby one group within society is, consciously or sometimes unconsciously, oppressing another group in society that is looking for or expecting equality of treatment.

Education, as a significant human activity system (Checkland, 1999), is itself seen by many as both a means to achieve emancipation for all groups within society (emancipation of people *through* education) and as a process within which there can be restrictions placed on certain groups within society by other participants that need to be overcome in that process (emancipation of learners and teachers *within* education).²

1 From Oxford Dictionaries online, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>

2 This is a term used to describe purposeful systems where, because of the human factor, the purposes and the activities involved are varied and changing, as distinct from having just one attributed purpose or set of activities as with a mechanical or engineered system.

In addition, there are others who would argue for emancipation of education (as a human activity system) from its existing structures and practices so that all are equally empowered to act within and benefit from education as a human activity system. Lastly, it is possible to consider that some people are able to free themselves from most of the structures and strictures of education as a human activity system through becoming fully autonomous learners or autodidacts (emancipation *from* organized education).

The first role of education as enabling emancipation in general is instantiated in declarations from the United Nations where education is deemed a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights.³ Such rights have themselves been incorporated into United Nations sponsored activities such as the Millennium Development Goals and the more recent Sustainable Development Goals.⁴ In part this role reifies the products of education as a human activity system in terms of the knowledge and knowledgeable citizens it produces (Kahn, 2014) and looks for transformations within the existing systems of power structures and relationships within society rather than radical transformation of those power structures and relationships (Freire, 1970; De Lissovoy, 2011; Suoranta, 2015).

The second role of education as a process within which certain groups in society are marginalized, disempowered or discriminated against even though it is one they do, or can, in principle participate in, also has these two elements: (i) that of transforming or empowering such groups within existing structures and relationships amongst the main actors within education (learners, teachers and educational institutions) and (ii) that of transforming such structures and relationships between those actors to ensure equity (Freire, 1970; De Lissovoy, 2011); which moves into the third role of education; namely the emancipation of education itself.

An example of the first element is of widening participation in higher education by under-represented groups (enabling transformation *within* one part of the human activity system); an example of the second element is of students and teachers treating each other as equals in the co-production of knowledge and ways of knowing within a

3 See <https://www.nesri.org/programs/what-is-the-human-right-to-education>

4 See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

self-organized network (encouraging transformation *of* the human activity system itself). In the third category are some highly capable learners who do not require any further social learning with either teachers or other learners to meet their learning needs and so are self-contained within their own personal human activity system.

From even this brief account it can be seen that restrictions on access to, and engagement with, education have many layers of complexity including what type and level of education is involved, whose perspective is being taken and which rights might be involved. Thus many countries by law require all children up to a certain age to have schooling but equally some parents or social groups may not like the style of teaching or the curriculum being offered within schools, and seek to undertake home schooling. Similarly, universities may use one language for teaching, learning and assessment in a country with multiple languages which then privileges the culture and ways of knowing and knowledge production of one social or ethnic group (Gunawardena and LaPointe, 2008). Another example of exclusion is where the naming and surrounding discourse of an educational philosophy or movement may itself be deemed restrictive as noted by Wals and Jickling (2002):

[...] education for sustainability runs counter to prevailing conceptions of education: it breathes a kind of intellectual exclusivity and determinism that conflicts with ideas of emancipation, local knowledge, democracy and self-determination. The prepositional use of "for" prescribes that education must be in favour of some specific and undisputed product, in this case sustainability. At the same time, an emphasis on sustainability, or sustainable development, might hinder the inclusion of other emerging environmental thought such as deep ecology and ecofeminism. (p. 222)

Throughout any discussion of the emancipatory effects of education will be the contrasts and compromises between the intentions and the actions of different groups of actors, in particular learners and teachers, but also educational institutions, and thus how emancipatory and systemic those intentions and/or actions might be. Further, as education is a human activity system it is also necessary to examine the role of the educational infrastructure in enabling participation, that is the physical structures that enable that human activity to take place. Two examples of infrastructure are the buildings and campuses of educational organizations with their geographical and temporal

constraints and the internet/World Wide Web providing extensive storage for educational resources and communication tools to facilitate discourse between learners/students and teachers, free of time and place. Equally, there is a need to examine what emancipation means within formal education (education leading to state recognized qualifications), non-formal education (certificated or non-certificated courses provided by organizations for their employees or for the public), and informal education (which is self-organized by the individual learner or learners) (OECD, 2016).

The Promise of Open Education

The phrase “open education” implies that there must also be closed education or education where there are restrictions or a lack of freedoms to exercise this fundamental human right. Legal restrictions are intentional restrictions in that they are purposefully designed to do so. Social and political restrictions can be a mixture of the intended and unintended flowing from the dominant societal structures and relationships and in particular matters of economics (Lane, 2013). For example, the participation rate in higher education in most countries has increased substantially in the past fifty years (OECD, 2015) as more higher education institutions were opened and more places within those institutions made available but this has led to significant debates and different policy responses as to who pays for this expansion of infrastructure and capacity and whether that includes students paying directly through tuition fees or indirectly, with most other citizens, through the taxes they pay; or effectively a mix of both through income contingent loans. The tension between public and private funding for education also relates to the public and private benefits of education which in themselves are influenced by the nature of ideas, information and knowledge. As noted by Benkler (2006):

[...] certain characteristics of information and culture lead us to understand them as “public goods”, rather than as “pure private goods” or “standard economic goods”. When economists speak of information, they usually say that it is “nonrival”. We consider a good to be nonrival when its consumption by one person does not make it any less available for consumption by another. (pp. 35–36)

However, while ideas, knowledge and information may be free in one sense and are both inputs and outputs of education as a human activity system, the particular form they are contained in e.g. a book, a patent, are protected by laws so that they can be commercially exploited. This protection then enforces a form of scarcity in that work or resource which gives them both a sale value and a use value (Lane, 2013). This in turn reinforces education as a commercial transaction involving private goods such that wealth inequalities also influence access to and engagement with elements of education as a human activity system (Nunan, 2008). Similar arguments of scarcity apply to the physical infrastructure of classrooms and lecture halls. However, others argue that digital technologies are only increasing a trend within capitalism of “prosumption”, involving both production and consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), and that this can equally apply to education as a human activity system.

This interplay of (infra)structural and economic factors makes fundamental change difficult even when there are social and political drivers for such change. Thus there has also been much policy and practice in recent years to widen participation in higher education such that the absolute numbers from disadvantaged groups have benefitted. But equally all social groups have seen higher participation rates such that often the relative proportion of disadvantaged students benefitting compared to all students has remained much the same (Chowdry *et al.*, 2010). At the same time some authors question whether the discourse around such policy and practice is misdirected and tends to conserve rather than challenge existing norms (Pitman, 2015).

Open education is predicated on freedoms that variously address some of the (time and place-based) restrictions noted above for closed education. The forms and way in which freedoms have been expressed and enabled have varied over the decades. To begin with, the open and distance education movement that emerged from the 1970s onwards (Lane, 2015) with its focus on open entry to degree courses (i.e. freedom from selection in that no prior qualifications were required) has been supplemented, some say supplanted (Nkuyubwatsi, 2016; Loeckx, 2016), by the OER movement since the 2000s (i.e. freedom legally to reuse, revise, remix and redistribute educational works through use of open licenses as noted by Wiley and Green (2012) and Orr *et al.* (2015));

while these “free” resources have, since 2010, been drowned out in media reporting by “free to participate in” massive open online courses or MOOCs (Daniel, 2012; Kelly, 2014).

Throughout this time there has been a changing balance between the freedom of works (e.g. open access to an educational resource) and the freedom of people as an act of emancipation (e.g. the ability of students without qualifications to enroll on degree courses and the ability of teachers to revise and adapt openly licensed educational resources) (Winn, 2012). This, in itself, has led recently to discussion about open educational practices (Cannell, Macintyre and Hewitt, 2015) as an innovative social practice involving partnerships and social networks co-creating educational resources and opportunities. However, just because something is openly (and freely) available and accessible, it does not mean that a learner or teacher can readily benefit from the freedom to use these OER if they do not have the means to do so because they lack freedoms from other constraints (e.g. ownership of digital devices; language skills) or do not have the knowledge to enact open educational practices (Farnes, 1988; Lane 2012; Winn, 2015).

To further unpack the different ways in which emancipation for learners and teachers within (adult) education is or might be realized through openness, I will look at the three modes of openness in the three forms of education already touched upon — open universities and formal education, MOOCs and non-formal education, and OER and informal education.

Open Universities

“Open universities” are a discrete type of university dedicated to using non-campus based systems of distance teaching (Lane, 2012; 2015). Not all such universities have open in their name and not all operate an open entry policy to their undergraduate courses, a defining feature of the first “open university” — The Open University in the United Kingdom, founded in 1969. Even today it is the only UK higher education institution to not have some means of selecting its undergraduate students by prior formal qualifications. The Open University, like almost all other open universities (Peters, 2008), was established through law by government to offer an alternative route or “second” chance for those without formal

qualifications. It can therefore be argued that such open entry overcomes certain legal, political and also social restrictions on what is expected of a university student to enable emancipation both through and within education for adult learners as students.

Open entry therefore provides freedom to enroll for those who can afford to pay the tuition fees and who feel emotionally and culturally able to participate (Gunawardena and LaPointe, 2008). The model of teaching used by open universities also means that they can teach very large numbers taking the same course presentation and so overcome some of the physical restrictions of place-based universities (Lane, 2015). In 2013–14 39% of the 180,000 or so undergraduate students studying with The Open University had insufficient or no school leaving qualifications to gain entry to other universities, 21% lived in the most deprived areas of the UK and 10% had declared disabilities, but equally 23% already had a higher education qualification (Open University, 2015). Openness cannot be selective and while it may help the disadvantaged it also helps the already advantaged. It is reported that those with degree level qualifications on entry at The Open University are more than twice as likely (55% as against 20%) to complete courses compared to those with no previous educational qualifications (Simpson, 2009), non-completion rates that are higher than at place-based universities (although all these comparisons raise issues of the definition of non-completion/dropping out and conversely what is seen as a measure of success by learners as opposed to teachers, educational institutions and governments as noted by Grau-Valldosera and Minguillón, 2014). Further, open entry can be tempered by many other factors including access to appropriate technologies. With courses now requiring internet access for remote experiments or collaborative group work this can and does exclude some people who have been able to study print based courses, such as prisoners. Equally, digital assistive technologies can make studying more possible for some disabled students. Inevitably the reality, as Newell (2008) notes is that distance education may be seen as both enabling (e.g. overcoming inability to attend; flexibility of study hours) and disabling (e.g. lack of social engagement; capital and running costs; use of distance education to avoid making campuses accessible).

While The Open University was set up an alternative model for providing and accessing higher education it can be argued that it

has not led to an emancipation of education by changing some of the fundamental structures and relationships of higher education beyond those of time (to some extent) and place. Distance teachers, albeit as course teams, devise the curriculum and develop the teaching materials. Yet while students are encouraged to debate and discuss what they are learning there is no greater co-production of knowledge than in a place-based university setting. Indeed the distributed nature of the students and limitations of communication technologies can make student involvement in co-production more challenging.

For its first thirty years, The Open University's curriculum was a very broad one and students could take a wide variety of courses to gain an unnamed Bachelor's degree. However, each course still largely followed strict schedules with regular assignments. Under pressure from students, named degrees were introduced with more restricted pathways. Increasingly this has meant that whereas previously the course teams had more freedom to define the scope of what they taught, increasingly they have to ensure that their course fits the needs of the named qualification(s) they contribute to and the needs of the different cohorts of students taking those qualifications.

Similarly, the requirements of the wider higher education system in the UK has shaped what The Open University does. It no longer receives its teaching grant directly from government as it did for twenty-five years. Like all other UK universities, it receives some teaching grant through separate funding bodies and some through tuition fees, with substantive increases to much higher fee regimes. This has led to reductions in part time student numbers overall though not significantly more for widening participation groups. The Open University has also had to fit in with UK-wide periodic external Quality Assurance reviews, and be part of the annual UK-wide National Student Survey despite the many differences in the types of student and ways of teaching that it employs. These many systemic, structural changes that The Open University has had to adapt to, have then variously affected the freedoms of both learners and teachers, as have the various forms of supportive funding for widening participation.⁵

5 <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss>

Systemic social and technological changes such as digital technologies and their use in education have also become political issues as the inequalities in access to such technologies, or equally the telecommunications infrastructure that supports those technologies, also impact on the new modes of education they support (Gulati, 2008). This is particularly important for open education as deployed by open universities as it impinges greatly on the capacity and capability of teachers to deliver technology-enhanced learning (Wright *et al.*, 2009); as well as learners having the requisite digital and information literacy skills (Lane, 2012); and it also impinges on the underlying education for all social justice missions of open universities (Tait, 2013; Lane, 2015).

Ironically, whereas until very recently The Open University was the only fully distance teaching university in the UK, one amongst 130 or so HEIs, the advent of the internet has enabled many more of these universities (and those in other countries) to offer online distance teaching courses to students. Much of this has been at postgraduate level, where there is more part time study, open entry is not a feature, and has not been necessarily about significant increases in student numbers or widening participation. But both this trend, and these issues, have been influenced by the advent of MOOCs.⁶

Massive Open Online Courses

The major premise of MOOCs is that they are open entry and, although as courses they are still timetabled over set times, the learner is free to study anywhere using the infrastructure of the internet. However, while no prior qualifications are needed, good internet connectivity is essential to be able to participate. In many cases a certificate or statement of participation can be gained but, although there are some pilot projects looking at ways of formally recognizing such study, usually no formal higher education credit is directly awarded. This is why I label them as non-formal courses that are developed and run by existing universities or other learned bodies with a pre-determined curriculum and scheduling. However, this is not where the idea of MOOCs started. The original

6 In 2014 the newly established Arden University (<http://www.rdi.co.uk/about-us>) was given degree awarding powers in the UK.

pioneers of MOOCs, in 2008, embraced a more emancipatory philosophy through a constructivist and connectivist approach to the pedagogy they employed (Daniel, 2012). These so-called “cMOOCs”, loosely defined as discursive communities creating knowledge together, are distinct from the more instructivist and behaviorist style “xMOOCs” (Daniel, 2012).⁷ The xMOOCs, focusing on knowledge duplication, exploded into the global consciousness soon after and that led to the establishment of platforms Coursera,⁸ Udacity,⁹ edX¹⁰ and FutureLearn¹¹ through which many organizations can deliver such open online courses.

While there are some similarities between MOOCs and online courses from open universities (Lane, Caird and Weller, 2014) there is a big difference in how the organizations that support them were established. Open universities are largely products of government and fit into prevailing political structures and discourses. MOOC platforms have been private developments with no or very little legal or political input or restrictions to date. Any social restrictions are similar to those influencing students at open universities, with uptake preferentially favoring those people who already have previous qualifications (anywhere between 70 and 90% of people taking MOOCs have higher education qualifications (Kelly, 2014; Rohs and Ganz, 2015) but without the built-in support mechanisms for the less advantaged seen within Open University courses.

Most MOOC platforms offer a wide range of courses across most curriculum areas that can be taken in any order, as was largely the case in the early days of The Open University, although the MOOCs are also relatively short (3 to 10 weeks/ 10–50 study hours) compared to the much larger formal courses currently available from The Open University (300 or 600 hours). MOOCs also exhibit much higher dropout rates than formal distance courses with 70–90% not completing the course (Jordan, 2014), but there has been much debate as to whether this is a valuable measure or not of success when the courses are free (i.e. no fee) to study,

7 Several authors have proposed typologies for MOOCs; this is one of the earliest.

8 <https://www.coursera.org>

9 <https://www.udacity.com>

10 <https://www.edx.org>

11 <https://www.futurelearn.com>

and which mirrors in part the debate within formal online education raised by Grau-Valldosera and Minguillón (2014).

This debate has two parts to it. One, that comparing retention in MOOCs to retention in other type of online courses is unfair as the investment made by participants is completely different (paying high fees for a course and/or committing to studying for a qualification over several years compared with clicking on the “Register” button and then studying for several weeks — or not as the case may be). Two, that retention may be a poor way of judging the success of a MOOC as research shows that MOOC participants engage with MOOCs in many different ways to suit their purposes (Ferguson and Clow, 2015).

The enormous freedom of choice and opportunity to study (or not), for the reasons one wants, can be seen as liberating for learners, providing both emancipation through education and partly emancipation within education. However, this only partly provides emancipation within education as generally there is very limited co-development of courses and/or co-production of knowledge through MOOCs except for those that deliberately take a cMOOC approach, which tends to happen outside the major platforms. Furthermore, MOOCs provide limited emancipation for teachers as well. They do offer scope for teachers from the same educational institution to collaborate on devising and running the course (as noted above for course teams in open universities). They allow them to experiment and do things that might not be allowed or encouraged within the structures of formal courses but they are also restricted by the rules imposed by the MOOC platforms such as the length of courses, when they are presented, and what (open) licence may be applied to the course.

MOOCs have also been subject to a lot of speculation as being disruptive innovations within education (Kelly, 2014; Loeckx, 2016). While it is argued that this disruption would significantly change education as a human activity system by unbundling different parts of the system (an issue which has also been considered in the past for open and distance education as noted by Peters, 2008 and Nunan, 2008) this is largely done through the lens of a “broken” education system (Weller, 2015) and/or liberal market economics with different organizations competing heavily for students (although ironically some have suggested this would lead to a rather monopolistic system

of a handful of universities globally as discussed by Loeckx, 2016). This might be seen as the hoped for emancipation of education, except for the fact that few talk about empowering the roles and positions of learners (students) and teachers within this system apart from a clarion call of education for all which many now dismiss (Rohs and Ganz, 2015).

Much of the early hype around MOOCs has abated, partly because of the difficulty in finding sustainable revenue models in the absence of teaching grants and tuition fees and partly because of the dominance of existing legal, political and social structures and relationships that support the current higher education system. For instance, in 2012, the percentages of GDP from public and private sources respectively spent on higher education were 1.4 and 1.4 for the US; 1.2 and 0.6 for the UK and 1.2 and 0.0 for Germany – with the OECD average being 1.2 and 0.4 (OECD, 2015) – all representing trillions of dollars of investment in existing provision. As well as these substantial sums of money, governments variously regulate higher education, such as approving who can award degrees in their country, which forms of teaching may be recognized, what fees might be charged, how many students can be taught and setting up quality assurance agencies to oversee the sector. The investment, value and interest in MOOCs is minuscule compared to these existing investments, as it has been for open universities compared to place-based universities, and it is likely that MOOCs will similarly provide a niche position in the overall system with varying contributions to emancipation.

Open Educational Resources

OER can range from a single learning object to all the education material from a taught course (but without the structured input of teachers as they then tip it over into being a formal or non-formal open online course). They therefore support informal learning by learners and provide inspiration and assets for teachers to use as the basis for new resources and courses. It is generally agreed that an OER should be available for free and openly licensed (Orr, Rimini and Van Damme, 2015) in order to derive the emancipatory effects of what have been called the 4 Rs (Hilton *et al.*, 2010). These 4 Rs are:

1. Reuse — to use the work verbatim.
2. Revise — to alter or transform the work.
3. Remix — to combine the work (verbatim or altered) with other works.
4. Redistribute — to share the verbatim work, the reworked work or the remixed work with others.

More recently a fifth R has been added:

5. Retain — to be able to retain a copy of the work(s) (Wiley, 2014).

These 5 Rs embody freedoms or permissions, through the legal force of the open license, which learners and teachers can then, in principle, exercise through open educational practices (Murphy, 2014). They therefore remove significant legal barriers to the use of educational resources. However, it is not enough to have freedoms in principle if a person (learner or teacher) does not possess the knowledge, capabilities and circumstances to exercise those freedoms. For instance, do they have the subject and/or pedagogic knowledge, the technological capabilities and support structures to create educational works, to learn from such works, or to add new knowledge to those works? In particular, this also raises issues about the knowledge, capabilities and circumstances of a lone learner or teacher as opposed to a team or community, with many possible social restrictions arising from their circumstances.

The sociality of education is part of the underpinning philosophy of sharing and collaboration that OER represent and as spelled out in the Cape Town Declaration:¹²

We are on the cusp of a global revolution in teaching and learning. Educators worldwide are developing a vast pool of educational resources on the Internet, open and free for all to use. These educators are creating a world where each and every person on earth can access and contribute to the sum of all human knowledge. They are also planting the seeds of a new pedagogy where educators and learners create, shape and evolve knowledge together, deepening their skills and understanding as they go.

This emerging open education movement combines the established tradition of sharing good ideas with fellow educators and the collaborative, interactive culture of the Internet. It is built on the belief

12 <http://www.capetowndeclaration.org/read-the-declaration>

that everyone should have the freedom to use, customize, improve and redistribute educational resources without constraint. Educators, learners and others who share this belief are gathering together as part of a worldwide effort to make education both more accessible and more effective.

In effect this declaration seeks the emancipation of education as well as emancipation through and within education, although the emphasis to date has been more on the emancipation of teachers than of learners (Murphy, 2013; Orr *et al.*, 2015). This is changing as more research is done (Weller *et al.*, 2015) and new mechanisms are put in place to gain recognition for informal study (Law, 2015) although the majority of these developments are an augmentation of formal and non-formal educational activities at established (educational) institutions rather than radical non-academic, community-led initiatives (Coughlan and Perryman, 2015).

In contrast to MOOCs, OER have directly impacted on the politics of education with a number of governments passing laws and developing policies supportive of OER (Orr *et al.*, 2015) and through international agreements such as the UNESCO sponsored Paris OER declaration.¹³ Thus certain political restrictions are being addressed in relation to OER, centred mostly on encouraging governments to openly license publicly funded educational materials for public use thus adding to the stock of material in the global OER commons, but also in encouraging open educational practices wherever possible, although the dispersed nature of OER repositories acts as a deterrent to broader engagement as indicated by several surveys of educators (e.g. Karunanayaka *et al.*, 2015). In that sense OER offers more scope than open universities or MOOCs in transforming education from within, by changing the overall culture of education as a human activity system as much as offering new routes to education for disenfranchised groups, such as women in developing countries (Perryman and De los Arcos, 2016). However, the dominance of formal education within this system can still easily crowd out these developments which are gaining most traction (so far) within non-formal and informal education.

13 http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/Paris_OER_Declaration_01.pdf

Concluding Remarks

The recently approved Sustainability Development Goals explicitly apply to all countries, whatever their deemed state of development (defining development as the process of economic and social transformation that is based on complex cultural and environmental factors and their interactions). Notwithstanding the concerns over language framing debates, as noted earlier for education for sustainability, discussing education through the notion of education for development may help us better understand issues of emancipation within education and the role that open education can play. Education is then about the personal and professional development of people, learners and teachers alike; it is also about the intellectual and practical development of everyone as expressed through organizations and societies. Within the field of development, Sen (1999) has written extensively on development as freedom and also introduced the notion of a capability approach. Saito (2003) has more explicitly set this out for education:

The human capital received from education can be conceived in terms of commodity production. However Sen argues that education plays a role not only in accumulating human capital but also in broadening human capability. This can be through a person benefitting from education “in reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken seriously by others and so on”. (p. 24).

While, in principle, open education in its various guises can help people benefit from learning who may not have otherwise had the opportunity, in practice it may not be doing much more to emancipate people than closed education is doing. This is because prevailing social, cultural and economic norms still place greater value on education arising through the existing physical, political and legal infrastructures. The development of more recent digital infrastructures has been crucial to any expansion of open education and, overall, open licensing (a legal instrument) has done most to challenge those existing structures. But in the end it will probably be the development of capabilities through an even wider framing of educational open practices that will do most to provide emancipation through, within and from education; and to do so in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary way. So, in my view, the rhetoric is way ahead of the reality and the reality will be less profound than the rhetoric suggests.

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