



## SOME EXPLORATORY THOUGHTS ON *OPENNESS* AND AN ETHICS OF CARE

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### 16.1 Introduction

Amidst the different claims and counter-claims of disruption, innovation and revolutions facing higher education, the notion of *Openness* is, on the one hand deeply embedded in the evolution of distance education, and on the other hand, one of the key characteristics of more recent phenomena such as Open Educational Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Key to these three phenomena is the claim that they aim *to widen access*, and while the statistics do support this claim with regard to number of registrations or users, widening access is much larger than just providing access and it raises a number of *ethical* issues and concerns.

*Openness* has become one of the “corporate buzzwords” (Birnbaum 2001: 3) and is “presented as universally applicable quick-fix solutions – along with the obligatory and explicit caution that their recommendations are *not* quick fixes and will require substantial management understanding and commitment” (Birnbaum 2001:4). *Openness* is much more buzzword or fad and is deeply political,

embedded in our epistemologies and ontologies, and reflecting and often perpetuating inequalities and injustices.

While there are many possibly ways to engage with exploring the ethical issues and implications of widening access and opening up opportunity, one possible heuristic lens is to explore these is through the claim that with opening up or widening access comes certain *responsibilities*. But having said that, determining the scope of these responsibilities is more complex and more nuanced than perceived at a first glance.

Considering the scope, definition and ethical implications of *Openness* and responsibility in these three phenomena, it is important to consider a number of questions such as: Is widening access enough? What are the fiduciary duties of the one who widens access or does widening access cancel or change the inherent fiduciary duty?

In this chapter we briefly explore ethics, responsibility and care while mapping the notion of *Openness* in three different, but overlapping phenomena namely Open Distance and Distributed education, OER and MOOCs. We then propose the need to move towards an ethics of care which acknowledges the need for leadership in Higher Education to take a teleological approach to *Openness* in order to truly leverage its potential.

## **16.2 Ethics, Responsibility and Care**

In general parlance, ethical practice is often equated with doing good or doing no harm, at least not intentionally. This is where the complexity in defining the term and scope of ethical implications in *Openness* lies. There is ample evidence that even the best intentions to do good often have harmful effects or unintended negative consequences that could not have been foreseen at the outset of the action.

Traditionally, one way to disentangle the definition and scope of ethics in particular contexts was to distinguish between deontological and teleological approaches (Marshall 2014). *Deontological* approaches to ethics, are rule-based and form the foundation of legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as the Terms and Conditions (T&Cs) stipulating rights and responsibilities in a particular context. As can be expected, deontological approaches work best in relatively stable environments. We acknowledge that even when there is agreement to follow a deontological approach, agreement will still have to be reached regarding the type of rule, for example contract-based, consent-based, informed by legal principles in a particular context, or based on a rule consequentialism.

A *teleological* approach to defining ethics focuses on consultative, discursive spaces where the potential for harm and the scope of consent, and recourses in cases of unintended harm are negotiated and agreed upon. An ethics of justice or a teleological approach is therefore based on the decisions of an “autonomous, objective and impartial agent” (Edwards as cited in Botes 2000: 1072) formulating and applying universal rules and principles to “ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all people”. An ethics of care or a teleological approach focuses on fulfilling “the needs of others and to maintain harmonious relations” (Botes 2000: 1072). An ethics of care has at its foundation the consideration of potential vulnerabilities of those affected by the intervention or opportunity.

Approaching the notion of *Openness* through the lenses of ethics, responsibility and care raises some interesting questions in the context where the discourses of widening access are often based on relaxing admission or access requirements. In this chapter we propose the need to consider widening access through the lens of an ethics of care. We now will briefly explore and map the notion of *Openness* in the contexts of

distance education, OER and MOOCs before contesting some of the claims regarding *Openness* in these contexts.

### **16.3 *Openness* in Distance Education**

The history of distance education provides ample evidence that opening up opportunities for previously excluded populations was an integral part of distance education from its very early beginnings. This can also be seen in the development and varying degrees of *Openness* to libraries and knowledge as documented by Latimer (2011), from monastic libraries, to chained libraries, to university readers and now we are losing even more chains through e-resources. Germane to distance education is the optimising of technologies of the day to offer educational opportunities for those who could not attend face-to-face education whether due to, inter alia, cost, admission requirements, the need to relocate or studying whilst working.

It is crucial also to understand that not all distance education institutions are open, while all open distance learning institutions are also distance learning institutions. Having said that, it is equally important to note that not all open distance learning institutions are equally open, and that an institution's *Openness* is dependent on national regulatory and funding arrangements and frameworks. *Openness* is, however, also a concept that is much wider than just admission requirements or the recognition of prior learning, but also refers to flexibility with regard to registration periods, curricula, pedagogy, affordability, re-admission and rules of progression, to mention but a few (Lockwood 2013).

In broad terms, *Openness* in the context of distance education therefore foremost points to opening up opportunities to individuals and/or populations who would have been excluded from educational opportunities. Closer inspection, however reveal that while increasing

access to education is but one aspect of *Openness*, providing access does not, per se, signify a more ethical stance than, for example, limiting access.

In terms of an ethics of justice, *Openness* in distance education contexts mean providing equal opportunities for all, regardless of race, gender, income or class. The principles and defining characteristics underlying an ethics of justice cannot, however, sufficiently address and accommodate the complexities, intersectionality and multi-dimensional nature of individuals and different relations in different contexts. In a certain sense, ODL as moral practice and public good is already a counter-narrative to the question of desert, which proposes that some students deserve access to higher education, while many prospective students may have to accept that they do not have access. An ethics of care will move beyond just widening access, but consider seriously the fact that providing access is but a start. Actually, an ethics of care proposes that providing access without providing reasonable care to ensure success is actually justice denied.

## **16.4 Openness in OER**

It is commonly acknowledged that OER represents tools to facilitate change by amongst others: decreasing cost of replication of materials, reducing cost and time in curriculum development, increasing the audience for research and making it easier to ensure the recency of the resources employed in our offerings (De Hart et al. 2015; Butcher & Hoosen 2012; Glennie et al. 2012; Anderson 2008). These are but a few of the beneficial natural outflows of the advent of OER and attributed to its *Openness*.

The revolutionary power of OER, however, lies in the opportunities it provides to re-examine, interrogate and shift the entrenched paradigms held in higher education. It provides the opportunity for ethical and

epistemological change pertaining to the role of higher education, sustainable business models in higher education, research, as well as teaching and learning. In this approach to *Openness* however we need to move beyond just OER to OEP:

“Open Educational Practices (OEP) are defined as practices which support the production, use and reuse of high quality open educational resources (OER) through institutional policies, which promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path. OEP address the whole OER governance community: policy makers, managers and administrators of organizations, educational professionals and learners.” (International Council for Open and Distance Education, n.d.)

With this approach higher education leaderships ethical responsibility does not only lie in opening of access (for whatever given value attributed to *Openness*), but in an acknowledgment that these new technologies require an ethics of caring. An ethic that recognises that the change brought about by OER, as technology, not only represents a disruption in access to knowledge, but is also a product of a changing society. It places an ethical burden on us to ensure that the disruptive technology does not dictate the change, but that the technology is harnessed in a responsible manner towards a praxis of pedagogy and leadership for new generation of graduates equipped to be responsive in an increasingly dynamic Knowledge Economy and Academe (Archer & Chetty 2013).

## **16.6 *Openness* in MOOCs**

Ethics in the context of MOOCs is, “like MOOCs themselves, something of a moving target” (Robbins 2013 para. 2). Adding a layer of complexity to considering the ethics in one aspect of MOOCs,

namely *Openness*, is the wide variety of pedagogies in MOOCs, and the seemingly proliferation of forms of MOOCs, often changing one of the key traditional elements of MOOCs such as the size (massive), *Openness* (open), online (by adding blended or hybrid elements) and courses (with a plethora of opinions regarding the criteria for an offering to be considered a course) (See Clark 2013; Conole 2013). Clark (2013), for example, refers to eight types of pedagogical models in MOOCs for example synchMOOCs that have a fixed start date, fixed dates for assignments and assessments and a fixed end date, while asynchMOOCs that have no or frequent start dates, have no or looser dates set for the handing in of assignments and not end date. (See Clark 2013 for a full discussion of each of these types of MOOCs). Each of the different types of MOOCs – whether as described based on their pedagogies (Clark 2013), or on the more traditional differentiation between connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) and MOOCs primarily using interactive media (xMOOCs) (Conole 2013) – will have their own ethical issues. Due to the huge variety in the phenomenon, we therefore briefly refer to some general elements regarding the ethical implications specific to the notion of *Openness* in MOOCs.

It is clear that the claims that MOOCs are democratising education and making education accessible for all need to be scrutinised and contested. There is evidence that these claims overestimate who actually has access to MOOCs, and that having access does not equate an ethics of care where there is an indifference about admission requirements, credentialising, often no oversight over the quality of course materials, and importantly, no oversight regarding how users' data are used and shared (Prinsloo & Slade 2015; Prinsloo & Slade 2016; Robbins 2013). There is furthermore no oversight regarding the ethical issues in the research on the participants as required by Ethical Review Boards (Robbins 2013; Willis, Slade & Prinsloo 2016).

Often overlooked are the ethical issues in the *design* of MOOCs as illustrated in the research by Millet and Luo (2014). There are, for example, the ethical issues with regard to the knowledge-claims and the fact that most MOOCs are presenting epistemologies and ontologies originating from North-Atlantic contexts, often presented as universal truths devoid of contextual sensitivities, and the possibility that there may be different ways of seeing knowledge and being. The choice of language of tuition also has implications for how *open* a MOOC is, as are the recognition of the rich diversity in student profiles and their different aspirations, goals, and available time and resources. Other questions in the context of the ethical dimensions of the *Openness* of MOOCs are, for example, how open are the resources or are they copyrighted and commercialised? How open are the pedagogies and assessment regimes (see for example, Clark 2013)? How *open* are MOOCs with regard to the *hidden* costs such as data and resources to be downloaded, etc.? And, how *open* or tolerant will the MOOC provider be with regard to inflammatory or abusive comments and harassment?

While we agree that ethics in MOOCs is a “moving target” (Robbins 2013 para. 2), we cannot avoid thinking through the ethical implications of the notion of *Openness* in MOOCs. Mapping out the ethical issues may assist us in opening up *Openness* and discovering the different nuances and varying degrees of *Openness* that contest the simple binary of open vs closed.

## **16.7 The Fallacy of *Openness* (Moving Beyond Binaries)**

Much of the opposition to *Openness* resides in fallacies surrounding how *Openness* is understood. *Openness* has somehow become to be perceived as having descriptive value beyond claims pertaining to barriers to access. This was optimised in the study conducted by John Bohannon, a science journalist at Harvard University (Guardian, 2013)

who submitted hundreds of fake articles to Open Access journals of which many accepted the paper. The design of this study was of course in and of itself flawed as there was no control group where the fake article was submitted to traditional closed access journals. As has been seen recently the results may well have been more of an indication of the rise of predatory journals (Scholarly Open Access 2015) and the problematic nature peer review (Mulligan & Hall 2013; Resnik & Elmore 2016) endemic to both open and closed access publication.

In the same vein the word *Open* does not in any way relate to the quality of material, ethical nature of the material, whether the material is accredited and recognised, the contextualization of the knowledge, whether or not employers seek employees with such knowledge, whether the production and reproduction of such knowledge is cost free, sustainability, etc. It merely indicates that the degree of accessibility is higher and more flexible than traditional access to knowledge.

If we then move beyond a mere deontological to a teleological approach to ethics, leaderships' responsibility lies in embracing an ethics of care which in broad terms includes, the (1) considering the intellectual integrity of the offering or resource; (2) a commitment to prevent harm; (3) transparency regarding the *limitations* of the offering or resource (e.g. accreditation by other providers, etc.); (4) a declaration of costs (hidden but also opportunity costs for students or users); (5) a clear and accessible declaration of the Terms and Conditions (T&Cs) of use; (6) a commitment not to exploit users' data outside of the scope of the T&Cs; and (7) seeing students and users of resources in terms of inherently vulnerable human beings and not (just?) as users of services/products and/or customers.

In effect, this is true for any type of material whether open or closed access. The disruption brought about by *Openness* as a technology has however re-sensitised us to these ethical considerations. We should not fall into the trap that these ethical responsibilities and ethics of caring is

only important for leadership when addressing *Openness*, but recognise that the same ethics is applicable, required when dealing with less open resources.

*Openness* has a number of implications such as the scalability and cost (to the institution) of the care and support provided. As higher education in general, and specifically distance and distributed learning providers increasingly face funding constraints and serious concerns about their sustainability, implementing a more ethical approach to widening access does have cost, operational and resource implications. Concomitantly, *Openness* and cost to students is something which cannot be ignored as students around the world demand a lowering of cost surrounding access to education as is seen in the recent #feesmustfall movement. Higher Education Leadership is facing increasing pressure to produce more, of a higher quality, whilst decreasing cost, *Openness* may provide some tools in dealing with these contrasting challenges if approached with an ethics of caring.

## **16.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter we aimed to contest the notion of *Openness* as used as ‘buzzword’ in distance and distributed learning, OER and MOOCs. Widening or opening access is not a “universally applicable quick-fix solution” (Birnbaum 2001 par 4) and requires careful consideration. We therefore need to move beyond a *simple* or *deontological* understanding of *Openness* and the comfort of binaries of open vs. closed. In this chapter we proposed moving to a teleological understanding of the ethical implications of *Openness* and to move beyond an ethics of justice or a rule-based understanding to an ethics of care.

## 16.9 Chapter References

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