

## For whom, and for what? Not-yetness and thinking beyond open content

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### Abstract

This article traces a line through contemporary critical perspectives on open online education, which challenge an emphasis on content and access that gives too much weight to instrumental goals of education. This article offers the concept of ‘not-yetness’ as a productive lens for examining alternative meanings of openness. Not-yetness emerged as a response to a dominant discourse of technology in education—including technologies of openness—that has been characterised by rhetoric of control, efficiency, and enhancement. Not-yetness invites a rethinking of online learning and digital education in terms of risk, uncertainty, and messiness and brings our attention to the variability of open education contexts and learners. Using examples of a ‘federated wiki’ and ‘agents beyond the course’, the article shows how higher education pedagogies can and should engage with boundary-crossings between openness and closure, and demonstrates the value of the perspectives that such engagements bring to the fore.

**Keywords:** boundaries; risk; critical perspectives; open education; online learning; digital education; not-yetness; complexity; emergence

### Introduction

In open education practice and research, there has been a persistent assumption that openness is an absolute positive (Bayne, Knox, & Ross, 2015). The result of this assumption has been the investment of time and energy in solving problems of access to educational resources, to the exclusion of other considerations. Treating openness as an absolute good has also generated a preponderance of its use as a ‘buzzword’ to describe a whole range of digital practices, some of which are seen as antithetical to a vision of positive educational change:

[Original advocates of openness] are despondent about the reinterpretation of openness to mean ‘free’ or ‘online’ without some of the reuse liberties they had envisaged. Concerns are expressed about the commercial interests that are now using openness as a marketing tool. . . . At this very moment of victory it seems that the narrative around openness is being usurped by others. . . . (Weller, 2014, p. 3)

This paper draws together three key critical arguments countering a utopian view of openness, namely that:

- 1) there is a false binary between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ which needs to be challenged;
- 2) an overemphasis on access to content homogenises learners and their contexts;
- 3) open educational practice does not attend sufficiently to issues of power and inclusion.

In response to these critiques, we propose that open educational theory and practice needs more attention to issues of multiplicity, uncertainty and transition—framed here in terms of ‘boundary

crossings'. The concept of 'not-yetness', developed to respond to issues of oversimplification in digital education policy and practice, offers an approach to meeting this need.

### ***False binary between open and closed***

Discourses of openness in education are structured around a series of binary positions that can be misleading—with 'closed' associated with hierarchy, repression, exclusion; while 'openness' represents creativity, innovation and flexibility. In addition, the negativity associated with closure is attached firmly to the idea of formal education. Gourlay (2015) identifies a fantasy of openness as "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" (p. 317). Oliver (2015) points out that in insisting on the absolute value of openness, all other forms of education are positioned as:

conservative, exclusionary or controlling of learners or knowledge...The risk with such polarised accounts is that education is inevitably bad, because it is and can only ever be 'closed'. (p. 367)

Attempting to move away from this unhelpful polarisation, Edwards (2015) argues that "all forms of openness entail forms of closed-ness" (p. 253)—in other words, that choices around practices always involve "selecting" and "occluding other possibilities" (p. 255). He frames the digital as reconfiguring rather than overcoming this reality (ibid). For Edwards, therefore, educators cannot claim openness as an educational value in its own right, and closedness as its antithesis, but must instead decide "what forms of openness and closed-ness are justifiable" (ibid).

If openness and closedness are not absolutes, and do not represent opposite spectrums of theory or practice, educators need strategies and conceptual resources for paying attention to and deciding what forms of openness are appropriate for the settings in which they operate. These considerations are both pedagogical and ideological, as the following two sections illustrate.

### ***Homogenisation of learners and contexts***

Utopian perspectives on openness are largely underpinned by a key assumption: that people are innately disposed to self-educate, and that individuals simply require *access to content* in order to learn. This is a contestable claim in a number of respects, not least because what it means to be an educated person has varied considerably over places and times, and because education also involves the disciplining of the human subject through, for example, the 'hidden curriculum' of schooling. In this respect, decontextualized and deinstitutionalized open content can mask the conditions of its production and the assumptions it makes about learners and learning.

If education is more than a delivery of content, then an exclusive focus on the content of open education and how accessible and affordable it is gives too much weight to instrumental goals of content creation and dissemination. In the dominant discourse about openness, open content and Open Educational Resources (OERs) in particular embed values of access, standardization, and deinstitutionalization. Their "emphasis on replication" presumes the uniformity of learners (Knox, 2013a, p. 29).

Metaphorically, the current focus on content means that an 'all-you-can-eat' ethos underpins the drive towards openness-as-access, with little attention paid to the situations or appetites of the diners. To focus on the diversity of learners would make openness and its goals more open to interpretation and to contestation. It would raise the question of what, precisely, is transformed or transformative about OERs, and might prompt us to view them as aligned with unhelpful "politics of complexity reduction" (Gough, 2012, p. 47). As McArthur (2012) puts it, complexity reduction

leads to “bad” rather than “virtuous” mess: “Seeking to force the inherently messy into a respectable tidy form can result in something that distorts, hides or falsifies the actual social world” (p. 421). Promises of simplicity—access, standardization, deinstitutionalization—come at a cost.

### *Issues of power and inclusion*

A perception that the main issue facing open education is how to separate content from elitist, restrictive, or exclusionary processes and make it more widely and freely available has been driven by what Dalsgaard and Thestrup (2015) describe as the “ideological” motive for openness. However, critiques of Open Educational Resources (OERs) question whether these “reproduce historically asymmetric power relations” (Olakulehin & Singh, 2013, p. 33). Amiel and Soares (2016) observe the need for advocates of openness to be vigilant:

to avoid constantly replicating inequalities in terms of those who produce, develop skills and revenue, and actively participate in the commons, and those who are passive observers mostly assimilating the offerings that are made available. (p. 1)

They offer the “one-way flow of English-language content to other groups” (p. 2) as an example of replicated inequality which persists in the context of OERs. These are issues that cannot be addressed with what Naidu (2016) calls a “jaundiced” and “narrow focus on free and open access to educational resources” (p. 1).

Ironically, insisting that “access alone” is enough (Knox, 2013b) actually deepens existing disadvantage by ignoring the processes through which OERs are taken up and used. As an example, research indicates that there are differences in how women in the Global South access, use, and experience barriers to finding and accessing OERs compared with both their male and Global North counterparts (Perryman & de los Arcos, 2016, p. 170), and such differences are deeply entrenched and require attention to social, economic and structural factors, leading the authors to recommend (amongst other things) that “all OER and [Open Educational Practice] projects operating in the Global South should have a gender equality component” (p. 179). In other words, access is emphatically *not* enough unless it is seen in a very broad context of social inclusion and social justice. As Rolfe (2015) puts it,

Anyone with an internet connection can access global higher education content and tuition. However, these developments have outpaced our critical thinking around the fundamental principles of how to deliver an education that is ethically sound. (no page)

The need for this kind of critical thinking cannot be overstated. Moves in this direction have included calls for openness to be framed in terms of “practices” (Ehlers, 2011) and “processes” (Knox, 2013b). These could pay more attention to “architectures” of openness (Ehlers, 2011, p. 3) and work to expose “social, economic, political and educational factors that have influenced the production of technology infrastructures, as well as the forms of open education that are subsequently made possible” (Knox 2013b, p. 27). Framing openness in terms of what we are calling ‘not-yetness’ contributes an additional focus—that of grappling with the uncertainty and complexity which accompanies educational and technological change. Having examined three arguments that complicate a straightforwardly utopian view of openness, we now proceed to explore how these arguments might be usefully taken up by reframing open education as a practice of boundary-crossing, and propose how such boundary crossing can be understood through a framework of ‘not-yetness’.

## Open education as boundary crossing

To reframe the conversation about openness and push beyond openness-as-access, we need to pay attention to other possible forms of openness rather than stop at questions of whether something is open or not, or how broadly to define openness. bell hooks (1994) reminds us that openness can be understood in a range of ways, for example as the result of a mindset in which students are co-explorers in education and the classroom is seen as a space of transgressing hegemonic boundaries:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (p. 207)

hooks' openness involves the inclusion of many voices and the recognition of the ways in which social realities—including open educational programs and processes—are political and often inequitable. This extends well beyond the notion of openness-as-access to views of openness as a "practice of freedom" (ibid), and acknowledges that such freedom may lead students and practitioners to cross boundaries between experiences and mindsets that are open and closed.

Oliver (2015, pp. 8–9) noted that boundary crossing is expected in any social institution, including education, and "instead of trying to establish whether something is 'open or not, the focus should then be on the instances of boundary crossing that take place, and consequently the kinds of "openness" that characterise a system or institution." The focus on boundary crossing invites critical reflections on the nature of borders between concepts and approaches, say, between openness and closedness. Anzaldua (1987, p. 3), in her seminal work deconstructing the physical, psychological, and cultural borders and borderlands between the US and Mexico, said that "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. . . a borderland is a vague and undetermined placed created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition." As Anzaldua's writings suggest, openness and closedness are in constant tension and in flux, and educators should explore and embrace the complexities that accompany modes of openness.

### *Not-yetness: a lens for analysing openness*

We propose "not-yetness" as a lens for critically exploring openness and boundary crossing between openness and closedness. The concept of not-yetness emerged as a response to a dominant discourse of technology in education (including technologies of openness) that has been characterised by rhetoric of control, efficiency, and enhancement, and underplaying more "disruptive, disturbing and generative dimensions" (Bayne, 2014, p. 3). Emerging technologies in education, as defined by Veletsianos (2010) are those which are "not yet fully understood" and "not yet fully researched, or researched in a mature way" (p. 15). Technologies can readily be viewed in this way, but we argue that many forms of teaching and educational practice, and learner and teacher identities, can also be seen to be in states of not-yetness (Ross & Collier, 2016).

The need to maintain pedagogical space for uncertainty is an appropriate response to what Barnett and Hallam (1999) call higher education's "conditions of radical and enduring uncertainty, unpredictability, challengeability and contestability" (p. 142). The rhetoric of openness in education has come, ironically, to represent a much more constrained set of possibilities and practices than many researchers and educators might have expected in the years leading up to the explosion of high profile initiatives in areas such as massive online courses and open educational resources.