

Why Open Teaching Matters! Harnessing the Power of Leadership, Culture and Service

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Abstract: ‘Institutionalising open education-open teaching in the university culture is about leadership envisioning and leading sustainable change.’ This article seeks to provoke a dialogue and we welcome your feedback in our social media spaces.

Keywords: open teaching, leadership, culture; science.

Introduction

Indeed, if aliens invaded planet Earth and we handed them a summary document of definitional doublespeak about open education, they would likely return to their spaceships and conclude there must be more advanced civilisations to explore in the galaxy. Of course, if they decided to spend their summer holidays here with us, they might provide some valuable insights from which to reframe our future strategies and assumptions about open education. After all, having aliens looking through a new lens and from different vantage points is a good thing — right?

The danger zone here, of course, is even aliens may see what those closest to the playing field may completely miss. We are all in the open choir singing the same song and we truly believe we are in harmony and headed to the open promised land. And we believe everyone else we touch with our song joins the choir — they do not. Perhaps we are all too close for a clear vision of reality. These metaphoric by-lines are another way of saying that the advances, affordances, and progress of all things open just may not have met earlier expectations. We had successes but we have had an equal number of failures no matter how hard they are to accept.

This commentary will be resisted by some, inspiring for others, and leave many wondering where we go next. Some might even contemplate getting on the next spaceship with the aliens and taking their chances on exploring strange new worlds and galaxies. But this is the beauty, virtue and grace of working in academe that we can challenge, agree, divert, combine, abdicate, retract, renew, withdraw and more . . . and still meet work and celebrate being colleagues.

We challenge to disagree and we agree to challenge. Life in the open fast lane is where all ideas and innovations are welcome with the caveat that not all will be adopted. Welcome to the open jungle, albeit, sometimes having to navigate the absurdity of today’s ‘cancel culture’ that challenges everything and everyone for the sake of argument rather than the sake of clarity and illumination. Your assumptions about open education are going to be challenged today so put on your space helmet and get ready to rock n’ roll.



What Are We Doing Out Here in the 'Open'?

Where do we start? The field of open education needs one singular focus for all things open. **This focus is LEARNING.** Whether we are talking about OER, OEP, open research, open science, open government, the Open University, The Open Championship (golf) and the rest of the list they all lead to the same destination. Moreover, digital technologies and their use as teaching tools (emphasis on the word tools) are designed to enhance and improve learning. This focus on learning does not diminish the role of the teacher, content, and interactive social contexts that emanate from the Community of Inquiry theory, for example. However, no matter how we define the teaching roles — lead academic, tutor, learning designer, assessment specialist, and peer mentor our one commonality is *better learning through better designed teaching.*

Leadership, Culture and Service

The 2020 UNESCO OER Recommendation (2020a; 2020b) was released recently drawing significant focus to open education, particularly OER and OEP. Despite the media and vocal rhetoric amongst educators, the fact is the Recommendation is not unlike the UNESCO OER 2012 Paris Declaration and the 2017 UNESCO OER Declaration from Slovenia. The focus is on five key areas: 1) capacity building; 2) policy formulation; 3) equity and inclusivity; 4) sustainable business models; and 5) international collaboration. The truth is not much has really changed in terms of priorities and we have immense work ahead of us particularly in expanding awareness and increasing adoption.

Although some progress has been made globally since 2012, it's not as much as we might like to believe. Hoosen and Butcher (2019) have pointed out that OER and OEP awareness and development since 2012 has been characterised by more rhetoric than action. Many national governments have failed to focus on OER and the digital divide has created slow adoption due to significant socio-economic inequities in developing countries.

Funding has mostly come at the institutional levels and sustainability was uneven, which, in turn, has made policy development somewhat arbitrary and uneven as well (Hoosen & Butcher, 2019; Santos et al., 2017). Ministries (see Santos et al., 2017) made some progress in the policy arena, however, like so many policy initiatives that emanate at the national level, may not make it to the teachers, leaders and students in the schools. Policy creation and educational implementation are not always mutually supportive.

The most notable example of this was the recent educational response to the COVID-19 pandemic by schools and universities across the globe (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Olcott Jr., 2020a). In the main, most institutions were not prepared to respond. Teachers lacked online training, school leadership was lacking and the most severe revelation of all was that many homes do not have the technologies available to effectively engage in home-based online learning. And yes, the dramatic revelation is that we failed to recognise we have a digital divide not just in developing countries but in developed countries as well. In short, our assumptions are often flawed and our celebrations premature.

If one scans the literature on open education, one will find articles that indirectly address leadership, culture and service for open education. The truth is there is not much that details these nor virtually none that combines these together. There is a broad-based assumption that everyone just accepts OER/OEP and we all depart the station on the adoption train. If it were only that easy. It was

suggested earlier that the one commonality for open education is LEARNING. I am now going to take this a step further and suggest as we move forward, we must consider leadership, culture and service as essential considerations in our planning, our dialogue, our definitions, our OER-OEP creation and our implementation.

Remember our choir singing in harmony, well now we have to start singing in the *same language* for it to make sense to the masses. OER and OEP, in and of themselves, are not enough for faculty adoption and institutional assimilation. It takes a coherent strategy of visionary leadership that can manage the organisational culture and recognise that advocacy roles are service roles created to support those who create OER/OEP.

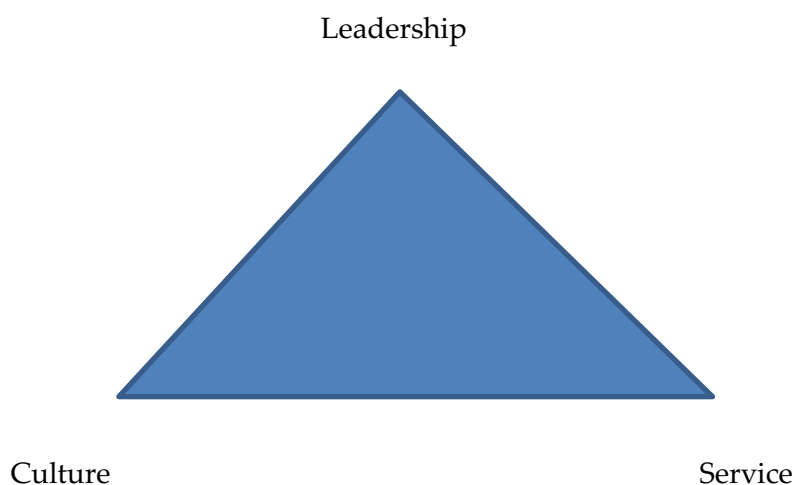


Figure 1: University Open Education and Teaching

Figure 1 is a renewed framework of core elements to promote all things open. Leadership that reframes open education within a benefits continuum for the faculties, the institution and the students is a good first start. Leaders must frame open education within their vision for the future. In other words, how will a vision for open education position the institution three to five years from now? The systematic adoption and assimilation of open education and open teaching within the culture of the university is entirely about leading change (Kotter, 2012). This fundamental attribute, the capacity to envision and lead change, is perhaps the single most important leadership attribute of successful leaders in the 21st century (Olcott Jr., 2020b). Indeed, if you can't lead change, you can't lead your organisation.

Secondly, the academic culture is often like walking through a minefield blindfolded and advocates of open *anything* must immerse themselves in this culture and ensure they understand the core values that drive academic behaviour (Ehlers, 2013; Schein, 1985). You want faculty to give their content away for free. If you wrote a hit song for a rock band and were told that the royalties would bring you 250,000 euros over two years would you give it away for free? A book with similar rewards? Advocates think because OER are not best-sellers with big paydays, they are not important to the creator; and that is the first mistake most have made over the past two decades. The things we create matter — to all of us.

University faculty don't care how many OER conferences you go to; they don't care if you have written five articles nominated for the Pulitzer Prize on the affordances of OER and OEP; and they certainly don't care how many keynotes or consultancies on open education you have done. Faculty members care about themselves and in fact the secret to all advocacy with faculty is not YOU — it is their peers. Faculty members listen to their peers; they emulate their peers; and they adhere to the values of their culture so they can be promoted and tenured.

If you are an advocate for open education and open anything you need to look in the mirror and reframe your view of yourself. *You are in the service business*. And hence the most important construct you can use is called *empathy*. Do you truly know what it means to be a faculty member? Do you know what is rewarded in a particular School's culture? They are not all the same from school to school. All of these lead to the most important element in all advocacy and adoption — *trust*. If you have not earned this — because it won't be given to you for free — faculty will not listen to your rhetoric. And, if you break this bond it will spread like wildfire across the institution and the faculties (Ehlers, 2013; Schein, 1985).

A final word for you advocates who are frustrated by the resistance you may find amongst your faculties. For centuries we have trained faculty members for one thing and one thing only — to push back the frontiers of knowledge through research, teaching, more research and publication. Moreover, we have established reward systems around these roles to recognise faculty through promotion and tenure. The artistic and scientific materials faculty members create are their lifeblood. What do you do at your institution — in terms of leadership, culture, service, trust and empathy? Do you bring these to your faculties? The ball is in your court.

As stated earlier, you have to understand the culture in which you are promoting advocacy. We fatally and mistakenly believed that simply suggesting more access, MOOCs, open content, OER, and the like are good things. Giving away knowledge for free would transform the developing world. In the main we chose to believe these are all in the best interests of everyone except the actual people who produce their content and are being asked to shower it among the masses. We need clear and well-articulated benefits continuums about open education to help faculties better understand the pros and cons of giving their content away instead of saying it's the right thing to do, just put a Creative Commons License on it, and your life will be much better.

As you read the rest of this commentary, I challenge you to think leadership, culture, service as you analyse your open educational landscapes and nurture trust and empathy in all your endeavours. Why is this important? Because our focus on the content side of open education side-stepped the necessary foundational core elements we needed to attend to for institutions, their leaders, and most importantly their faculties and students. We severely over-estimated the number of global tickets we could sell to board the open content adoption train.

The Path to Open Teaching

The field of open and distance education has crossed many conceptual and pedagogical boundaries to define openness, Open Educational Resources (OER), Open Educational Practices (OEP), open access, open pedagogy, open research and open assessment (Butcher, 2011). And, although there is a tendency to associate all these concepts with open and distance education, we must remember these concepts apply equally to traditional F2F models and pedagogies (Nascimbeni et al., 2020).

The macro view of these open concepts has expanded access to content and resources and made these more accessible and usable across education. In the US, there has been massive adoption of OER to reduce textbook costs for students and in developing countries where content and textbook costs can be cost-prohibitive, OER and open content have been the catalysts for promoting access to higher education in particular (Olcott Jr., 2012c).

Despite this progress, there is a need to bring our conceptual framework for open education back to exactly what we do with all these resources. What we do with these resources is teach. We use them to enhance teaching and improve learning by promoting high quality interaction, engagement, retention and reduce transactional distance.

Garcia-Holgado et al. (2020) offered a general definition of Open Teaching as a “combination of practices aiming at increasing access and quality of learning where theories about learning, technology, and social justice enter into conversation with each other and inform the development of education practices” (p. 1). The next step is to refine and define this concept operationally.

Open teaching is an instructional framework that draws upon open practices, resources and pedagogical strategies designed to promote access, enhance teaching quality and improve more effective learning in educational environments (Olcott, 2020b, p. v).

Characteristics of Open Teaching include:

- Use of Open Educational Resources (OER) as the primary content of courses/programmes.
- Use of Open Educational Practices (OEP) standardised by the institution and or profession.
- Student, student to teacher, and student to student opportunities for creating and revising open content. This process is typically called open pedagogy.
- New and/or revised content created in the course are assigned OER status with the appropriate open licensing.
- Open assessment options for students in collaboration with teachers to contribute/identify some elements of their assessments.
- Engagement of external stakeholders and community to improve the teaching process and to make students’ assessment more relevant.

Avenues for Future Research

Indeed, the components of this expanded definition above provide the directions to areas of new research that will support open education in general. How do we make OER more attractive and incentivised for faculty members? What is the optimum road map from open content to proven OEP at the institutional level? Again, we are talking about benefits continuums to all stakeholders — are these clear? How do we expand open pedagogy, particularly engaging students in the design process for OER and input communication channels for OEP?

Summary

We still have extensive work to do in promoting the adoption and assimilation of open education in all its guises across the globe. The one commonality in everything open is *learning* — enhancing and

improving learning. All paths and all resources lead to learning. Moreover, institutions must consider visionary leadership, managing culture, and ensuring quality services to faculties and students engaged in the open environment.

The definition offered in this commentary was formulated collaboratively by the author and work begun by Garcia-Holgado et al. (2020). It is not perfect; it is a work in progress as is all of education and everything open. Conversely, this definition gives the readers and practitioners a starting point to reframe the open landscape. If you empower this definition by infusing leadership, culture, and service driven by trust and empathy, you are well on your way to building the right foundations of open education and teaching at your institution.

In the final analysis, as difficult as it is to admit, we got it wrong. Our collective leadership did not create the stable foundation necessary to take open content and related concepts exponentially forward within our institutions. Culture matters, context matters and yes — faculty matter. The illusions of our choir convinced us we were successful but that is simply wishful, mythical thinking. We have all heard the mantra before that any decision amongst leaders is better than no decision. This is a myth and only applies if the decision is the right one. We made the wrong one and refocusing now on open teaching is an opportunity to realign our open efforts on learning; and to embrace the criticality of leadership, culture and service infused with trust and empathy to progress open education by 2030 beyond our wildest expectations.

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