Can learning be free?

An investigation of open access from a learner perspective

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Certificate of authorship ..... **v**
Acknowledgments ..... **vi**
Note to the reader ..... **vii**
ABSTRACT ..... **ix**
Introduction **2**

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING THE IDEA OF 'OPENNESS' **4**

1 The question of free education **5**
1.1 The 'open' world 7
1.2 The need for access today 15
1.3 Access in the context of open educational resources 21
1.4 'A project of exploration' 26

2 A history of open access **29**
2.1 An (more nuanced) approach to understanding openness 31
2.2 Openness, access and the question of contemporary education 32
2.3 12th to 16th century: the opening and closing of higher education 37
2.4 17th century: the coffee-house education 39
2.5 18th century to 19th century: Newly open education 43
2.6 20th century education 44
2.7 A story of continuities and discontinuities 47
2.8 Conclusions: a story of open learning 57

PART 2: INVESTIGATING OPEN ACCESS TO LEARNING **59**

3 A methodological approach **60**
3.1 World view 61
3.2 Analytic Autoethnography 64
3.3 Institutional Ethnography 69
3.4 Analytic Autoethnography and Institutional Ethnography: a conversation 71
3.5 Criteria for quality 75
3.6 Open access learning experience data 78
3.7 Ethical considerations 79

4 An open learning journey **81**
4.1 Recovering and uncovering meaning 83
4.2 My open learning journey 90
4.3 The making of open learning 109
4.4 Conclusions 123

PART 3: RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION.....132

5. Imaginaries and interventions.....133

5.1 CONCEPTUALISING THE IMAGINARY.....134
5.2 THE IMAGINARY ACCESS.....139
5.3 AN IMAGINARY INTERVENTION.....161
5.4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS.....172

6 Re-imagining (the question of) access.....174

6.1 ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS OF ACCESS.....175
6.2 A CHANGING ECOSYSTEM.....177
6.3 A CHANGE IN MEANINGS.....181
6.4 A NEW QUESTION (OR HAVE MASSIVE OPEN ONLINE COURSES MADE OPEN EDUCATION IMPOSSIBLE?).....190
6.5 SOME CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....192

APPENDICES.....194
LIST OF CONCEPTS.....210
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....213

List of figures and tables

1.1 Comparison of selected major open initiatives 9
1.2 Major open education initiatives and ICT developments in the past ten years 10
1.3 Mapping openness 13
1.4 The open educational resource ecosystem 22
1.5 Excerpt from 2011 Background and action paper on OER Report prepared for The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation 24
1.6 MIT OCW users 2005, 2009, 2011 25
2.1 Dimensions of open educational resources 34
2.2 Dimensions of open accessibility 36
2.3 A history of open access 48
2.4 Years to reach 50% market penetration for telephone, computer, mobile phone and smartphone 52
2.5 Dimensions of open learning/education 56
3.1 Overview of research framework 63
3.2 The dimensions of autoethnography 67
3.3 The dimensions of autoethnography, reconsidered 73
3.4 The interplay of dimensions in analytic autoethnography 73
4.1 Experience, memory and the accounts they produce 86
4.2 The three dimensions of literacy according to Green (1999) 96
4.3 Video lecture part of a Yale open course in the Psychology, Biology and Politics of Food 97
4.4 Literacy dimensions based on Green (1988, 1999) 99
4.5 OpenStudy in 2010 102
4.6 Traces of engagement based on Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) 105
4.7 Flow based on Csikszentmihalyi (1988) 106
4.8 Illeris's (2007) dimensions of learning 108
4.9 Key course texts 110
4.10 Course description on the MIT course homepage 112
4.11 My copy of Molly O'Neill's American Food Writing 113
4.12 Sample Google search results 117
4.13 Amazon preview ('look inside') pages 120
4.14 Mapping major/significant institutional texts 122
4.15 A refined framework for open access 130
5.1 The dimensions of imaginary 138
5.2 Sample word cloud 141
5.3 Frames of imaginary of open educational initiatives 148
5.4 The meaning and purpose of higher education 150
5.5 The different facets of imaginaries around open access 158

Certificate of authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Note to the reader

When I first set out my outline of intended research I made a case for the importance of open educational resources to open access to learning and education. MIT's OpenCourseWare initiative was only five years old, many of those engaged in higher education were not familiar with any of the many open initiatives that were being developed around the world, and no one had participated in a massive open online course. There was relatively little discussion of such initiatives in areas outside academic, organizational and policy conversations directly concerned with their creation or use. The field was in its relative infancy.

As I complete my research study, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's OpenCourseWare initiative is more than a decade old, massive open online courses are regularly mainstream news and overall attention to openness in education and its meaning to traditional higher education is increasing exponentially. In the past 10 months alone tremendous changes have begun to reshape the landscape: MIT partnered with Harvard University and created the new online platform edX, newly founded for-profit educational technology company Coursera already has more than 2 million participants from almost 2000 countries in its online courses and Udacity, another for-profit educational venture, promises to "democratize" education. At the same time the popular media are attempting to define these practices, and their meaning to learning and education, faster than the academic communities of which they are a part.

Whilst such rapid development has provided some challenges to this study, it has also afforded a unique opportunity to examine the contemporary manifestation of 'open access' as it is in the process of transforming. Analysing a phenomenon that is still emerging has been both methodologically and theoretically challenging. It has been incredibly exciting, rewarding me with substantial insights and allowing me to consider critical interventions to the social imaginary of access to ensure that learning can be free.

Parts of this thesis have been published or have been accepted for publication (in earlier versions) in peer-reviewed publications, conference proceedings and online repositories.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the question of access to education, focussing particularly on the potential opening up of access to higher education that open educational resources (OER) seem to offer.

Starting with MIT's OpenCourseWare initiative, continuing with massive open online courses and emerging commercial start-ups, OERs promise free access to anyone, anywhere at any time. I am interested in open access that is expressed as the learner's ability to claim his or her learning (or educational) opportunity to achieve his or her learning goals. My research is conceptualised as a 'project of exploration' (Smith, 2005). I want to know how open access to learning is enabled through open educational resources, from the learner's perspective.

I propose three avenues for understanding open access. First, I draw on the little explored history of open learning to chart its development, ground the current discussion and provide a basis for understanding ways in which OERs may help meet today's opportunities and challenges. I explore how openness was then, as it is now, a matter of degree, the importance of the context in which open access becomes enabled and reconsider notions of literacy, technology, time and location. I also highlight the importance of association and stress the significant role that awareness plays.

Second, I investigate learner experience with OERs and use analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006a) to develop theoretical understandings of access through my own practice. I then move to a macro level perspective and use Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2005) to analyse that experience in the context of an ambiguously bounded, emerging, global education. I expand on the theoretical discussions around the possibilities afforded by analytic autoethnography and institutional ethnography. The two methodologies in conversation allow me to extend the framework for understanding access and learner profiles. They also throw light on the role of both traditional and new texts in organising experience, unmasking more profound instances of power, as embodied by search engines.

These insights challenge me to address a third dimension to examine the imaginary of access as it comes into existence and understand avenues for possible interventions. I examine how media representations come together to produce the imaginary around open access to learning. I also examine how institutional ethnography's commitment to social justice can be achieved by revealing the complexities of this phenomenon and setting the terms of current debates, if people are to achieve access for themselves.