Whether we consider ourselves to be open education practitioners or researchers, advocates or critics, wonderers or agnostics, our motivating questions regarding openness are likely to be different, often very different. For example: How can we minimize the cost of textbooks? How can we help students to build, own, and manage their digital content? How might we support and empower learners in making informed choices about their digital identities and digital engagement? How might we build knowledge as a collective endeavor? And, how can we broaden access to education, particularly in ways that do not reinforce existing inequalities? Open educational practices can help us in achieving these aims. However, engaging with the complexity and contextuality of openness is vitally important if we wish to be keepers not only of openness but also of hope, equality, and justice.
At present, open practices sit somewhat uneasily and unevenly within higher education. As Bonnie Stewart notes: “The word ‘open’ signals a broad, decentralized constellation of practices that skirt the institutional structures and roles by which formal learning has been organized for generations.”

Teaching and pedagogical interactions typically occur in higher education in one or more of the spaces illustrated in figure 1: physical spaces; bounded online spaces; and open online spaces. This is a simplification, of course, but useful for the purpose of comparison. There are good reasons for teaching and learning to occur in each of these spaces, depending on our particular aims and context. However, if we limit ourselves to the first two spaces, it is difficult to share our learning with wider networks and difficult to invite our networks to participate in the dynamic learning spaces we create. This is not simply a matter of, say, choosing to use Facebook simply because “that’s where our students are” (which is not a valid assumption in any case). It’s about recognizing the ubiquity of knowledge across networks, the importance of developing network as well as digital literacies, and the imperative of facilitating learning that fosters agency, empowerment, and civic participation.

The Open Education Consortium defines open education as “resources, tools and practices that employ a framework of open sharing to improve educational access and effectiveness worldwide.” Beyond this overarching definition, however, openness is a complex phenomenon, with economic, political, technical, and social aspects. The qualifier “open” is variously used to describe resources (the artefacts themselves as well as access to and usage of them), individual learning and teaching practices, institutional practices and policies,
Free resources are not unfettered, however. They can be accessed online by those with the requisite skills, device(s), and Internet connection.

So how do we grasp openness? A first step is to be clear about our own aims and interpretations. I’ve often used a simple typology of interpretations of openness (see figure 2) to contextualize and compare others’ work and to communicate my own. The first interpretation of openness in education is open admission, where the qualifier “open” refers to open-door academic policies, such as those of The Open University in the United Kingdom and dozens of open universities globally. A second interpretation is open as free. Using this interpretation, a vast array of online resources and courses would be considered open: YouTube videos, podcasts, TED Talks, and MOOCs, for example. Free resources are not unfettered however. They can be accessed online by those with the requisite skills, device(s), and Internet connection. Users are often required to register in order to access free resources, providing personal information such as a name and e-mail address. In such cases, even though the resources are free, they have an opportunity cost to the user in the form of personal data and usage data. In addition, the use of free online resources is subject to copyright restrictions unless the creators provide explicit permission for reuse of the original works. Many open education advocates and researchers thus consider the “open as free” interpretation to be limited.

Two further interpretations of “open” are OER (Open Educational Resources) and OEP (Open Educational Practices). OER are resources whose creators have expressly enabled reuse through the use of open licenses. OER embody the notion of knowledge as a public good: take it, use it, remix it, and share as you wish. OEP move
the focus beyond content. OEP are “practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning paths.” The most expansive definitions of OEP focus on OER, open pedagogy, and open learning, as well as power relations and inequality.

The deceptively simple term open hides a great deal of complexity, much of which depends on the particular context within which open practice is considered. Thus it is imperative to move beyond open-versus-closed dichotomies and even beyond unified conceptions of openness. Openness requires a critical approach.

We must be aware of the potential for openness to do the opposite of what we intend. And openness—which was overwhelmingly described as both an individual decision and an ongoing challenge. In the words of one academic: “You’re negotiating all the time.” Through this research, as well as ongoing work with faculty and students, I’ve found that individuals seek to balance privacy and openness in their use of social and participatory technologies at four levels (see figure 3): macro (global level), meso (community/network level), micro (individual level), and nano (interaction level).

Considering these different levels has proved helpful to me in understanding the personal and complex negotiations involved in open practice. At the macro level, individuals make decisions about
whether or not to engage in open networking and sharing, for example via Twitter or blogging. Some individuals opt out at this level. Those who engage further in open practice must consider questions at three additional levels. At the *meso* level, individuals consider whom they would like to share *with* (e.g., family, friends, faculty, students, interest groups, the wider public), as well as those with whom they do not want to share. At the *micro* level, individuals make decisions about their digital identities—that is, who they will share *as.* And at the *nano* level, individuals make decisions about individual open transactions: “Will I like, follow, friend, post, tweet, tag, or share *this*?” Think, for example, of those moments when you’ve hovered over your keyboard or phone before pressing “Send.” As one academic in my research study put it: “It’s a lot of work for one tweet.” Formal and informal professional development initiatives often focus at the top or macro level, describing the benefits of sharing and supporting staff in learning how to use various tools. But the complex and ongoing work of open practice happens beneath this level—at the meso, micro, and nano levels—where issues around context collapse and digital identity are negotiated.

In summary, openness does not involve a one-time decision, and it is not universally experienced. It is always complex, personal, contextual, and continually negotiated. Attention must be paid to the actual experiences and concerns of students and faculty. Critical approaches are essential. I believe we must support faculty and students by working broadly and collaboratively in three key areas: developing digital literacies and digital capabilities; specifically supporting individuals in navigating tensions between privacy and openness; and, most critically, reflecting on the role of higher education and the roles of and relationships between educators and students in an increasingly open and networked society.
Notes


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