The True and False Promise of Open Educational Resources, or, How Open Educational Resources are Condemned to Wither without Open Pedagogy

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Abstract

Open Educational Resources (OER) are not an overarching panacea which will solve every concern of low-income students. Low- or no-cost material will definitely help every student economically; however, it is only by developing social relationships by the inclusion of everyone's knowledge that OER and Open Pedagogy (OP) will fulfill their true radical, democratic potential. Open Educational Resources have undoubtedly changed the educational landscape, but student outcomes depend upon how we will, as a community of learners, construct it, use it, and improve it. In our view, the solution is to practice Open Pedagogy while using Open Educational Resources.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, Open Pedagogy, social relationships, alienation, liberation, inclusion

La verdadera y falsa promesa de los recursos educativos abiertos

Resumen

Los Recursos Educativos Abiertos (REA) no son una panacea general que resolverá todas las preocupaciones de los estudiantes de bajos ingresos. El material de bajo costo o sin costo definitivamente ayudará a todos los estudiantes económicamente; sin embargo, solo mediante el desarrollo de las relaciones sociales mediante la inclusión del conocimiento de todos, los REA y la Pedagogía Abierta (OP) alcanzarán su verdadero potencial democrático radical. Los Recursos Educativos Abiertos sin duda han cambiado el panorama...
educativo, pero los resultados de los estudiantes dependen de cómo lo construiremos, usaremos y mejoraremos como comunidad de estudiantes. En nuestra opinión, la solución es practicar la pedagogía abierta mientras se utilizan los recursos educativos abiertos.

**Palabras clave:** Recursos Educativos Abiertos, Pedagogía Abierta, relaciones sociales, alienación, liberación, inclusión

開放教育資源的真假承諾

**摘要**

開放教育資源（OER）不是解決低收入學生所有顧慮的萬能藥。低成本或零成本材料確實能從經濟上幫助所有學生；不過，只有通過將每個人的知識包括在內，進而發展出社會關係，OER和開放教學法（OP）才能實現其根本的、民主的潛能。毋庸置疑的是，開放教育資源已改變了教育景觀（educational landscape），但學生成果取決於作為學習者社群的我們如何構建、使用和提升OER。我們認為，解決方案是在使用開放教育資源的同時實行開放教學法。

關鍵詞：開放教育資源，開放教學法，社會關係，異化，自由化，包容

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**Introduction**

The murder of George Floyd angered the world. As educators, we have the responsibility to respond, more than ever, to the cries for social justice demanded by many people in America and in the world. How can we, as educators, respond to the issue of democracy, equity, and social justice that we are facing today? Open Educational Resources and Open Pedagogy are one of many solutions that we can use to promote greater democracy, equity, and social justice in today’s world. Open Educational Resources and Open Pedagogy can contribute to the common good if we, as educators and political being, use them.

The UNESCO defines Open Educational Resources (OER) as “teaching, learning or research materials that are in the public domain or released with intellectual property licenses that facilitate the free use, adaptation and distribution of resources”\(^1\). Due to their being freely distributed, OER responds to an important student need: the expen-
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The true cost of textbooks. This important concern is discussed by professors and administrators in an effort to increase the participation, GPA, retention, and graduation. OER supports the inclusion of every student; this is especially true for low-income students, who are subject to the high cost of higher education. With the exception of big publishing corporations, many educators, administrators, students, and institutions think that OER is fundamental for the future of higher education. However, the economic inclusion provided by OER is only the first step. Using a Marxist critical framework, we argue that this first step, the use of OER with the sole intention of providing low- or no-cost texts to students, especially low-income students, is condemned to fail.

The potential locked within OER can only be reached through the social, cultural, and creative inclusion of all students, especially those whom stories and history had been historically rejected from commercial textbook. David Wiley suggests that “Using OER the same way we used commercial textbooks misses the point.” The solution is to use Open Pedagogy to transform the world by offering “activities which actually added value to the world.” Geser (2007) defines open pedagogy as “active, constructive engagement with content, tools and services in the learning process, and promot[ing] learners’ self-management, creativity and working in teams” (37). Social, cultural, and creative inclusion can be attained through the moderate modification of OER. David Wiley explains that revision causes one to “edit, adapt, and modify your copy of the resource” and remixing allows faculty to “combine your original or revised copy of the resource with other existing material to create something new.”2 This is why open pedagogy is fundamental to attaining inclusion.

Open pedagogy offers the opportunity to students to create and edit materials for an audience. Members of the audience can be other students, professors, administrators, members of the local community, or members of the world community, depending on the specific media selected.

Students can write or edit Wikipedia materials. Students can illustrate textbooks with the perspectives of underserved and oppressed communities whose voice is excluded from commercial publishing. Students can create test banks and explain their reasoning for excluding the wrong answers. Students can create discussion questions which focus on their own social reality. Students can create videos or add comments on videos which already exist. Students can create pedagogical learning experiences like board games, or specific situations to help other students to understand concepts and theories. Students can create step-by-step templates to guide learners through specific assignments. Students can create assignments. Students can guide the

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2 Defining the "Open" in Open Content and Open Educational Resources was written by David Wiley and published freely under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license at http://opencontent.org/definition/
reading of the material by including questions on the margins of a textbook. The possibilities of Open Education are endless under such conditions.

To explain these two steps, we will use a different theoretical framework. In the past, OER and OP had been under analyzed theoretically (Bayne, Knox, & Ross, 2015; Deiman & Farrow, 2013; Edwards, 2015; Knox, 2013; Moe, 2015). In recent years, a social justice theoretical framework had been used to achieve this (Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotters 2018, Lambert 2018). Miller (2019) used the real utopian sociologist framework created by Erik Olin Wright (2010, 2012) to theorize OER and OP. Our intention is to use conflict perspective (Marx, Gramsci, and Bourdieu) and the school of Frankfort (Marcuse) to show the power of the OER/OP movement and the dangers which can ruin it.

In the first part of our argument, we will argue that OER and Open Pedagogy can liberate us, professors and students, from the alienation of some of our practices. We also argue that without including the potential creative, social, and cultural inclusion of OER, its economic inclusion is condemned to fail.

In the second part of our argument, we will argue that many barriers can destroy the essence of the OER revolution by reducing it to a simple cultural commodity reproducing cultural inequalities.

The Liberating Essence of the OER Movement

From the alienation to the liberation of creativity

Using the concept of alienation (Marx, 1959), or estranged labor, we argue that by responding to their assignments, students are alienated like laborers are alienated when working in a factory. In an assembly line, laborers do not decide how they will produce a commodity. Engineers design the commodity and the way to produce it. Laborers are not workers in the sense that workers create the product and identify the best way to produce it. Laborers only follow directions. This process alienates their creativity. In Marx’s words, “this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers.”
In this sense, students are like laborers. Most of the time, they are deprived of their creativity when responding to assignments created only by the professor. Students rarely select the topic of their assignment. In the best-case scenario, students are fully informed of the professor’s expectations. In the worst-case scenario, students have to know or guess. To respond to this lack of creativity, educators can use Open Education.

Open Education offers the opportunity to liberate students from alienation by creating assignments in which they have to produce knowledge. It can be an individual or a collective creation of knowledge. Students come with assets and interests; by asking them to reveal these assets and interests to their learning community (the professor and to their classmates), we can start a conversation about connecting their talents and their interests to the course content. Assignments can become an opportunity for students to be creative by selecting the topic, the medium (video, papers, photos...), and the evaluations. This process changes the power dynamic in the classroom radically, in the sense that faculty becomes a learner in a community of learner, and an instructor in a community of instructors. The antagonistic approach of instructor learner is replaced by a more democratic process focusing on social relationships (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004).

**From alienation with others to the creation of social relationship**

Second, students, in the production of their assignments, are alienated from other students just as laborers are alienated from other laborers in the assembly lines. Laborers are in competition with each other to get a job which will provide a wage to support them. By being in competition which each other, they lose perspective on their class consciousness and their ability to understand that they are united through the same conditions of exploitation. For Marx, “the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he confronts the other man.”

Students are also alienated from other students but in a different way. Students are not in competition for wages; yet they compete against each other to receive the best possible grades or to be known by their professor to benefit from them, in the form of letters of recommendations, teaching assistant opportunities, research opportunities and so on. Students are also alienated because they compose their assignments for only one person: the professor. This process does not create intellectual exchange nor the development of a community.

Open Pedagogy offers the opportunity to create relationships between people by sharing the knowledge which is produced. An intellectual creation becomes an intellectual creation only by being shared with an audience that can agree or disagree, and thus critique the work. The intellectual work can be passed on to future students in the course, to the campus community, the
local community, students friends and family, or to a larger public by using the Internet. Regardless of the audience, what is important is diffusion with the intention of fostering human relationships. In “The Gift,” Marcel Mauss suggested that first societies created social relationships between different groups or tribes by exchanging gifts. The person or group receiving the gift is “forced” to reciprocate at a later date. This exchange in creates society. This is what Open Educational Resources can offer to our society: creating a society by freely diffusing produced knowledge based on the work of another person or group. The advantage of diffusion of knowledge is that it eliminates the “forced” reciprocity between individuals or groups who are in relationship and know each other. This diffusion of knowledge can create a new collective consciousness based on organic relationships (Durkheim, 2014) between people who don't know each other but create knowledge regardless of differences and singularities.

From cultural exclusion to cultural inclusion

Textbooks, as a commodity, are put on the market for profit. To maximize profits, publishing companies create products which are “tested” on the most populated states in the United States. Publishers do not provide a cultural product, but a pure commodity designed to provide a higher benefit in the form of profit. It is a commercial enterprise and not an intellectual one. To be profitable, these materials promulgate a mass-market cultural narrative which legitimizes and supports the status quo. By doing so, many cultural perspectives are deleted or ignored. In this sense, textbooks are an excellent example of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). At an international level, textbooks written from Eurocentric and North American perspectives are an agent of cultural imperialism which promote the supremacy of the Eurocentric and North American view and the inferiority of the non-occidental perspective. Quinn and Vorster (2017), discussing protestors in South Africa, explained that they were protesting the westernized world view offered in higher education and the limited inclusion of “scholars from the Global South” (p. 131) At every level, textbooks vehicle the social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) of inequality by diffusing a culture which has been institutionalize by the and for the powerful. The textbook is a commodity which includes the culture, values, and beliefs of the powerful while denying the experiences and realities of oppressed groups.

OER offers the opportunity for every group and every community to participate in the diffusion of knowledge. Every standpoint, every perspective, every experience can be included to provide a variety of world views. OER is the perfect tool to challenge the power dynamic in the production and diffusion of knowledge (Cox, Masuku, and Willmers 2020). However, OER is only a tool and much depends how we are use it. OER can also be used against OP and against the inclusion that it represents.
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The Danger of OER

The fight in and over the OER movement

The Open Educational Resource movement, like every social movement, is affected by two types of conflicts. The first type is internal to the movement and represents a conflict over the institutionalization of the definition. Pierre Bourdieu discusses this process in terms of field when analyzing art and literature (Bourdieu 1993, 1995). For Bourdieu, different groups exist in the art world and the literary world. These different groups vie with each other to control, legitimize, and institutionalize their own definition of what art and literature should be. By controlling the definition, the group assures its status, prestige, and revenue. The same process happens in the OER and OP movement. It is present in any movement, regardless of its democratic, egalitarian, social justice or inclusive nature. Despite its intrinsic nature in any movement, the resolution of this conflict can divide, affect, or destroy any movement. By recognizing and understanding the process, members of the movement can use this dynamic to reinforce the democratic process instead of destroying it.

The second type is external. The OER movement decreases the revenues and profits of publishers. Publishers responded and are responding to the movement by creating a counter-movement to assure their continued profits. One technique used by publishers is to sue organizations which promote OER. In 2012, Boundless, an OER “start up,” was sued by Pearson, Cengage, and Macmillan. The three publishers accused Boundless of copyright violation for three specific products of their catalogue. In June 2020, Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette and Wiley sued Internet Archive for violation of copyright (Harris 2020). These concrete examples are a way to intimidate educators, administrators, universities, and companies invested in OER. A less aggressive technique used by publishers was the adoption of inclusive access (McKenzie, 2017). Inclusive access is a strategy used by an institution to assign to an entire class the same electronic copy of the material. Students are not buying the material individually. Their institution of higher education purchases the commercial material at a discount price and the cost is included as a part of students’ tuition fees. This approach, selected by some institutions of higher education, seems interesting in terms of cost saving and assuring that students have the same material on the first day of class. On the other hand, it is largely invisible- students may not see the cost of purchasing educational material. Regardless of the strategy used, a conflict between publishers selling commercial material and the OER movement providing free material is happening and is affecting the movement’s success.

The possible fetishization of OER as commodity

Using the concept of fetishism of commodities, we argue that it is important for every educator who selects OER on any level to discuss the intention of saving money (economic intention) and to explain the intention of OER as a social movement to share knowledge (political intention). Without discussing and explaining these two ideas with students, OER can become a fetish, “an object believed to have magical power.” In “Capital,” Marx used the following adjectives to describe the fetishization of the commodity: “mystical”, “mysterious”, “enigmatical”, “fantastic”, “necromancy”. OER can be venerated because it is free. Everyone likes what is free, but they do not realize that nothing is free. Using the opposing logic, OER can be rejected because it is free. Some people believe that what is free has less value than something paid for. OER can become a positive or negative fetish, a form of talisman in which the content and the intention is disregarded because of the absence of cost. To destroy the fetishism of OER as a form of commodity, it is important to discuss the political and economical reasons of production, consumption, and transformation of OER. If it is not done, OER will be simply consumed as a vulgar form of cultural product, and will not be successful in transforming social relationships. As a simple commodity, OER would simply perpetuate alienation between human beings.

The commodification of OER

In addition, we need to be careful of the commodification of Open Educational Resources. Commodification is the process of transforming a public or private social relationship into a commodity which can be bought or sold. The commodification process generally involves the use of an expert who sells its knowledge, understanding, and practices, as well as the diffusion of a culture of experts who possess greater knowledge and experience than the “non-expert”. In traditional societies, family members and community members take care of children or the elderly. Taking care of other was based on a social relationship. Today, educators and health care providers, individuals possessing expertise, take care of children and the elderly for a fee. In the case of Open Educational Resources, many companies are offering services, for a fee, to support OER. For example, in courses which require using Lumen material, the cost for the material is $25.00 per students but it can goes to $33.00 if the course requires the use of skill build-

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5 Marx explains: “Consequently it was the analysis of the prices of commodities that alone led to the determination of the magnitude of value, and it was the common expression of all commodities in money that alone led to the establishment of their characters as values. It is, however, just this ultimate money form of the world of commodities that actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers.” (The Capital)

6 https://lumenlearning.com/how/payment-options/ Retrieved 7/06/2020
ing and peer community, that is, “if the professor also wants to participate in Circles” (Young, 2020). ITS Learning, a learning platform “includes 5 million quality open educational resources?” and offers LMS implementation, LMS Integration, Content Management, and Professional Development for a fee. OER is a new market and companies want a piece of what appears to be a very rich cake. However, these companies, by providing services which may be needed by some instructors, school districts, or universities, are destroying the essence of OER. These companies are transforming a social relationship between members of an intellectual community into a market. They are organizing the commodification of OER. We can only predict that the idealist creators of knowledge who offer their work for free may stop doing so after seeing that their effort is profiting companies. This commodification process reduces their work to a product.

The technological rationality of OER

Finally, the focus on technology may be another downside of the OER movement. In North America, the discussion on economic inclusion and increasing access has been integrated into a technological perspective. This unfortunate way of thinking assumes that technology can solve every concern of our societies. It is what Herbert Marcuse (1982, 1991), one of the main philosopher of the Frankfurt School, call technological rationality. Instead of focusing on the roots of a concern, technological rationality assumes that technology will provide a solution. This fetishization of technology, excluding the political acumen of humans and their ability to create the world around them, is condemned to fail.

This argument was illustrated by Funk and Guthadjaka (2020) when they discussed open platforms. They explained that “that emancipatory digital technologies such as open platforms may reproduce western knowledge domination, a feature that has marked the entire history of cultural and linguistic relations between white Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Such domination is not the explicit aim of these ‘open’ technologies which ostensibly seek to democratise access and participation, but because they are structured with western knowledge and reliant on English proficiency, they create conditions of exclusion just as they do inclusion.” (2020, p. 2)

Conclusion

OER is not a miracle solution which will solve every concern of low-income students. Low- or no-cost material will definitely help every student economically. However, it is only by developing social relationships by the inclusion of everyone’s knowledge that OER and OP will fulfill their true radical democratic potential.

8 https://itslearning.com/us/services/overview/ Retrieved 7/06/2020
OER is a great tool. But like every great tool, the result depends on how we will together, as a community of learners, construct it, use it, and improve it. In our view, the solution is to practice Open Pedagogy when using Open Educational Resources.

References


