

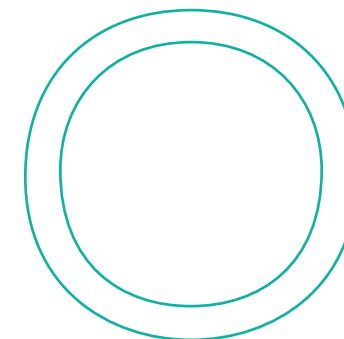


The Open Course

Through the Open Door: Open Courses as Research, Learning, and Engagement

Let attention be paid not to the matter, but to the shape I give it.
—Montaigne

By Dave Cormier
and George Siemens



ver the last decade, as educators have increasingly experimented with social technologies and interactive pedagogies, the concept of a “course” has been significantly challenged. In particular, questions have arisen as to the key value of the course in the educational system. Is the value the content—the academic journal articles, lectures, textbooks, and libraries that compose much of the teaching and learning process? Or is it the engagement and interaction that occurs through discussions? Or is it the self-organized activities of learners in the social spaces of a college or university?

The numerous high-profile open courseware initiatives from elite universities suggest that content itself is not a sufficient value point on which to build the future of higher education. Indeed, the creators of the OpenCourseWare (OCW) initiative at MIT began with the realization that they were “not going to try to make money” from their content.¹ The actions of institutions like MIT suggest that the true benefit of the academy is the interaction, the access to the debate, to the negotiation of knowledge—not to the stale cataloging of content.

We are, in effect, returning to Socratic roots. The change that so worried Socrates was the writing down of knowledge, so that a learner could imitate understanding ideas by being reminded of them, giving the learner the “appearance of wisdom,” not its reality.² The technologies available to Plato and Aristotle and eventually to Gutenberg (writing and the book) allowed content to be scaled and to be used as a vehicle for truth.³ Now, with social/network technologies, negotiation of knowledge itself can be scaled. As communications technologies allow collaboration beyond the classroom space—beyond restrictions set by fire marshals and practical limitations of face-to-face discussions—a new world of possibilities opens up.

With each budget line in higher education facing increasing scrutiny, the conditions under which innovation happens are also changing. The field of educational technology has been heavily impacted by this new reality; the promise of open source and the reverberations of open content have forced colleges and universities to reconsider the ways in which they invest in technology for education. Whereas openness is a new business model, bringing with it new fears and new opportunities, it is also a chance for faculty to take their work to a new audience. In open models of learning and education, faculty can try new things and innovate without having to call on the funding sources that have traditionally accompanied the desire to use technology to change learning.

Although the open course, as positioned here, builds on a long tradition of opening up the academy through lectures, learning via television, and public forums, it is relatively new in the online form. Online open courses challenge a number of assumptions about the idea of the course and can give educators—be they faculty members, trainers, or teachers—new insights into their fields as well as make the teaching process more rewarding. Online open courses allow for innovation in how educators prepare to teach, how learners negotiate knowledge from the information they are encountering, and how courses can have an impact on the broader field of study. Online open courses can leverage communications technologies and open the door to learners to fully engage with the academic process. Open courses offer a new possible future for those of us in higher education—a value choice that promotes collaboration, responsibility, and a commitment to seeing that we can accomplish our goals together.

Openness as Transparent Practice

The word *open* is in constant negotiation. When learners step through our open door, they are invited to enter our place of work, to join the research, to join the discussion, and to contribute in the growth of knowledge within a certain

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field. The openness of the academy refers to openness as a *sense of practice*.⁴ Openness of this sort is best seen as transparency of activity.

In an open course, participants engage at different levels of the educator's practice, whether that be helping to develop a course or participating in the live action of the course itself. This is distinctly different from the idea of *open* in the open content movement, where *open* is used in the sense of being free from the intellectual property stipulations that restrict the use and reuse of content. The

distinction between openness in practice and openness in content is significant in cost as well. Creating content requires time, effort, and resources and opens up numerous discussions around intellectual property rights. However, openness in practice requires little additional investment, since it essentially concerns transparency of already planned course activities on the part of the educator.

Over the last several years, open courses taught by Dave Cormier and George Siemens (“Education Futures,” <http://edfutures.com/>), David Wiley (“Introduction to Open Education,” http://www.opencontent.org/wiki/index.php?title=Intro_Open_Ed_Syllabus), George Siemens and Stephen Downes (“Connectivism and Connective Knowledge,” <http://ltc.umanitoba.ca/connectivism/>), Alec Couros (“Social Media and Open Education,” <http://eci831.wikispaces.com/>), and others have called into question the content-centric view of traditional educator-formed courses. Under the banner of “open courses” or “massive open online courses” (MOOCs), thousands of learners, from around the world, have been able to engage in learning experiences for a nominal fee. The MOOC, or connectivist, course model strives to do for the teaching and learning process what MIT did for course content.

MOOCs

A massive open online course (MOOC) is a potential byproduct of open teaching and learning. The term was coined in response to Siemens and Downes's 2008 “Connectivism and Connective Knowledge” course. An initial group of twenty-five participants registered and paid to take the course for credit. The course was then opened up for other learners to participate: course lectures, discussion forums, and weekly online sessions were made available to nonregistered learners. This second group of learners—those

who wanted to participate but weren't interested in course credit—numbered over 2,300. The addition of these learners significantly enhanced the course experience, since additional conversations and readings extended the contributions of the instructors.

For those learners who are not officially registered participants, the MOOC mirrors a discussion at a conference, in a research lab, or in a workshop. One of the key reasons for creating an open course is to bring a wide variety of perspectives to bear on a given topic. In the case of Siemens and Downes's course in both 2008 and 2009 and also Cormier and Siemens's "Education Futures" course, the instructors were interested in taking a broader look at the ideas. The course members resemble the people in a corner having an in-depth discussion that others can choose to enter. Enough structure is

provided by the course that if a learner is interested in the topic, he or she can build sufficient language and expertise to participate peripherally or directly. The registration process is the approach to the conversation; the filtering, the deciding whether or not to participate, happens after registration. The more people who walk over to talk, the better the chance will be that people will contribute to the conversation.

Why Courses Still Matter

Although courses are under pressure in the "unbundling" or fragmentation of information in general, the learning process *requires* coherence in content and conversations. Learners need some sense of what they are choosing to do, a sense of *eventedness*.⁵ Even in traditional courses, learners must engage in a process of forming coherent views of a topic.

The discussions in the first few weeks of an open course frequently address the feeling of disorientation that learners experience. In contrast with a structured, often linear course, an open course utilizes learning material from numerous sources. The conversations occur in various forums: blogs, Twitter, course discussion boards, virtual worlds, and in some cases, face-to-face. With digitally-thinned classroom walls and accessibility to numerous conversations and content sources, a course serves an important role as an information and discussion center.

Being Open

Open Educators

The opening up of the teaching process is an important dimension of openness in education more broadly. Increasingly, educators are able to share and par-

ticipate in the trials and successes of their fellow educators as they tweet and blog about their work. This process can be as simple as posting ideas for the classroom or as profound as posting daily reflections on the successes and failures of different approaches. For example, the warm-up course for the “Education Futures” course, taught in Singapore, shows how open teaching can encourage the participation of other experts to enrich the learning experience.⁶

Open Curricula

The idea of openness can be applied to the curriculum of a given course as well. As content becomes readily available and as searching for it becomes easier, allowing learners to participate in the creation of their own curriculum becomes increasingly

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realistic. The move away from standard class structures and toward a lifelong learning model also encourages this, since it allows learners with different interests and needs to create their own flavor of a course within the course. The community-as-curriculum model inverts the position of curriculum: rather than being a prerequisite for a course, curriculum becomes an output of a course.⁷ This is particularly useful in adult professional learning environments, where learners come to a course with diverse skills and needs. The community-as-curriculum model allows the curriculum to diverge on a learner-by-learner basis.

Open Learners

Learners themselves have become open to a variety of nontraditional learning models. They are now able, sometimes through the open access noted above and sometimes through access to other materials and guidance, to engage in their own learning outside of a classroom structure. Although this has always been possible, of course, learners now have considerably more access to content and more opportunities to engage online (through synchronous tools such as Elluminate and Skype). Yet analysis of the open courses noted above reveals a reluctance on the part of many learners to engage in open online

discourse. This initial reluctance is minimized somewhat over time, but some learners have strong personal reasons for not wanting to form an online identity through transparent open learning (e.g., one learner was concerned about a former abusive partner).

What We've Learned So Far

Filtering

The most disconcerting issue for many educators running an open course is the drop-out rate. In a traditional course, various filters control the number of participants who make the baseline commitment to join a given course. The first, and most obvious, filter is the price of entry. Other filters include the location of a given course, the registrarial structures around it, and the accessibility of the enrollment structures.

An important side effect of these limiting structures is that learners are forced to seriously consider their participation in a course before taking the first step into the learning environment. In an open course, learners are able to sample from a single live event; they may participate simply by looking through the suggested articles

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or discussions, or they may decide to participate in different ways over different parts of the course. The filtering, then, begins *after* the participant has started the course. It is only after the participant has begun working on the course that the time pressures of daily life start to wean out those who are not fully committed or those who tend to a different type of learning.

Facilitating

Open learning does not negate the role of the educator. Instead, open learning adjusts the role of the educator with respect to access to new content and engagement tools now under the control of the learner. Educators continue to play an important role in facilitating interaction, sharing information and resources, challenging assertions, and contributing to learners' growth of knowledge.

The Social Contract

Participatory learning requires active contribution from all participants. In larger courses, this will often result

in learners forming subnetworks addressing particular topics, themes, and methods. For example, in the "Connectivism and Connective Knowledge" course, a group of Second Life participants held weekly discussion sessions in-world.

Regardless of how learners self-organize, the social contract in open courses differs from that in traditional courses. The social contract in an open course is based on the participatory pedagogy model.⁸ The educator provides a frame, foundation, or platform for learning through starting-point readings and resources. With this structure in place, learners are expected to actively contribute to the formation of the curriculum through conversations, discussions, and interactions. Without the active involvement of learners, the course retains a limited structure of educator-provided content rather than becoming a multifaceted web of intersecting concepts, ideas, and connections to peripheral fields—a *bricolage*. Educators must be clear in their description

ROLES OF EDUCATORS IN ONLINE COURSES

Educator Role	Activity of Educator	Tactics and Tools
Amplifying	Drawing attention to important ideas/concepts	Twitter, blogs
Curating	Arranging readings and resources to scaffold concepts	Learning design, tutorials, adjustment of weekly activities to reflect course flow
Wayfinding	Assisting learners to rely on social sense-making through networks	Comments on learners' blog posts, help with social network formation, "live slides" method*
Aggregating	Displaying patterns in discussions and content	Google Alerts, RSS reader, visual tools (e.g., Many Eyes)
Filtering	Assisting learners in thinking critically about information/conversations available in networks	RSS reader, discussion of information trust, conceptual errors
Modeling	Displaying successful information and interaction patterns	All use of tools and activities to reflect educators' modeling of appropriate practices
Staying Present	Maintaining continual instructor presence during the course, particularly during natural activity lulls	Daily (or regular newsletter), activity in forums, video posts, podcasts, weekly live sessions in synchronous tools (e.g., Elluminate)

*Dave Cormier, "Presenting with Live Slides," *Dave's Educational Blog*, November 6, 2009, <<http://davecormier.com/edb/2009/11/06/presenting-with-live-slides-ocr-literacies-libraries-and-the-future-pres/>>.

Source: Based on George Siemens, "Teaching in Social and Technological Networks," *Connectivism: Networked and Social Learning*, February 16, 2010, <<http://www.connectivism.ca/?p=220>>.

of the challenges faced by learners in a bricolage-style environment so that learners will understand the investment necessary for success. That understanding is critical for an effective social contract between educator and learner.

Open Accreditation?

A major challenge confronting the open models discussed above involves how we can talk about what is being learned. Traditional accreditation models will (and have) run into significant difficulties when they confront openness. How are we to assess and accredit work when not all learners are doing the same work? How can we deal with peripheral participation? How can participants make an informed decision on how the course will help them without knowing what they are going to get from it? There is a strong division among learners in open

courses as to whether it is even necessary to have a form of accreditation.⁹

The challenge of accreditation for open courses may be one of the most interesting possibilities for growth in course enrollment. It's quite possible that in an open course, a learner would start or even complete a course before engaging in a formal accreditation process. If the assessment model is a combination of peer review, participation, and formative/portfolio assessment, the accreditation could be entirely separate from the running of the course.

Conclusion

Growing complexities in all areas of society indicate an increased need to consider networked, holistic, and integrated models of knowledge and learning. Nowhere is this more evident than in the world served by higher education.

Solving complex problems is simply not possible in the solitary, "expert model" of higher education. Open courses provide educators and learners with an opportunity to develop the skills, knowledge, and mindsets needed to participate in complex, ever-shifting real-world situations in which *coming to know* is as important as *knowing*.

Open courses are not a new way to pass on knowledge from the initiated to the acolyte. Rather, they are an acknowledgment that passing knowledge from one to another is not, and has never been, the primary goal of the academy. The academy seeks to grow knowledge by engaging learners and members of society in a discussion, an exploration. Open courses permit educators and a global network of learners to participate in research, learning, and sense-making around a given topic. In opening our

doors to collaborative participation, we are making a value judgment about what we want higher education to be and are also, perhaps, opening the door to new research, learning, and business models of our own. ■

Notes

1. Quoted in Rebecca Attwood, "Get It Out in the Open," *Times Higher Education*, September 24, 2009, <<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=408300>>.
2. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a-b.
3. Bonnie Stewart, "Techknowledge: Literate Practice and Digital Worlds," *New York Studies in Media Philosophy*, vol. 7 (2002), pp. 44-47, <<http://www.cgs.edu/mediaphi/pdfs/bonnie-stewart-techknowledge.pdf>>, archived at <<http://www.webcitation.org/5Xed19AOc>>.
4. See Dave Cormier, "Open Educational Resources: The Implications for Educational Development," *Dave's Educational Blog*, November 24, 2009, <<http://davecormier.com/edblog/2009/11/24/open-educational-resources-the-implications-for-educational-development-seda/>>.
5. See David White and Alison Le Cornu, "Eventedness and Disjuncture in Virtual Worlds," *Educational Research*, vol. 52, no. 2 (June 2010), pp. 183-196, <<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a922236000>>.
6. Dave Cormier, "Day 2 Futures Education Course: Trends," *Dave's Educational Blog*, April 6, 2010, <<http://davecormier.com/edblog/2010/04/06/day-2-futures-education-course-trends/>>.
7. Dave Cormier, "Rhizomatic Education: Community as Curriculum," *Innovate*, vol. 4, no. 5 (2008), <http://innovateonline.info/pdf/vol4_issue5/Rhizomatic_Education_Community_as_Curriculum.pdf>. An early iteration of a "non-course" course is proposed in George Siemens, "Elearning Course," *ellearnspace*, August 27, 2002, <http://www.ellearnspace.org/Articles/elearning_course.htm>.
8. Betty Collis and Jef Moonen, "Web 2.0 Tools and Processes in Higher Education: Quality Perspectives," *Educational Media International*, vol. 45, no. 2 (June 2008), pp. 93-106, <<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a793858056&db=all>>.
9. Dave Cormier, "Accreditation and Assessment in an Open Course: An Opening Proposal," *Open Course in Education Futures*, April 18, 2010, <<http://edfutures.com/blogs/davecormier/accreditation-and-assessment-open-course-opening-proposal>>.

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