# A Commentary on the Paradigm Shift Toward Openness in Higher Education

## Special Issue: Paradigm Shifts in Global Higher Education and eLearning

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A paradigm shift in education could briefly be described as a profound change in the theoretical and conceptual models that are commonly accepted in the field. These models are important because they provide solutions and roadmaps to professionals, including educational researchers, practitioners, administrators, and policy makers. As many practitioners would know from experience, a multitude of paradigms coincide in education. Partly because this is a multidisciplinary field that is connected to psychology, sociology, politics, and history, among others, and mostly because specific instances of teaching and learning are always situated in a socio-cultural context, there are vast differences in the way education is understood and practiced. The result of this complexity is that there is not a single common knowledge base (a unified body of knowledge) for educators to draw from for their practice. To further complicate matters, what is "new" and "old" is debatable. It is not uncommon for educators to look back into educational history, only to rediscover, reconsider, or build on an educational theory or approach with new developments or in the light of a contemporary issue. (For example, the rediscovery of the works of Ivan Illich in the discourse on open and networked learning or the intersection of critical pedagogy and inclusive teaching in higher education in the U.K.) As such, it is not surprising new paradigms often co-exist with their precursors and lead to a diversity in practice.

Arguably though, the biggest paradigm shift in education in the 21th century has been the move from brick and mortar spaces toward online learning, as Harasim argued almost two decades ago [1]. Since then educators have experienced many sub-shifts in learning and teaching in higher education, such as mobile learning, networked learning, and massification of learning. However, perhaps the most influential sub-shift has been openness in education, which is evidenced by Bozkurt et al.'s study [2]. The researchers looked at research trends in distance education between 2009 and 2013 and found there was a paradigm change from distance education to open and distance learning, which shows distance education is increasingly becoming open—whether that means free, easily accessible, or publicly available. Higher education not only has become online and blended, it is also opening up on a global level.

It is challenging to capture the diversity and richness of open educational practices in one post. But there are some broad implications of openness for practitioners and learners, which can be used as useful entry points to better understand the shift toward openness in higher education and why it matters One important implication is that openness has provided new possibilities for academic scholarship and how it is defined (see Katy Jordan, Bonnie Stewart, and George Veletsianos). Scholarship in open online networks can include teaching,

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learning and research activities that may not fit the practices of traditional academic communities and traditional academic roles. As professionals (or non-professionals for that matter) participate in online networks and share their experiences and knowledge on platforms like blogs, personal websites, and social networking sites, and via non-traditional tools like videos or podcasts, scholarship becomes a lot more diverse and multimodal. It also becomes a lot more transparent.

With openness, learners have greater opportunities and choices for learning too. In a recent faculty development program on educational technology at a public university in the U.K., only two of the many tools educators considered using in their classes were confined to the institutional space (forums and questionnaires on the learning management system). The rest of them were available on the open web (just to name a few, Twitter, Kahoot!, Padlet, Mentimeter, Pressbooks, and WordPress blogs). Other examples are the increasing popularity of the open textbooks initiative in the U.S., and now in the UK, and open online courses such as MOOCs and open courseware. These initiatives enable those outside of academic settings to have access to specialized disciplinary knowledge in non-conventional ways. Of course, this does not mean students no longer need teachers. On the contrary, teacher roles have become immensely diverse in open and networked platforms. Teachers can be facilitators, curators, conveners, co-learners, and designers; they can provide support and mentoring.

Openness can also provide a magnifying glass to forgotten, ignored, never attended, or messy issues in education. When MIT opens up its classes via video streaming, for example, that does not only mean the world now has the opportunity to benefit from one of the best institutions in the U.S. The instructional videos and resources provide a window into MIT's institutional practices, which had been entirely closed for more than a century—a window into what has or hasn't changed in MIT's pedagogical practices over its history. So the value of MIT open courseware is not just in the content, it is also in the discourses it enables, the transparency around educational activity. Open pedagogy, for example, reminds us there are closed pedagogies still prevalent in institutional learning. It can help us ask important questions such as the one Jhangiani poses, building on Wiley's [3] arguments on killing the disposable assignments:

Most course assignments are "disposable" in the sense that they will only ever be seen by the instructor. Moreover, students often see little point in them and rarely revisit them. But what if we redesigned our course assignments to empower our students as creators of [open] resources for the commons? [4]

This is not to say openness is always desirable or beneficial in education. As higher education opens up, the discourse on educational technology and digital spaces is becoming more critical than ever before. Agency and power in online and networked learning, digital literacies and capabilities, platform surveillance and the ethics of online data collection and use, and the impact of neoliberalism on the system of education—including the many diverse ways it is distributed such as open, online, hybrid, mobile, and networked spaces—are just some of the topics that are increasingly debated and talked about in professional learning networks, blogs, conferences, and also in traditional academic literature, some of which are cited within. Only 5-6 years ago the tendency in educational technology was to advocate for the goodness or even greatness of the affordances of digital tools and platforms. Today, critical perspectives on educational technology and digital learning are moving from the periphery into the center

of educational debate and theory. For example, the *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* recently published a special issue titled "More than Tools? Critical Perspectives and Alternative Visions of Technology in Higher Education." Another example is the upcoming OER19 conference *"*Recentering Open: Critical and Global Perspectives," which was announced during the write up of this piece. This annual international conference on open education will focus on important issues such as critical digital literacies, critical data literacies, the politics of openness, contextual and historical perspectives in openness, and inclusion.

Going back to the concept of paradigm shifts, pedagogical values and visions and the types of practice vary in education and this is no different for open online education. The critical perspectives and issues I noted here remind us that there is a need to focus more on pedagogy in the shift toward openness in higher education, and critically explore its intersection with technology. In the spirit of open scholarship, I also argue there is a need to make the structures of online teaching and learning more transparent to others and open them to discussion and critique, not only in specialized academic communities and institutional spaces but also in our families, communities and professional networks. To what extent are new technologies used to perpetuate the same old, but persistent, paradigms of learning and teaching (for example, teaching as direct knowledge transfer, learning as passive acquisition of new information)? Where do theories like social constructivism, authentic and situated learning and concepts like agency and co-construction sit in MOOCs, open courseware, open textbooks and resources, social networking platforms, and in learning that "has gone online"? These are important questions to address, as in the midst of all the technological paradigm shifts they can help us "reconnect with the question of purpose in education," [5] however diverse that may be.

## References


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## About the Author


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## Comments

There are no comments at this time.