



DEAR EDUCATOR, HOW OPEN ARE YOU?

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Recognising teachers as change agents for openness in higher education

As a researcher working on open education, I often feel frustrated by the distance between the promises of openness in education, both in terms of increased equity and access and of improved efficiency of educational systems, and the actual impact of open approaches on our university systems. Surely, research shows that Open Educational Resources (OER), Open Educational Practices (OEP), Open Textbooks, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are increasingly being adopted by universities around the world (Grodecka & Śliwowski, 2014; Esposito, 2013; European Commission, 2013); but at the same time many observers agree that the outreach of the openness in education is still limited (Rohs & Ganz, 2015; Kortemeyer, 2013; Hollands & Tirthali, 2014; Glennie et al., 2012; Okada et al., 2012). The situation is certainly evolving and openness is increasingly being accepted in higher education policy and practices; nevertheless we need to accept that the consideration made by Conole in 2008 is still valid today: “Arguably then there has never been a better alignment of current thinking in terms of good pedagogy – i.e. emphasising the social and situated nature of learning, rather than a focus on knowledge recall with current practices in the use of technologies – i.e. user-generated content, user-added value and aggregated network effects. Despite this, the impact of Web 2.0 on education has been less dramatic than its impact on other spheres of society – use for social purposes, supporting niche communities, collective political action, amateur journalism and social commentary” (Conole, 2008, quoted in Weller, 2012; p.89).

In recent years, I have had the chance to talk about openness with a number of university professors and lecturers, discussing the benefits and the problems connected to the adoption of open approaches such as OER, and I have grown the conviction that educators are the cornerstone that we need to focus on if we want to shorten the distance between the potential and the actual implementation of openness in higher education. Educators represent in fact both the highest resistance and the potential best promoters for any innovation in education, and if they would fully engage with the open education movement the whole process would be more inclusive, creative and rooted to the real needs of learners. A number of observers agree with this priority, recognising the importance of the involvement of faculty members in open education initiatives (Albright, 2005; Pearce et al., 2010) and considering that teachers are actually the final decision makers for the adoption of open approaches (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Price, 2015).

Dear Educator, How Open Are You?

Fabio Nascimbeni

The transition of teachers towards openness must be understood as a part of a broader change process, connected both with the crisis of university systems (Sledge & Dovey Fishman, 2014; High Level Group on the modernisation of Higher Education, 2013) and with the possibilities offered by ICT. University teachers are traditionally considered as the ones who *own* the body of knowledge that needs to be communicated to students for them to get *educated*. This role is being increasingly questioned by educational researchers, who claim the thanks to the spread of ICT and to the open and networked approaches that they have made possible, new forms of social learning are emerging that challenge traditional roles within education systems, and in particular the idea that teachers are the only ones entitled to produce and transmit knowledge (Schmidt et al., 2009). In other words, researchers seem to agree that teachers should change the way they work and become critical friends, co-travellers, mediators, facilitators (Dron & Anderson, 2011; Downes, 2012; Rivoltella & Rossi, 2012; Goodyear et al., 2001; McLoughling & Lee, 2008). “Since the distributed and networked structure of knowledge in the digital age challenges the traditional view of education delivered within the borders of school, strict time periods, and content, the role of the teacher has been redefined in the context of the connectivist paradigm to include networked learning environments” (Ozturk, 2015; p.6).

To facilitate this change process, the Open Educators Factory project, funded by the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR), is exploring how to transform university teachers from *agents of resistance* into *agents of change* for openness in education. During its first year of work, the project has been reflecting on the change process that is needed to empower teachers to become agents of change towards the adoption of open practices in higher education, producing a definition of *Open Educator* as well as a multidimensional teachers development framework able to guide educators in embracing openness in their daily practice.

What is an Open Educator?

If we want teachers not only to accompany but rather to drive the change towards openness in education, in a moment where this would be possible thanks to the increasing adoption of technology coupled with developments such as Open Educational Resources, Open Licensing, Open Publishing, Open Design, we need to have a clear and possibly shared understanding of what we mean by an Open Educator. This would help decision makers at different institutional and policy levels as well as the teacher population itself to have a clear development target towards which to work. Interestingly, while definitions of OER and Open Education are abundant in policy as well as in scientific literature – even if some degree of disagreement on what openness means in a number of contexts still exists (Bates, 2011; Deyman & Farrow, 2013), a definition that encompasses openness within all dimensions of teachers’ activities does not seem to exist. Existing literature seems to be focusing mostly on the “objects” of Open Education, namely Open Educational Resources and more recently MOOCs (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Cormier, 2009; De los Arcos et al., 2014; Kortemeyer, 2013; Rolfe, 2012; Wild, 2012 among others), and on its “processes”, namely Open Educational Practices (Andrade et al., 2011; Esposito, 2013; Murphy, 2013; Okada et al., 2012 among

others), Open Learning Design (Conole, 2013; Laurillard, 2012; Cochrane & Antonczak, 2015 among others) and Open Scholarship (Pearce et al., 2010; Weller, 2012 among others).

To fill the gap given by the absence of a shared definition that can represent a clear target for the *transformation of teachers into open educators*, the Open Educators Factory project has worked out a definition which takes into account both the *objects* (teaching content and tools) and the *processes* (learning design, pedagogical and assessment approaches) of teachers' activities. This definition results from an extensive literature review and has been fine-tuned and validated through discussions with experts in the field of open education. The definition has been discussed and validated with Martin Weller from the Open University in the UK, Wayne Mackintosh from the OER Foundation in New Zealand, Rory Mc Greal from Athabasca University in Canada, Chrissi Nerantzi from the Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK, Antonio Texeira from the Universidade Aberta de Portugal and Daniel Burgos from the Universidad Internacional de la Rioja in Spain.

Our definition of the Open Educator is the following:

An Open Educator chooses to use open approaches, when possible and appropriate, with the aim to remove all unnecessary barriers to learning. She works through an open online identity and relies on online social networking to enrich and implement her work, understanding that collaboration bears a responsibility towards the work of others.

An Open Educator implements openness along four main activities. She:

1. Implements Open Learning Design, by openly sharing ideas and plans about her teaching activities with experts and with past and potential students, incorporating inputs and transparently leaving a trace of the development process.
2. Uses open educational content, by releasing her teaching resources through open licenses, by facilitating sharing of her resources through OER repositories and other means, and by adapting, assembling and using OERs produced by others in her teaching.
3. Adopts Open Pedagogies, fostering co-creation of knowledge by students through online and offline collaboration, allowing learners to contribute to public knowledge resources such as Wikipedia.
4. Implements open assessment practices such as peer and collaborative evaluation, open badges and e-portfolios, engaging students as well as external stakeholders in learning assessment.

The definition starts with a general paragraph that contextualises the expected transformation of teachers with the existing higher education context, by stating that an Open Educator chooses to use open approaches *when possible and appropriate*, meaning that openness should always be adopted if and when it can improve the teaching process and the learners accessibility and performance. The paragraph then provides a clear reason for educators to opt for open approaches, that is *to remove all unnecessary barriers to learning*: here we mean

Dear Educator, How Open Are You?

Fabio Nascimbeni

both access-related barriers, connected for example with the socioeconomic status of students or with students' disabilities, but also the more subtle barriers connected to learning personalisation and learning styles and preferences. Then, it is specified that an Open Educator should work through an open online identity and rely on online social networking to enrich and implement her teaching, making clear the connection between being open and being networked. Finally, we mention the importance of understanding the responsibility towards the work of others that comes with the adoption of open approaches, meaning that an open educator should be cautious about copyright, privacy, and ethical issues connected with openness.

In its second part, the definition suggests that openness should pervade all the components of teachers' work: the way a teacher designs her courses, the way she licenses, creates and shares learning content, the pedagogical practices and the assessment approaches implemented. The definition is based on the assumption that a correct process of *opening up education*, to use the wording of a recent initiative by the European Commission (European Commission, 2013), should be based on opening up all these four components (design, content, teaching, assessment) that ideally shall coexist and complement each other within a generalised open culture. First, opening up learning design, by co-designing curriculum and courses with peers and students and allowing the courses to evolve and improve year after year, as “a creative way to breath new life and fresh ideas into course design” (Cochrane & Antonczak, 2015; p.3). Second, opening up the teaching content, typically by releasing material as Open Educational Resources by and making it findable and usable by others. Third, adopting open pedagogical approaches, intended as a mix of strategies and tools that can make the learning process more transparent, partecipative, understandable, and available to all involved actors (Grush, 2014). Fourth, implementing open assessment practices such as peer evaluation or e-portfolios. Transversally to these four elements, an open educator works to open up the organisational and learning boundaries of her teaching activities, for example allowing students to follow courses in an open MOOC style also if they are not enrolled in the university (Dalsgaard & Thestrup, 2015), or working towards the provision solutions towards accreditation of the knowledge acquired (Peterson, 2014).

Time to go beyond OER and OEP

Embracing openness is a process that has to do with a major mind shift and that affects all areas of a teacher's work. To understand how deep this change is, it is worth considering the keywords that, according to Siemens (2010), should guide teachers in a connectivist world: amplifying, curating, sense-making, aggregating, filtering, and modelling: most of these concepts would simply not be immediately understood by a traditional teacher. The introduction of open and networked practices brings a number of tensions which have to do with the educators' attitudes and self-perception, related to the need of rethinking and reshaping the roles played by teachers and students within the learning process and the underpinning knowledge production process, working in an open and transparent environment where all traditional implications of learning design, delivery and assessment are questioned (Crook & Harrison, 2008; Rivoltella & Rossi, 2014; Orr et al., 2015). These tensions

are further exacerbated by the generalised low level of adoption of social media in teaching settings (see for example Jaschik & Lederman, 2013). To give an example, a recent survey targeting the whole HE teaching population in Italy reports that the great majority of respondents never use Twitter (94.5%), Slideshare (84.5%), or Researchgate/Academia.edu (74.4%) for teaching purposes and that “Social Media tools are mainly perceived as a waste of time, as a great concern about privacy and as a risk to weaken the traditional roles of teacher and student” (Manca & Ranieri, 2015; p.110).

In 2009, Wiley and Hilton defined open educators as the ones who “publish their course materials online under an open license before the beginning of the course and invite students from outside their university to participate in the course together with the official students of the course” (Wiley & Hilton, 2009; p.11). Even if this definition contains important elements of openness such as the encouragement of the participation of non-traditional students, we believe that adopting OER is just the first necessary step for educators to get open, and that, in order for openness to deploy its full potential for change within higher education, other elements should be present in our understanding of Open Educator.

Similarly, an Open Educator should not be defined merely as a teacher who adopts Open Educational Practices (OEP), since in our understanding open teaching can take place even without the use of OER, while typically OEP are defined as a further step of the *openness journey* that follows and enriches the use of OER. OEP are typically defined as the use of OER in the frame of open learning architectures (Camilleri & Ehlers, 2011) or as “practices which support the creation, use and management of OERs through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path” (Andrade et al., 2011; p.12). The OPAL consortium (2011) appropriately states that OEP foster the incorporation of social learning in the learning environment, but then again connects the use of open methods to OER: “The social learning element is coming in because learners can use educational resources, modify them and present them to other learners (modification of OER or User generated Content), knowledge environments on the basis of OER can be created by learners and shared with other learners or teachers (e.g. social bookmarking, Wikis, collection of resources)” (OPAL Consortium, 2011; p.3).

We believe it is important to *disconnect* the concept of open teaching from the use of OER since many teachers are indeed using open methodologies in their classroom activities, for example by fostering co-creation of knowledge from students allowing them to enrich the course content with any complementary information they deem important. In our view, these teachers can be indeed considered Open Educators even if they do not explicitly use – and maybe do not even know the existence of – OER. Differently from a *developmental* understanding of openness in education that defines steps of adoption (first OER, then OEP, etc.), our definition pushes the idea that a number of *entry points* into openness (learning design, content, methods and research) should be recognised, since this would motivate a teacher who is already used to *think openly* in one of these domains to explore and adopt open approaches in the other domains.

Next steps: putting the definition in practice

To help the development of teachers’ *openness capacity*, we propose an original self-assessment and development framework for teachers, which takes into account all the dimensions of openness included in the above definition, making clear the different typologies of educators with respect to openness in a comprehensive picture that includes all areas of activity of an educator.

	A. Design	B. Content	C. Teaching	C. Assessment
Layer three: Open collaboration	Open designer	OER expert	Open teacher	Open evaluator
Transition phase: Transformation into Open Educator				
Layer two Bilateral collaboration/ Small groups	Collaborative designer	OER novice	Engaging teacher	Innovative evaluator
Transition phase: Awareness				
Layer one: Individual work	Individual designer	OER-null	Traditional teacher	Lone evaluator

Figure 1. Self-development framework for Open Educators

In the columns we represent the four areas of activity of our open educator definition (design, content, teaching and assessment), while in the rows we categorise – with a necessary degree of generalisation – the different typologies of educators with respect to openness for each area of activity. Starting from the bottom, for each column we have defined three levels of openness that an educator reaches once she goes through some necessary transition phases, which are transversal to all four components. The first transition phase has to do with being aware of open approaches, and represents still today the main obstacle for the teaching populations to opt for openness (Browne et al., 2010). The second transition phase deals with becoming *fluent* with openness: once gone through this transition, an educator is expected to adopt open approaches as default in the way she designs her courses, she develops and shares content, she interacts with students, and she carries on learning assessment.

This framework would be useful at two different levels. First, an individual educator can self-assess her level of openness in each area of activity (the columns) and be exposed to other possible developments in areas of openness that she has not yet explored. Second, a university department leader, provided that all educators in her department have positioned themselves in the framework, can appreciate the level of openness capacity of her staff, understanding who are the leading faculty in terms for open approaches. In the next phase of the OEF research project, the framework will be tested with a number of university educators, in order to both validate the approach we have taken in the project and to actually analyse the development of a sample of university with respect to open approaches.

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Dear Educator, How Open Are You?

Fabio Nascimbeni

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Dear Educator, How Open Are You?

Fabio Nascimbeni

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