The missing link: Converging neoliberalism and OpenCourseWare Movement

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to converge two major trends in Higher Education that have been on top of recent discourses: (1) the neoliberal shift in Western universities and (2) the emergence of OpenCourseWare (OCW). Both have attempted to provide different and alternative visions of education and both have been blind to the other side, i.e. whereas neoliberal pundits omit non-economic values which have a long and outstanding tradition in liberal-arts colleges, advocates of OCW often times do not account for an economical understanding which has prevented that OCW has achieved a self-sustaining life cycle. Therefore, instead of keeping on separating both movements which would only reinforce contrasting views, it will be demonstrated how they can benefit from each other.

Keywords

Open Education, Neoliberalism, Open Educational Resources,

Neoliberalism in Higher Education

A basic understanding for the neoliberal approach in higher education is that education is a natural private good and should therefore be marketised (Marginson, 2007). It has began in the 1970s and 1980s as globally linked policy makers, academics, corporate leaders and financiers were rethinking the way economies and governments operated. They produced a new doctrine that would “(...) be responsible for reshaping many contemporary social institutions, as well as the techniques and vocabularies individuals use to situate themselves within their societies and understand each other and their world” (Ward, 2012, p. 1). Education is now to be judged and valued according to management methods (efficiency, utility, output, project etc.) which however “(...) masks the complexity of the cultural changes it announces” (Love, 2008, p. 16). This managerialism can be regarded as the “(...) amoral answer” (Preston, 2001, p. 344) to contradictions that are to be found at the centre of capitalism and has been evidenced for instance by corporate sponsored university students (Giroux, 2002).

In this vein, knowledge undergoes a fundamental transformation inasmuch as it has only value until it enters the marketplace. Thus, it is the swan song for any kind of contemplation – a philosophical practice which was at the heart of the classical liberal-arts colleges (Nussbaum, 1997) – because economic principles took over to determine what is valuable to be taught and researched. As Ward (2012) points out this implies a certain moral view because cultural aspects (“commodities”) are priced according to their anticipated market value. Free use of knowledge should therefore be restricted and privatized to protect its market value. One could assumed that this conception would seal the fate for the commons and is resonated by Ward (2012) who writes: “(...) just as in the first enclosure movement when peasants were removed from the land in order to unleash the lands potentiality and in order to aid economic development, today knowledge and education must be freed from the stifling and
unproductive grip of the public realm and the stranglehold the public professions and turned over to various knowledge entrepreneurs who can use market incentives to value various forms of knowledge and education and increase their usefulness (...)” (p. 106). There are various examples indicating the commercialisation of knowledge that was hitherto a publicly accessible good such as licensing public research to private institutions (Devaney & Weber, 2003).

The counter revolution: Open CourseWare and its notion of “open”

In the beginning in 2001, when MIT started sharing educational content as OpenCourseWare under an open license, the idea was to increase access to audiences outside the university (Goldberg, 2001). Not only would it serve teachers in working together and increase educational quality, but also would it widen access to audiences with generally little access to high quality educational contents. Ten years later, these ambitions have been increased, aiming to ‘reach one billion minds’ and ‘bridging the gap between human potential and opportunity’ (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013). MIT is now not nearly the only university sharing its course materials openly as OCW. Hundreds of universities now are sharing their course materials with the same goals.

Sharing course materials under an open license fosters the goals of sharing, where legal hurdles have been taken away and learners are now legally allowed to re-use the course materials of others. The availability of growing amounts of OER has led to a vast amount of users, coming from all corners of the world and in all ages (Lesko, 2013). Recent usage statistics (Lesko, 2013) suggest that there is quite a demand for OpenCourseWare material among individual users. But high user statistics i.e. a large audience is not the only affordability openly licensed educational materials has brought universities. For example, Delft University of Technology has a long tradition in cooperating with ITB Bandung, Indonesia, in the field of Water Management. The openly licensed Educational materials shared by Delft University of Technology has led to a closer cooperation in education, where one University is able to re-use educational contents aimed at knowledge transfer from the other, replacing physical lectures. In turn, the ‘receiving’ university creates local cases based on this knowledge exchange, which are re-used in Delft campus education. A very tangible example of how openly licensed course materials can stimulate the cooperation between parties; and this example is not unique.

Conclusion: OER and OCW as responses to the neoliberal shift in Higher Education

Open Education can be seen as an idealistic altruistic generosity offered by universities for the greater good. This vision seems to contradict the market value of knowledge, as argued in the first section of this paper. But here we must realise both OER and OpenCourseWare are not a fully digitised packaged education which is now delivered openly to all. All effluences of Open Education are results of the unbundling of education; OER and OCW provide content mostly aimed at knowledge transfer, where MOOCs add the learning experience, guidance and certification to it. But as argued, education consists of more then that. A well known quote from Sugata Mitra for example, argues that if a teacher can be replaced by a computer, he should (Matias, 2012). Also, Charles Vest, who gave the starting sign for the OpenCourseWare movement at MIT 12 years ago, argued about the same issue: “I don't think we are giving away the direct value, by any means, that we give to students” (Goldberg, 2001). Instead, Schaffert and Geser (2008) argue that open re-use of educational content cannot go without adding didactics into the discussion.

At the same time, open licensing is not such a strange development, while often in Europe, OER, OCW and MOOCs are developed by publicly funded universities, meaning that tax payer money is used to create them. Many share the conviction that contents or services created with public funding, should
also be publicly available – as is now legally enforced, for instance with regard to Open Textbooks in the state of California (Vollmer, 2012).

Universities educate students to become alumni, competent to work in highly complex environments and tasks. Competency in itself is a concept made up of an integrated whole of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and as argued cultural aspects and such can also be taken into account. This then constitutes the market value of education: educate students to come up with innovating and necessary solutions for societal problems (Deimann & Farrow, 2013).

Does this mean that OCW is ultimately not able to fulfil its promise to bring education to all, when we argue that education is so much more than what OER has so far been able to offer? Just recently Sebastian Thrun has been widely criticized for Udacity’s pivot from providing education to all towards developing commercial company training (Schuman, 2013). Set aside both the underlying fact that Udacity is a commercial enterprise sponsored by venture capitalists, in need of making profits, this pivot does seem to be striking a real issue many in the world of Open Education do not like to hear. Can Open Education fulfil its promise, while indeed many do not have very good Internet Access to start with, or the societal, cultural, or other means to actually be able to access the educational contents at all. Also university level course materials might indeed perhaps be to big an entrance requirement for some, to actually be able to use the educational materials as intended.

Still, even though not ‘all’ can perhaps be reached, this does not mean the open movement needs to be served of. Many still do profit from the open availability of and increased accessibility to universities educational materials and resources.

As argued, the market value of Open Education lies not in the content itself. The OCW movement seems to urge HE institutions to rethink their business models and rethink education’s actual market value in ways that go beyond the prevailing logic of neoliberalism. The unbundling of education might mean that the university campus experience will actually grow in market value, while the wide availability of educational materials provides more opportunities to actually valorise the potential knowledge has in itself.

Using OER the same way we used commercial textbooks misses the point. “It’s like driving an airplane down the road. Yes, the airplane has wheels and is capable of driving down on the road. But the point of an airplane is to fly at hundreds of miles per hour – not to drive” (Wiley, 2013).

OCW and OER are fascinating cases in terms of the classical distinction between public and private goods. Despite philanthropic notions of OCW/OER as purely common goods, it can also be argued that they also provide an account for the private use of public goods. As evidenced by the recent launch of the OER University (Heise, 2013), there is a mixture emerging of public and private qualities that helps us to rethink the neoliberalistic account of education.

References


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