When Openness Excludes: Strategies for Equitable Open Pedagogies in Diverse Contexts

Dr Leigh-Anne Perryman
leigh.a.perryman@open.ac.uk
@laperryman
Hello everyone and thanks for joining me today. I’m Leigh-Anne Perryman, a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Educational Technology at The Open University in the UK where I’m also qualification director for our masters in online and distance education and lead for the microcredentials programme.

All education sectors, globally, have faced unprecedented challenges and changes over recent months. Some sectors have had to almost wholly reinvent the ways in which they deliver teaching and learning, at speed, and with reduced human resource. The impact on students, of all ages, has been undeniable and extensive. It’s no surprise that a large scale, ongoing study by the Mental Health Foundation in the UK found that 18-24 year-olds are the most likely segment of the population to report loneliness, hopelessness, not coping and suicidal thoughts, facing a ‘triple whammy of curtailed education, diminished job prospects and reduced social contact.’

The image with which I’ve chosen to open my presentation focuses on the strengthening of communities in a time of crisis. Almost a year into the pandemic now seems a good time to stand back, work together as a community of open educators, and plan for the future, albeit an uncertain one in many ways. It’s a good time to review the different ways in which teaching and learning can be made more
equitable and open educational practices and pedagogies can help. As I’ll explain shortly, though, openness and equity don’t necessarily go hand in hand.
In this session I want to focus specifically on the affordances and challenges of open pedagogy. As is customary in presentations such as this, I’ll start with some definitions.

Definitions of open pedagogy are many, and varied, and some people suggest the term ‘open pedagogy’ is inappropriate in itself, and should be replaced with the term open educational practices. That aside, there are common elements in the definitions of open pedagogy that are offered, including:

- Learners having autonomy over what and how to learn
- Connecting learners with the world outside a formal course – bridging formal & informal
- Learners and educators using, creating, remixing and sharing OER.
- Renewable assessment - learners creating and openly sharing their own assessment tasks.
- A commitment to social justice and educational equity – and a pedagogy of care.

At its best, open pedagogy is about care, compassion and connection with others. It’s about flexibility and freedom, and about breaking down hierarchies and having equal dialogues between learner and educator, and learners and the wider world. However,
for some learners the autonomy, open online connectedness, creative freedom and emphasis on self-determination of open pedagogy can feel very uncomfortable, can exacerbate or even cause mental health issues, and can exclude students from participating in teaching and learning activities that, ironically, are intended to increase equity.

But, a careful approach to the design of teaching, learning and assessment activities and close attentiveness to learners’ needs, can help mitigate this.
In this presentation you’ll hear voices from two groups of students:

+ The first group are students on The Open University’s postgraduate module Technology-enhanced learning: Foundations and Futures (H880) - part of The Open University’s masters in online and distance education. While the Masters is being withdrawn, the module is continuing.

This 60 credit module:
• models open educational practices through the use of entirely open assets such as images, video audio resources
• has some openly licensed weeks
• Embraces connectedness: fee paying learners study a MOOC alongside open learners; join Twitter chats; explore personal learning networks;
• Involves learners in open practices: Remix content and share it publicly
• Create renewable assessments
• Focus on social justice and transformative education
• Learner autonomy
• Ongoing reflection
The second group of students have studied one of the OU’s first postgraduate microcredential courses - Teacher development: embedding mental health in the curriculum, which I produced with my OU colleague Kate Lister.

We included a section on open pedagogy and its connections with mental health and wellbeing. We had a lot of feedback from learners in the course discussion areas reporting on experiments with using open pedagogy in their own settings, from primary schools through to nursing training. Some of the comments and ideas give an insight into the possibilities and constraints real educators are facing in real classrooms and I’ll share a few with you today.
In the next few slides I’ll go through some of the aspects of open pedagogy, looking at the positive impacts for learners and also at some of the challenges.

I’ll start with the emphasis on autonomy. As we’ve seen, empowerment and autonomy are at the heart of open pedagogy, which prioritises giving learners the autonomy to choose how and what, they learn. Learner empowerment and autonomy can have a huge impact in supporting learner mental health and wellbeing, increasing motivation and improving study outcomes. In contrast, disempowerment, unequal relationships, feelings of powerlessness and a sense that education is something being done to learners can have a negative impact on learners’ attainment and mental health.

Open pedagogy offers learners empowerment and autonomy through practices including the co-creation and open sharing of resources and the design of renewable assessment, and by reimagining the relationship between educator and learner. The freedom and choice that results can be thrilling and very stimulating but can also be very scary for some learners, especially those with low self-esteem, anxiety or who lack confidence.
So what can be done? At this point, I want to make reference to the Universal Design for Learning Framework which I think offers an equitable way of embedding open pedagogy in teaching and learning.
You may already be familiar with Universal Design for Learning (or UDL). The UDL framework was initially developed in the 1990s and has flexibility at its core. The related UDL Guidelines, which elaborate on the UDL framework, are research-informed and are constantly being revised to incorporate new pedagogies, technologies and evidence about how people learn.

Learner autonomy, but on the learner’s terms, is a central concern across the UDL framework – hence its compatibility with open pedagogy.

According to UDL, equity should be designed into all teaching and learning, to meet the needs of all learners, by providing:
- multiple means of engagement with the subject and learning environment, to align with learners’ interests, challenge learners appropriately and motivate them to learn.
- multiple means of representation of learning materials, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge.
- multiple means of action and expression in learning, to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know.
One of the key features of open pedagogy is an emphasis on connecting learners with the wider world beyond the formal classroom. This has great potential for supporting study outcomes and wellbeing, giving opportunities for learners to feel part of communities beyond those in their institution, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and offering opportunities for peer support too.

A sense of belonging can make it easier to develop meaningful and positive relationships with others, to participate in shared endeavours, to pursue common goals and to develop support networks. If someone feels they don’t fit in, they’re less likely to have support networks to draw on and can feel anxious about any disconnect between their values and those of others.

Learners who feel a sense of belonging tend to be more resilient, better able to handle personal and learning-related challenges, more autonomously motivated and more willing to ask for support from peers, educators and others. At a time when physical connections with others are difficult, online connections and collaboration is particularly valuable and can help to combat isolation and loneliness too.

Collaboration can also be problematic though, especially for people with social
anxiety - a persistent fear of social situations in which a person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others. Such situations can lead to panic attacks. Group work and collaboration can be unbearable for people with social anxiety.

One way for educators to mitigate against this is by following the principles of UDL and carefully planning collaboration-related activities and providing learners with multiple options for such work (including the option to opt out). For learners with social anxiety, Graded Exposure can also be a helpful technique for educators to employ when planning collaborative activities, and might involve social or collaborative tasks being broken down into small manageable steps, with learners taking small steps to begin with and gradually building up to the bigger task.
A further challenge with open online collaboration is the safety aspects involved.

Way back in 2015, Sava Saheli Singh was warning us to be cautious about seeing openness as universally good. She explained: “Open is not good for everyone… The hype around open, while well-intentioned, is also unintentionally putting many people in harm’s way and they in turn end up having to endure so much.”

(sava saheli singh, 2015)

Students with anxiety and other mental health issues can be particularly vulnerable to trolling, hate speak, cyber-violence and other forms of online abuse and may find it particularly difficult to cope.
Cyber-violence is incredibly widespread and much of it is directed at women, replicating offline cultures of violence and misogyny.

The Indian NGO It for Change explain that “The cloak of online invisibility encourages patriarchal attitudes of entitlement over women resulting in a toxic disinhibition...in the online public sphere, lowering thresholds for sexist and misogynistic speech and behaviour”
Fear of cyber-violence can lead to a fear of speaking out.

One H880 learner explained that “In my country many men still believe the internet is their domain and women shouldn’t be participating alongside them. I’ve taken part in open discussions before and had a terrible experience – threats, abuse – real hatred. From a standpoint of initia|aly feeling confident and excited about making connections across the world I now feel fearful and out of my depth. I’m happy to participate in closed discussion forums but feel scared about doing so more openly, especially if I’m required to show my true identity.”

(H880 student)
Educators taking their students to open online spaces have a responsibility to support those students’ development of safe online participation skills – something that will benefit all learners, especially in an age of surveillance capitalism. Following the principles of UDL, and offering alternative ways to achieve a course’s learning outcomes, other than open online participation, is really essential bearing in mind the risks some learners are facing. Again, true freedom includes the freedom to opt out.
A lack of up-to-date technology and unreliable or slow internet connections can also be barriers to equitable participation in teaching and learning activities that involve connecting with the wider world.

An H880 student from Nigeria commented: “A big challenge is my lack of access to internet data on a daily basis - I have no regular job to be certain of data access... It is annoying, stressing and agitating experience to be aware of your data which is expiring in the next few hours cannot be used to access what you want. This meant you paid money to get nothing.”

(H880 student)
access what you want. This meant you paid money to get nothing.”
Another student, from Dominica, commented: “Studying is all about prioritising for me. The internet speed is slow and the connection unreliable so I rank of the tasks in order of importance and do the vital ones first. Sadly online discussion is often low on the list so I miss out on connecting with people.”

While open educators are unlikely to be able to do much about infrastructure and connectivity issues, they can help achieve equitable participation by being mindful of such issues, offering ways for learners to participate in course activities asynchronously without compromising their achievement of the course learning outcomes, again following the principles of universal design for learning.
Moving on to the use, co-creation and sharing of open educational resources, the availability and flexibility of OER makes them a powerful tool for enhancing learner wellbeing and improving educational equity and study outcomes. For example, they offer educators opportunities to find out about new and alternative pedagogies, in the interests of offering learners flexibility in the way that they learn and the autonomy to make decisions about how they learn.

There’s a wealth of high-quality open content that can be adapted to suit local needs and settings to better align with learners’ interests and preferences and allow educators to better represent their learners’ identities and backgrounds in course resources. In turn, increasing the relevance of resources can support identity formation, increase self-esteem and increase motivation.

The wellbeing-related benefits for learners are clear too. OER can be used to support offering learners a choice of ways in which to access course content, Learners can be given the autonomy to search for OER that are relevant to their own interests and which will help them to achieve the learning outcomes of a course or lesson. Co-creating OER for contributing to the ‘commons’ can be very motivating and can enhance self-esteem.
Learners on our Embedding mental heath microcredential had been experimenting with the co-creation of OER across multiple sectors, producing posters, toolkits, revision guides, additional course resources, and e-books that were then openly shared.

For some learners, though, it will be necessary for educators to scaffold the necessary skills to avoid the activity causing stress and anxiety.
Technology, or lack of it, can also be a barrier to the use, co-creation and sharing of OER. An H880 student commented:

“When we’re asked to make a poster or image and share it openly I feel disadvantaged by a lack of skill, though that’s something I could gain, but more so by a lack of software. Other students produce beautiful work and it’s clear they have sophisticated image editing programs. My attempts looks so amateurish in comparison so I don’t share them.”

(H880 student)

Again, offering a choice of activities, is important here.
Finally, we come to renewable assessment – whereby learners complete assessment tasks that are contributing valuable knowledge and resources to the world, rather than those generating disposable outputs only read by their tutor. Learners might also design their own assessment.

Renewable assessment has huge potential to support learner wellbeing in its emphasis on learner autonomy, on learners having control of their own learning, and on learners having the opportunity to design assessment that fits with their preferences and interests. The possibilities for increasing learner self-esteem and motivation are considerable.

Learners on the Embedding mental health microcredential reported back on their experiments with renewable assessment. Most were very positive about the impact on their students’ wellbeing and motivation. One learner had set first-year nursing students the assessment task of making an e-book covering self-care strategies relevant to nursing in the pandemic, for sharing within and beyond the institution. Another learner, teaching sport and physical education, was experimenting with asking learners to make videos demonstrating swimming strokes and other sports techniques – videos that could then be shared as open resources. A college educator
shared how her students were making posters for local community groups. There was some caution amongst primary school educators, concerned that the level of independence required by open pedagogy would be difficult for young children. That said, some applications in primary school settings were shared, including an assessment whereby students wrote stories for younger children in the school to read.

Renewable assessment can be challenging though, especially for people with existing mental health problems. The level of autonomy involved where learners are asked to design their own assessments can be stressful for some learners, especially those with anxiety, as can the lack of structure. The prospect of sharing the output of an assessment task with the wider world can also cause anxiety. Again though, adopting an UDL-informed approach and offering learners flexibility and the choice of open, and regular assessment tasks should help ensure all learners’ needs are met. And, as with other aspects of open pedagogy, there’s much that can be achieved by scaffolding learning and the skills needed to engage in open practices.
To conclude, a mindful, UDL-informed approach to implementing open pedagogies in ways that support, rather than undermine learners’ freedom, their mental health and their wellbeing is likely to also be an approach that foregrounds educational equity and is deeply attentive to students’ needs. It’s important that learners are not excluded by open pedagogies and are able to benefit from their affordances, but on their own terms.

There’s a need for much more work in this area, especially in the current circumstances, and I hope to have given you some food for thought about some of the issues that need further exploration, and which we can work on together, as a community.

Thank you for listening.
THANK YOU

Leigh-Anne Perryman
leigh.a.perryman@open.ac.uk
@laperryman

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.