The Best Use of Infinity: Open Educational Resources and the Politics of Knowledge

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Introduction

As learning spaces go, cyberspace is pretty big. Whether we want to pursue this concept of the internet as a physical space – and I'm not sure I do – the idea of the geography of infinity is an interesting one to consider when discussing how best to use it. The idea of the 'commons', a physical space for the benefit of all, something I'll come onto later, is related to this.

This article will concern itself with the phenomenon of what have generally become known as 'Open Educational Resources' (OER) and originally as 'OpenCourseWare' (OCW). Essentially this is the practice of putting educational resources – lectures, tests, podcasts, seminar notes, ideas and reading lists and so on online, for free. It began with the decision by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the late 1990s (with huge financial help from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation - who are now also significant funders of the Open University's OER project - and the Ab Initio Software Corporation), to make all of their undergraduate and postgraduate teaching materials available for anybody with a computer to access. It is now a global network of institutions of Higher Education with a global agenda of free access to educational resources for (almost) all – the caveat here being the so-called 'digital divide' and the portions of the global population who do not have access to a computer with the necessary broadband connection. This is all coordinated by the OpenCourseWare Consortium, the global coordinator of more than 300 Universities in more than thirty countries from Afghanistan to Vietnam, and a visit to their website is highly recommended. The importance of the technology here, specifically the internet, is fundamental; the internet encourages, demands and facilitates new ways of behaving towards each other and new ways of relating to information. Consequently, the phenomenon of OER requires us to re-think what it means to be a student, the politics of knowledge and the 'business' of education including the responsibilities and duties of wealthy organisations to contribute to the common good.

I want to use some of the ideas of the philosopher Ernest Gellner to situate my thinking before moving onto more contemporary thinkers in the areas of collaborative media and models of social and cultural organisation. Before I do that however, I want to go back forty-one American presidents and start with some very old-fashioned ideas about being nice and sharing things from Thomas Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson, 'Fair Use' and the idea of the Commons

The concept of an education as something which was not to be bought and sold and treated as a commercial enterprise like any other is certainly not new and may go back hundreds if not thousands of years. Around two hundred years ago however, the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, believed in the idea of the 'fair use' of intellectual materials and the concept of 'fair use' is now one the four 'principles' of the internet activists, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), along with Free Speech, Innovation and Privacy. Jefferson also supported the idea of the 'public library' – not just the physical buildings for the borrowing of books but, literally, the 'idea' or the concept of educational and creative matter being in the 'commons' and commonly available to all. He said:

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'He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me. That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without any lessening of their density at any point, and like air in which we breathe and move and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation. Inventions then cannot, in nature, be a subject of property'

(quoted in Mayor and Binde, 2001, p. 300).

The idea of the 'commons' – areas which were owned by nobody, owned by everybody is a very powerful one and one which still finds significant resonance whenever anybody wishes to talk about communal resource, common purpose or sharing. The fairly modern idea of 'the public domain', a conceptual, virtual place where, amongst other extraordinary things, anybody can place, access or, in the jargon, 're-purpose' intellectual or creative product is the conceptual equivalent of this, except that it's infinite.

'Greater than the sum of its parts': Two 'kinds' of knowledge
In his 1998 book *Language and Solitude,* the philosopher Ernest Gellner sought to differentiate between two competing and antithetical approaches to knowledge which he called the 'atomistic' and the 'organic'. The 'atomistic', or 'individualistic', he argued, was concerned with the artificial segregation and reduction of the world to 'bits' of knowledge which bore no essential relation to one another and which were the result of a similarly solitary and atomistic human project of individuals working alone and in isolation. This vision of knowledge makes the individual a 'foreigner in his own world' (1998, p.4), he wrote. It is not only a partial and misleading way of conceiving of knowledge, it is an unhealthy way of pursuing understanding; knowledge, in this practice, process or view, is separated, secretive and without any real meaning. The 'organic' vision of knowledge, by contrast, is not only profoundly social, it is a view of knowledge which seeks precisely to understand through a consideration of connections, contexts and the kind of perspective which can only be achieved by viewing things in relation to one another; as part of a whole and as something which is not fixed or reducible. This 'organic' view, in Gellner's opinion, forms a system 'whose parts are in intimate and intricate relation with each other' (p.6).

Gellner went on to argue that these ways of conceiving of knowledge and of working in its service inform all areas of our lives and were profoundly political in their implications. Some of these ways of working have echoes in recent analyses of social trends and also in new ways of considering intellectual property in the light of the new (-ish) communications technologies – not just the practical aspects of this type of 'property' (such as, it is really possible to 'protect' or 'own' it in an age of digital file sharing?) but also in the moral and even ethical responsibilities and duties of universities to participate in a global culture. If knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge are, at some level, about making the world a better place and not just commerce, then OER are a contribution from the academic community to whoever finds them useful or interesting.

One contemporary phenomenon is the fact that any word pre-fixed by 'wiki' is an indicator of some kind of collaboration or analysis of cooperative project or process. 'Wikinomics' is an idea popularised by Tapscott and Williams (2006) to explain how organisations of all different kinds which encourage cooperation with their employees (sometimes known as 'crowdsourcing') can overcome problems, initiate more efficient processes, develop new 'products' and become very successful. The 'founding principles' of Wikinomics are, according to its authors, 'Openness, Peering, Sharing and Acting Globally' – a set of claims which can, should be, and increasingly are, employed by all manner of social and cultural institutions as a kind of mission statement. This is beginning to have implications for the idea of 'intellectual property', an idea which is itself a fairly recent addition to the history of ideas. There are those who believe that this type of ownership is not only impractical and increasingly unworkable, but is also unhealthy and unfair; The Free Culture Movement, the EFF, the 'Copyleft' Movement which was supported by UNESCO and where the rights of the author were reduced to a moral right, and the Creative Commons are just a few of the movements dedicated to the free exchange of ideas, creativity and expression, all of which is related directly or indirectly to the sharing of educational materials. The EFF's unofficial slogan of 'information wants to be free', finds an echo in the newly created Wikiversity's motto of 'setting learning free'. This is not just empty rhetoric or catchy turns of phrase. These are all indicators of practical projects which are making a difference in the real world and which inform UNESCO's conception and development of 'knowledge societies' (UNESCO. 2006).

There are a number of examples of this new collaborative, cooperative spirit, all of them facilitated, encouraged or whatever by the internet and particularly its Web 2.0 incarnation, from the Open Source movement of computer code exchange and peer-to-peer file sharing, to the extraordinary phenomena of YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and MySpace, as well as Wikipedia and any number of others. The fact that these examples are all made possible through and by the internet is, depending on who you talk to, significant but perhaps not the whole story; the technology is maybe simply facilitating a new mood or belief in the idea of sharing, an idea which itself should be shared and copyrighted, but not necessarily in that order.

Open Educational Resources
One of the extraordinary things taking place in these virtual or digital commons at the moment is the placing of free educational materials, known as Open Educational Resources for, well, anybody who wants to learn about, well, almost anything you can think of; anything which has been taught in some kind of institution of Higher Education almost anywhere in the world. The pioneers of this were the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who decided in the late 1990s and in the course of assessing their distance learning provision, to make all of their under- and post-graduate courses available for anybody to download, read, and study. Crucially, however, you can't get accreditation – a degree or any other qualification- through OER, and you can't get access to any teaching staff, or gain entry into any assessment regime – but you can access a bewildering variety of carefully designed degree and post-degree level courses in almost any subject you might be interested in, the point being, in the words of one of the prime funding bodies, '...to advance education and empower people worldwide' (http://www.ocwconsortium.org.). OpenCourseWare (OCW) or Open

Educational Resources (OER), have been defined as '..teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property licence that permits their use or re-purposing by others. Open Education Resources include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software and any other tools, materials or techniques used to support access to knowledge' (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2008).

To join the OCW Consortium an institution has to have developed ten or more 'items' of educational resource, as listed above, and if you browse the OCW Consortium website, you'll not only get a guide to how to participate, but you'll get the idea of the reach, scope, limitations and generosity of spirit as well as the global, educational ambition of this movement, if that's what it is. What is perhaps surprising are the countries featured and how they break down. At the time of writing (and this does change quite quickly) Spain have the most institutions offering OER with 38, the USA has 22, Taiwan has 9, Republic of Korea has 8, and Australia, Austria, China , South Africa, Israel and the Palestinian Territory (Occupied) all have 1 each. The United Kingdom currently has four – the Open University, The University of Nottingham, The Mathematical Institute at Oxford University and The People's Open Access Health Initiative.

'Access to knowledge', 'advancing education' and 'empowering people' globally are clearly Good Things To Be Doing. Universities do, and are seen to be doing, Good Things in the World and, at the same time, more and more people are eager to pay real money for a University education. The duties and responsibilities of wealthy Universities to contribute to the social and cultural wealth of a global society are partially fulfilled in this way. The various and worthy agendas of 'Lifelong Learning', 'Widening Participation' and Distance Learning can be facilitated and developed through the production of OER. Recent analyses of social trends (Wikinomics (2006), *The Long Tail* (2006) and *Free* (2009) by Chris Anderson, *Here Comes Everybody* (2009) by Clay Shirky) suggest that giving stuff away actually gets returns. The interest in OER worldwide by anyone with access to a computer has become a phenomenon although the precise figures for take-up are difficult to obtain. What is clear is that this would seem to match a similar explosion in University enrolment; in 2007, there were a recorded 152.5 million students worldwide representing a 50% increase compared to 2000. (http://www.unesco.org). Predictably, a further breakdown of these figures shows an imbalance along the lines of the 'digital divide' with the wealthier, post-industrial nations being more involved. Admissions to British Universities have increased by two thirds since 1991/2 (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk.).

Many institutions are developing online teaching resources as a part of curriculum delivery and these are used as Distance Learning packages, aspects of Virtual Learning Environments including presence in the virtual world *Second Life* and as offerings to a wider public as OER/OCW. Any institution with ten or more of these resources can register with the OCW Consortium and benefit from the association with the overall project as well as raise their institutional profile. This indeed is one of the benefits which the OCW Consortium claims will come from membership, along with what they refer to as 'Faculty Benefits' – essentially, networking and the archiving of academic materials. In other words, everybody wins – it's not only good, it's good business.

At York St John University a team have been working on 'writing' a first year media module 'Reading the Media' as both an online resource for students and also as an OER offering for anybody. The project is nearing completion and if anybody would like to see it, please contact me and I will provide the password details.

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