INVITED PAPER

Towards an Operational Definition of Open Teaching

Don Olcott, Jr., FRSA

Global Consultant, Romania & Honorary Professor, University of South Africa

The field of open and distance education has transversed many conceptual and pedagogical boundaries to define openness, Open Educational Resources (OER), Open Educational Practices (OEP), open access, open pedagogy, open research and open assessment (Butcher, 2011). And, although there is a tendency to associate all these concepts with open and distance education, we must remember these concepts apply equally to traditional f2f models and pedagogies (Garcia-Holgado et al., 2020).

The macro view of these open concepts has expanded access to content and resources and made these more accessible and usable across education. In the U.S. we have seen massive adoption of OERs to reduce textbook costs for students and in developing countries where content and text book costs can be cost-prohibitive, OERs and open content have been the catalysts for promoting access to higher education in particular (Olcott, 2012a; 2012b; 2013).

Despite this progress, there is a need to bring our conceptual framework for open education back to exactly what we do with all these resources. What we do with these resources is teach. We use them to enhance teaching and improve learning, by promoting high quality interaction, engagement, retention and reduce transactional distance.

Garcia-Holgado et al. (2020) offered a general definition of Open Teaching as a

> *"combination of practices aiming at increasing access and quality of learning where theories about learning, technology, and social justice enter into conversation with each other and inform the development of education practices"* (p. 1).

This opening act on Open Teaching is a good start. The next step is to refine and define this concept operationally.

Open teaching is an instructional framework that draws upon open practices, resources and pedagogical strategies designed to promote access, enhance teaching quality and improve more effective learning in educational environments.

Characteristics of Open Teaching include:
- Use of Open Educational Resources (OER) as the primary content of courses/programmes.
- Use of Open Educational Practices (OEPs) standardised by the institution and or profession.
- Student, student to teacher, and student to student opportunities for creating and revising open content. This process is typically called open pedagogy.
- New and/or revised content created in the course are assigned OER status with the appropriate open licensing.
- Open assessment options for students in collaboration with teachers to contribute/identify some elements of their assessments.

- Engagement of external stakeholders and community to improve the teaching process and to make students' assessment more relevant.

This definition focuses on the teaching process in open educational environments. Garcia-Holgado et al. (2020) discussed the broader open ecosystem which may further include open source, open research, open government, open innovation. These are valuable and certainly may have an indirect role to open teaching but maintaining a clear focus on the open teaching instructional framework avoids unnecessary confusion.

Moreover, any teacher will tell you they do many things that contribute to the overall educative process in their teaching. Most of these can be categorised (see Garcia-Holgado et al., 2020) under OEPs, basic teaching strategies, theoretical concepts, etc. However, for offering a simply definition of Open Teaching we should stay focused on the basic definition of what it is. The "*how*" of open teaching is embedded in the strategies, pedagogies, theoretical frameworks and OEPs we use to teach.

Without question, by operationally defining Open Teaching it raises some interesting questions.

Does a university have to be "open" for its teaching to be considered open? The answer is no. Universities set parameters for admission, tuition and fees and many other regulations and administrative requirements but once in the institution the mode of teaching can be entirely open. Conversely, other institutions may have extensive digital innovation tools whereby other institutions may be very limited in its technology. Digital arsenals can empower open teaching and open in general.

Does the creative open pedagogy of Open Teaching mean students should be able to create anything and everything they want? Again, the answer is no. There are boundaries and negotiating points by which open teaching meets the minimum "openness" on the definitional characteristics listed above so that we can comfortably and genuinely consider this open teaching. Open pedagogy is not turning the entire content continuum over to students. Most of this is plain common sense.

The Open Championship is held each summer in the UK or Scotland. It is publicised as Open – does this mean every golfer on the planet can come and play? No. It means every golfer who can play great golf and qualify via various systems can enter The Open Championship. Open universities advocate students can come and study anything they want no matter what their previous background and experience. Does this mean if I have no background in medicine I have open access to Med School? No. It simply means the open university will admit you to the university but you will still have to meet all requirements set by the School of Medicine – this could mean taking three years of prerequisite coursework before you would even start medical studies. Similarly, open teaching doesn't mean open everything for the teacher nor the student. There are boundaries, rules, and everyone agrees on these. The teacher might use a non-OER resource if she/he believes it is relevant and important enough to student learning. Does every open teaching course have to personify all OEPs of the institution? No. Autonomy, open dialogue and responsibility still remain key to open teaching but it does not mean anything goes. The key point here is you can employ an open teaching instructional framework and still retain locus of control for decision making and core course values and norms.

References

Butcher, N. (author); Kanwar, A. (ed.); Uvali ć-Trumbić, S. (ed.). (2011). A Basic Guide to Open Educational Resources (OER). Vancouver, Canada: Commonwealth of Learning / Paris, France: UNESCO.

Garcia-Holgado, A.; Nascimbeni, F.; Garcia-Peñalvo, F.J.; Brunton, J.; Bonaudo, P.; de la Higuera, C.; Ehlers, U.; Hvarchilkova, D.; Padilla-Zea, N.; Teixeira, A.; Teixeira Pinto, M., Vazquez Ingelmo, A., & Burgos, D. (2020) Handbook of successful open teaching practices. Logroño, La Rioja: Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR). ISBN: 978-84-18367-08-3. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4062529

Olcott, D. J. (2013). New pathways to learning: Leveraging the use of OERs to support non-formal education. Revista de Universidad y Sociedad del Concimiento, 10, (1), 327-344.

Olcott, D. (2012a). OER perspectives: Emerging issues for universities. Distance Education,33(2): 283-290. doi:10.1080/01587919.2012.700561.

Olcott, D. (2012b). Mobilizing open educational resources in the UAE and GCC states: A primer for universities. UAE Journal of Educational Technology and eLearning, 3.