OPEN PRAXIS

Student Perceptions of Open Education Practice: Navigating Privacy, Identity, and Collaboration with Participatory Technologies

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MICHELLE HARRISON

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

Recent research in open education has increasingly focused on the potential of open educational practices (OEP) to foster equitable, accessible, and transformative learning experiences. This study explores students' perceptions of openness in education, particularly within a fully online graduate program that integrates OEP. The research examines how learners navigate participatory technologies in an open pedagogy context, their shared practices and values, and the impact of open platforms on their learning experiences. Utilizing a virtual ethnographic case study approach, the findings reveal that while students appreciate the collaborative and empowering aspects of OEP, they also face challenges related to navigation, digital identity, and privacy. The study underscores the importance of critically examining the implementation of open platforms and the need for ongoing support to enhance digital literacy and effective use of open educational tools.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Michelle Harrison
Thompson Rivers University, Canada
mharrison@tru.ca

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research in open education has focused on the potential of open educational practices (OEP) to provide a more equitable, accessible and transformational learning experience (Bali et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2022). Though there is not one overarching definition of OEP, aspects such as participation and learner empowerment, use of open licensing to support knowledge creation and inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives, pedagogical practices employing participatory technologies and social networks for collaboration and interaction have been highlighted (Hegarty, 2015; Lambert, 2018; Paskevicius, 2017).

There has been a shift in emphasis from Open Education Resource (OER) creation and adoption, to creation of OEP frameworks that address improved student learning and empowerment, including student perceptions of OER adoption on their learning, but there is a gap in our understanding of learner experiences in other dimensions of openness, such as negotiating identity, privacy, visibility, literacy and the co-construction of knowledge (Jhangiani et al., 2018; Lin, 2019). Jhangiani & DeRosa (2017) emphasize that one important aspect of open pedagogy is that it is "a process of designing architectures and using tools for learning that enable students to shape the public knowledge commons of which they are a part" (para. 13). There is considerable gap in the literature about the implementation of open platforms in an open pedagogy context, how learners both perceive and use these tools and how they shape our learning spaces (Araos Moya & Damşa, 2023; Axe et al., 2020; Harrison, 2018). Educators need to critically examine these spaces, as we know that learning technologies are not neutral and shape the kinds of practices that are possible and align with our pedagogical approaches (Decuypere, 2019; Oliver, 2015).

It has also been suggested that there is a need to critically examine an idealized version of "technologically mediated openness" (Oliver, 2015, p. 366) that is often associated with OEP, to consider who openness most benefits, and how it might be exclusionary (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019). Cronin (2018) points out that "Openness is not a one-time decision and it is not universally experienced; it is always complex, personal, contextual, and continually negotiated" (p. 291). This study focuses on students' perceptions of openness in education, exploring their identities as open educational practitioners and how they negotiate their open educational spaces. It will explicitly explore how students use and navigate their learning using open educational tools and how the inherent openness of the platforms may both enable or inhibit their learning practices. The research context is a fully online graduate program (including multiple courses) that embraces OEP, such as the use of open platforms and open educational resources, and endeavors to include learners in critical digital pedagogical practices. To explore learner practices the following research questions were examined using a virtual ethnographic case (Hine, 2008):

- How do learners use and navigate participatory technologies in an open pedagogy grounded course learning environment?
- What practices, values and/or strategies are shared by learners who are working within an open educational practice framework?

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINING OP AND OEP

Open pedagogy, one element of OEP and a concept rooted in the principles of open education, encompasses a variety of teaching and learning approaches that emphasize collaboration, transparency, and inclusivity, and, in its earliest iterations, autonomy and interdependence, freedom and responsibility, and democracy and participation (Paquette (1979), as cited by Morgan (2016)). A recent definition by Tietjen and Asino (2021), indicated that open pedagogy is a teaching practice that encourages educators to create and share open educational resources (OER) collaboratively, allowing students to actively participate in the co-creation of knowledge. They proposed a five-circle framework that focuses on diversity, students as design partners, participatory pedagogy (multiple stakeholders), open licensing (or ways to modify, re-use, remix), contributing to knowledge-building community (the commons), and fostering a culture of collaboration – sharing, reviewing, editing. Hegarty (2015) proposed a model of OP with eight attributes, including learner contributions to OER, use of participatory technologies, trust, confidence and openness in working with others, a connected community and space for innovation and creativity, disseminating knowledge, and reflective practice and peer review. Cronin (2017),

in earlier work, emphasized the importance of breaking down the traditional barriers between educators and learners and, in her view, OP involves not only the use of OER but also a shift in the power dynamics within the classroom, fostering a culture of shared expertise and mutual learning. Paskevicius and Irvine (2019) highlighted how open pedagogy can be used to cultivate critical digital literacies and empower learners to engage meaningfully with digital technologies. As Jhangiani and DeRosa (2017) also emphasize, OP can promote a more democratic and accessible educational experience, encouraging active participation, knowledge sharing, and the development of essential skills for the digital age. A common thread is that in open pedagogy students are using the elements of open, digital practice, to move outside the boundaries of a traditional classroom, to become contributors and builders of knowledge in their communities. In previous work I emphasized that OP is grounded in sociocultural and critical approaches to learning, and that it can help students emphasize meaning-making through shared experience, connection, and guided practice, relating their experiences to larger social realities.

STUDENTS AND OPEN PEDAGOGY

More recently studies have gone beyond how faculty have implemented OP to focusing on student perceptions of the effect of OP on their learning. These studies examined various elements of OP implementation, including the use of renewable or non-disposable assignments (Al Abri & Dabbagh, 2019; Lazzara et al., 2024; Werth & Williams, 2021), OER textbook co-creation (Brown et al., 2021; Kruger & Hollister, 2021), question development (Hilton et al., 2020), and syllabus creation (Hilton et al., 2020), along with general surveys (Ashman, 2023; Baran & AlZoubi, 2020; Hilton III et al., 2019). Students reported a variety of benefits, including skill and knowledge development (Werth & Williams 2021); Baran & Alzoubi, 2020), personalization (Hilton et al., 2019), sharing/collaborating and peer production/feedback (Abri & Dabbagh, 2019), maintaining ownership (Abri & Dabbagh, 2019), developing agency and community engagement (Baran & AlZoubi, 2020; Clinton-Lisell & Kelly, 2024). Ashman (2023) reported that "Overwhelmingly, students indicated...they found OP to be more valuable, engaging, creative, motivating, and enjoyable in comparison to traditional learning activities" (p. 18). Though participants in many of the studies felt overwhelmingly positive, challenges also emerged, such as the time requirements, perceptions of the quality of their own work, lack of adequate peer review and feedback, content curation, and struggles with technology (Axe et al., 2020; Baran & AlZoubi, 2020; Hilton III et al., 2019). Students report in multiple studies that they had to develop digital skills, and in many cases even though this was seen as positive, it took time and the technological requirements of participating in the open created challenges (Baran & AlZoubi, 2020; Werth & Williams, 2021). Axe et al. (2020) also highlighted that OP requires time to build trust and to have students establish connections. This was echoed by Maultsaid and Harrison (2023) where students shared that trust was an essential component of establishing caring relationships when using OP. Overall, students report that collaboration and peer feedback help overcome some of the challenges of OP, creating a sense of support and accomplishment. However, the literature is lacking in explicit connections between student experiences and the concept of an open education learning environment, pointing to the need for further research and exploration in this field.

STUDENTS AND OPEN TOOLS/NETWORKING

Though Hegarty (2015), Blomgren (2018), and DeRosa & Robinson (2017) have proposed that open and participatory technologies are a key element of OP, there has been little research on how they are being used. In their literature review, Axe et al. (2020) highlighted that though the activities and tools often related to *open learning* are broadly captured in the literature, how students and faculty use them in an open education context, particularly student experiences with the platforms and tools that support open practices, are rarely noted. Araos Moya and Damşa (2023) echoed this and argued that few studies have explored students use of open online platforms, but that it essential that we understand what processes working in this space enables, and how students use them with specific curricular contexts. Decuypere (2019) provided a critical analysis of open education platforms and reminded us that these tools are not neutral in the way they convey and organize information, knowledge and curriculum, and that they are "active devices that perform particular operations and that, in the process, enact specific ideas about both "open education" and the figure of the "open learner" (p. 441). The elements of open platforms and tools that have been argued to help support OP, such as student and

faculty agency and ownership over their practice, data, and privacy, are also those that help overcome some of the troublesome aspects of our digital technologies, such as dataveillance and control by corporations. A UNESCO report on global education (2020) emphasized the value in using OERs and open tools so that faculty and students are not compromising their data or relinquishing privacy controls, or curriculum focus to corporate entities who may then exploit it. Much of the literature suggests that open and participatory technologies can help make connections, through open communication and collaboration in digital spaces, but there is a lack of research that considers how these non-neutral players shape learning experiences.

In an early study that specifically focused on student use of open platforms, Veletsianos and Navarrete (2012) examined online social networks use in formal learning environments. Participants highlighted the need for seamless navigation, ease of navigations and pathways and alerts to how to find content. And though many shared positive experiences, students found certain features of the platform (Elgg) challenging in terms of usability, and these inhibited their learning experience. Veletsianos et al. (2015) in their study of social network development outside of MOOCs, using open platforms, also found that the learner interactions outside the course were meaningful, but students still had challenges with navigation and using this content. Wallis et al. (2022) in their examination of student uses of renewable assignments found that "Despite the priority given ease of use and design in technology construction, learners still feel systems fall short – and appreciate technologies that are very easy and straightforward to use" (p. 49).

We need to keep in mind that educators are often co-opting technology tools originally designed for other purposes for formal learning environments. Several studies have found that though encouraged to do so, there is little evidence of learners using open technologies to go beyond what is required for formal assessments (Veletsianos et al., 2015; Veletsianos & Navarrete, 2012; Harrison, 2018). Veletsianos and Navarette (2012) note "It appears that while the technology and pedagogy enabled (and even encouraged) sharing, students used the online learning environment in a strict educational (albeit socially enhanced) manner, deviating little from the tasks and assignments, and focusing on the activities that were graded." (p. 161). Paviotti et al. (2020), in their study of OP practices, also noted that students did not always embrace active engagement or being taken out of their comfort zones, so found resistance to some of the more open activities used in the course. As teachers/educators, they also noted that they were also given little choice in the types of tools they had available to them to use in their open practice, so there was further misalignment between how they envisioned students might engage in OEP in the courses and what actually occurred. It reminds us that we are only *designing for* certain activities to happen, and though we need to better understand how our tools influence our practices, the reality is that technology and pedagogy are, as Fawns (2022) notes, inherently entangled and reciprocal.

With a recent focus on the importance of digital literacy development, it is also important to emphasize how open pedagogical approaches, which often adopt open tools and other emerging technologies, and require an understanding of open licensing and navigating personal identity and privacy in online spaces, are becoming increasingly relevant and needed for building student skills. As educators increasingly grapple with the advent of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) capabilities, digital literacies such as valuing, creating and communicating about digital information, understanding the relationship of technology to lifelong learning, and personal information and privacy management are necessary. Understanding how students use these open technologies to communicate and collaborate personally and professionally, and how they then use them to help contribute to an informed and committed community is an important focus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a social constructionist perspective that emphasizes that learning is located in socially constructed contexts, not just in the minds of individuals. This perspective is consistent with sociocultural activity and situated learning theories (Engeström, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) where the view is that learning derives from participation in joint activities and is inextricably tied to social practices, mediated by artifacts over time (Greenhow et al., 2009). This aligns with an open pedagogical approach that emphasizes learner agency, co-creation and knowledge building. As I aim to investigate the entanglement of learning spaces and practices, Fawns (2022) model of entangled pedgagogy, drawn from sociomaterial and postdigital perspectives, is relevant where he states that to investigate the

complex interplay between instruction, pedagogy and technology we need to take a holistic view. As he highlights, there is a "mutual shaping of purpose, context, values, methods and technology" which are "socially and materially situated, and relate to the traditions, practices, culture, policy and infrastructure in which they are embedded" (p. 4). This study which focuses on student perceptions of open pedagogical practices, with a focus on how the open platforms are used, suggests a particular attention to how this interplay is shaped and how practices are both influenced by and influence the learning spaces available.

STUDY AND METHOD

As this project focuses on capturing practices and patterns of interaction, a virtual ethnographic case study (Hine, 2017; Simons, 2009) was chosen. A case is a "bounded system" and for the purposes of this study includes analysis of an open program over a two-year period. Though similar to an ethnographic approach, which relies on participant observation and long-term immersion, the case approach differs in that it explores an "instance in action" on a shorter timescale, though still trying to understand the case within its socio-cultural context (Simons, 2009, p. 23). A case can provide detailed and rich descriptions of a specific context, examining multiple perspectives that help examine complexity, allowing the researcher to communicate ways the findings can be transferable and more generalizable to other contexts and settings.

STUDY CONTEXT

The five courses explored as part of this project are part of a graduate certificate in online teaching and learning offered fully online. This program has been designed around elements of open educational practices, including the use of an open course platform termed Commons in a Box, which layers community building tools onto a common Wordpress (WP) theme and allows for personalized portfolios. Other elements of openness include an emphasis on student autonomy, through choice and multiple pathways through activities and assessment, use openly licensed and shareable materials and an emphasis on student choice and knowledge creation. Each course is designed around weekly activities where course participants interact with content, collaborate and participate in discussions within online discussions, blogging or other collaborative activities (creation of a variety of artifacts and projects). As per Paskevicius (2017), in this program the learning outcomes and assessments ask for students to be "producers, peer-reviewers, collaborators" and require students to be or become digitally literate contributors (p. 133). In some courses, students take the lead on facilitating activities and creating digital learning environments for other course participants. Though activities and assessments are not directly referred to as non-disposable, participants build relevant skills and awareness that contribute to a final project that applies directly to their own practice. They are encouraged to share activities in their portfolios and with a wider audience, but explicit reference to licensing is not included in any of the three course assignment directions.

The course learning environment is designed to emphasize open sharing and connection, using embedded portfolios, direct linking and ways for students to connect. As highlighted on the Commons in a Box site, "Members of a CBOX community can create groups and media-rich websites, participate in discussion forums, edit documents together, share files, send messages, and make friendship connections" (CBOX OpenLab, n.d.). To help with navigation and to encourage students to make connections to other participants in the program (beyond the course level), the main page included feeds that would highlight new members, who is online, participant portfolios, and a "What's happening" section that includes recent posts (discussions and blog posts) (program homepage: https://eddl.tru.ca/). Each participant is provided with a portfolio space, where they create their own content, and are encouraged to personalize it with custom theming, linking opportunities and the ability to adjust their privacy settings. The course design team felt that though openness was encouraged, students needed to be able to determine their own levels of visibility.

PARTICIPANTS

The number of registered participants for the 5 course instances over the 2 years being studied was 60. Following research ethics board (REB) approval of our ethics procedures, instructors in the courses sent out recruitment invitations via discussion messages within the courses.

Participants were advised they could withdraw at any time and that their data and responses would be anonymized. Seven students responded and agreed to participate in the wider study which included sharing their public course postings (discussions/blog posts/comments) and portfolios and agreeing to be contacted for follow-up focus group discussions. Table 2 outlines participant profiles with reference to portfolio and digital footprints.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The following data was collected.

- Blog posts, discussion posts and portfolio data from seven participants which included:
  - 64 blog posts, and associated comments.
  - Discussion posts (n = 293).
  - Portfolio data that included visual analysis of portfolio spaces, connections and settings (privacy, profile, avatars).
- Detailed mapping of one course in the open platform to examine different spaces, course files and instructions and linking. Numbers and types of posts (blog, discussions, connections) were collected.
- Audio transcripts from two focus groups with a smaller selection of participants (n = 4).

To organize the large disparate data set (captures of webpages, notes, transcripts), all data was incorporated into NVivo where it was examined and categorized through an inductive coding process grounded in the research questions. Blog and discussion posts were coded to look for open pedagogy and other digital learning elements (inductive coding) as the activities prompted students to share reflection on their overall learning experiences which include references to digital literacy, the design and navigation of the platform, open approaches to education, and metacognitive reflections. The transcripts from the focus groups provided further insight into the learning experiences. Key word searches and code comparison and consolidation across multiple data types was completed (Ahmad & Newman, 2010).

To examine the way students navigated through the course learning space, digital tools used by the participants within the course environment were traced, posts/discussion items that identified use of the platform and other open tools were analyzed, and personalization and customization of design were captured. As participants were engaged in five courses over a two-year period, for this part of the analysis I focused on the interactions in *one course*, to note the level of activity in different course spaces at different times, and to map which digital tools and activities students engaged in. To ensure validity of the findings, multiple data types were used to explore themes and provided a form of triangulation. The study also followed the principles of validity as outlined by Cohen et al. (2013) by using descriptive data, both inductive and deductive analysis and presenting the data in terms of the respondents voices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

NAVIGATING SPACES: PRACTICES

Course Navigation and Structure

This course was designed with the open platform in mind, and students were directed to complete a variety of activities. Many of the *kinds* of activities are similar to those you would find in courses that live inside an LMS and included instructions to complete posts in a discussion forum. The open pedagogy aspects included creating blog posts, adding to a personal portfolio, and creating collaborative projects using open tools. Marks were assigned to both activities, including 10% overall for participation in the discussions and a blogging assignment worth 20% of the final grade with five required posts.

The discussion spaces in the course were very active, with 25 separate topics and 293 posts (initial posts/replies). The six assigned discussion topics had 151 posts, and all of the participants in the course posted at least once to these topics. The discussions were also used for other topics, and was the central space where students asked questions about the course, the instructor provided information and announcements and the team presentations were linked. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the different categories and number of topics/posts.

DISCUSSION CATEGORY	NUMBER OF TOPICS	NUMBER OF DISCUSSION POSTS/ REPLIES
Information Sharing	1	5
Questions (course structure/clarification)	5	31
Announcements	2	2
Assigned Discussion Topics (for marks)	6	151
Other (Extra topics)	4	23
Team Presentations (Assigned)	7	81
Total	25	293

Table 1 Categories of topics/ posts in discussion forums.

There were five assigned blog posts, and most students completed all five, but unlike the discussions, many of the posts had no responses or comments. It is notable that some participants had comments closed, but even those who had comments open, often did not receive any comments. There was a total of 41 blog posts over the duration of the course, with 54 comments attached to them.

Internal spaces

Participants noted various challenges they encountered navigating the internal spaces of the learning environment. It took time to know where to find course materials, where to post activities (discussion or blog post) or how to configure the portfolios. When you are in the content section, there are no direct links to discussions/posts, so you need to navigate back to the course landing page to find these spaces. And though there are links to recent posts, an indicator of community members online on the main course landing page, there are then no links directly to the course content. As one participant posted in the discussions area:

> "Where is everyone seeing the list of themes for the Projects? I am a bit confused. Maybe I am missing something. It took me 4+ hrs to figure out my WordPress blog so I am a little slow here! I am still in need of a group for the project too... I would be happy if someone would adopt me into their group."

In another post participants try to figure out how to contact each other as two participants had left their blog comments closed.

> "I've sent a few of you "membership requests" for your portfolios – I can read your blog (some of you) but can't comment. Not being creepy but you may want to change your privacy settings."
>
> "I did grant the membership requests. My privacy was intentionally set to only allow people from the group who ask for permission to be granted it."

These sentiments were echoed in the focus group discussions where participants shared that it took quite some time to figure out how to take advantage of all the affordances of the course learning environment. As they were more familiar with a traditional LMS, the more lightly linked spaces were unfamiliar.

> "The difference and what I found to be more challenging with the *[course]* setup is that everything was on one page and scrolling down and I found a little more difficult to be organized in terms of what to be reading and what assignments to cover had so *[I created]* my own checklists as a strategy to ensure that I was covering everything I needed to cover to meet the course requirements."
>
> "I finally figured out where to access the comments on my blog! (better late than never I suppose)"

In many of these cases of using repurposed spaces the participants struggled with the technology and the many external links and layers of instruction to help provide a "clear" pathway may have inadvertently created barriers for participation.

External spaces

Participants connected to outside networks and personal work through linking, embedding and referring out. In this particular course, team presentations were created using a variety of tools, including Google (slides/drive), PowerPoint and YouTube, and Zoom. Other tools were embedded within presentations, such as PowToon and Screencasto Matic. Providing access to these external resources was sometimes a challenge, and, in multiple instances, participants had to find alternative ways to share, either by adjusting privacy settings, or using alternative tools if they had technological challenges. In one example, the audio in a Google slideshow was inaccessible except in a certain browser, so a participant re-recorded it, and posted "Just to be sure it is viewable, I've uploaded it as a private YouTube video, accessible only via the link below," sharing a new link with better access.

Another participant post demonstrated perseverance in developing new skills, as well as using OER to revise/remix as part of an activity.

> "My task for this blog was to source an audio file that I could use in a lesson. I looked at various open-source places and settled on a file from Wikimedia Commons. Overall, I found the task to be time consuming, and believe that creating my own audio would improve student success. I also had a great deal of difficulty embedding the file to this blog. After embedding and originally publishing it, the file did not appear. So, I have provided a link to the file instead." (P7 blog post)

Personalization and privacy

As part of the open course design, students were encouraged to personalize their spaces, make connections with peers and explore different technologies that can support teaching and learning. To explore how participants were using the learning spaces, an analysis of the level of personalization, usage of the peer collaboration tools (in the provisioned learning environment) and level and comfort of sharing/privacy was conducted. A brief overview of the portfolios and profiles of the seven participants (across multiple courses) is outlined below (Table 2).

Table 2 Participant profiles and digital spaces personalization.

PARTICIPANT	PERSONALIZED (Y/N)	PRIVACY SETTINGS	AVATAR (Y/N)	FRIENDS	SOCIAL MEDIA	PROFILE	TECHNOLOGY COMFORT (SELF-REPORTED)
P1	No	Private	No	1	No	None	Beginner
P2	Yes – theme, banner, layout, tagging, categories	Public	No	8	No	Location, Bio	Advanced
P3	Yes – theme, banner, layout, tagging, categories	Public	Yes – not personalized	1	LinkedIn	Location, Bio, Interests (brief)	Medium
P4	Yes – theme, banner, layout, no categories, no tagging	Public	Yes – personal photo	1	Twitter, Instagram	location, bio, work, interests (detailed)	Medium
P5	Yes – theme, banner, layout, no categories, no tagging	Public (select posts private)	Yes – personal photo	2	No	Location, work (brief), personal information	Medium
P6	No – theme, no banner, no categories, tagging	Private	Yes – personal photo	5	Twitter	Location, work, bio, interests	Medium
P7	No – theme, no banner, no categories, no tagging	Private	Yes – not personalized	3	No (but lists Facebook)	Location, work	Beginner

There was little uptake on specific community building aspects of the platform. As an example, only one participant had any "Friends" listed. This feature was not emphasized in any of the course instructions so it may be that learners were either unaware or uninterested in using this feature to make connections. The blog spaces were customizable, and participants were encouraged to choose their own themes, banners and layouts. As we see in Table 2 just over half the participants had any customization, and some did not share any personally identifying information (such as a photo or avatar). Sharing personal information, such as a personal photo, can be a way for participants to represent self and build identity online, and helps to build rapport and connections with follow learners (Fornaciari, 2013). Additionally, depth of sharing and self-disclosure has been positively correlated to a sense of belonging in a community (Fornaciari, 2013) so this anonymity or lack of visual presence may be a barrier to interaction. Veletsianos and Navaterre (2012) also noted that ownership and presentation/identity were

points of tensions for learners, noting that negotiating how they presented themselves and how they were perceived by others was a concern.

Learners encountered a myriad of spaces and places within the formal course learning environment, and through their engagement with the course platform, engaged with various levels of anonymity and visibility. In some cases, we could only see a partial glimpse of participants as they kept their digital presence obscured. In other cases, learners provided more detailed sketches as they personalized their portfolios, shared photos, stories and reflective engagements about their learning journeys. Learners did not often take advantage of some of the affordances of the open platform for making connections and missed key tasks such as opening up comments on their blog posts or adding visual elements to their portfolio. Discussion spaces were used more actively than the blogs, and this more traditional space became a more centralized hub for communication. We see a loosely tied together learning space, where nooks and crannies abound, and some participants get lost in the many different pathways, not following the breadcrumbs (navigation aids) or wayfinding points that are provided. On the other hand, we see peer guidance and support to help those build their navigation and digital literacy skills, in response to some of the disorientation that some participants were encountering. This feeling of disorientation, from both instructor and participant viewpoints, has been reported in other studies (Cronin, 2014; Hannon et al., 2014; Knox, 2014) and Hannon et al. (2014) noted in their study that "technologies per se were not the focus of comments, rather the associated practices that interfered with the framing of the learning environment, and either aligned or conflicted with the arrangements for learning" (p. 447).

OPEN PEDAGOGY PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

The previous sections explored how students were using the provisioned open tools – in this section student perceptions of how the design and use of OER and open tools in the use of the design impacted on their practice is examined. Both blog posts and focus group data were examined to analyze how students experienced the elements of open design in the course. Participant blog posts were coded for different elements of open pedagogy principles. These codes were not pre-defined but were informed by the literature and personal experience. See Table 3 for the coding and exemplar quotes. The emergent codes were then organized into five overall themes that highlighted student practices: digital and networked practices, creating connected communities, agency and ownership and reflective practices.

Table 3 Themes, Codes and Associated Quotes.

THEMES	CODES: SECONDARY CODES	EXAMPLES
Digital and networked practices	Using Technologies (ex. H5P, Google) Creating Artifacts	"Creation Process: The graphic was taken from a free public domain site called SnappyGoat.com. I then inserted it into an H5P plugin and created some hotspots that explain the different areas of a convergent boundary."
	Sharing knowledge/ resources Embedding Linking (external/ internal)	"For my Technology Integration Activity, I would like to create an interactive game that teaches students about the concept of mutation-to-adaptation (something like the image below). There are a number of digital resources that I need for this game to be put together, and ideally all of them will be free and provide universal accessibility (read more about my universal accessibility guidelines for my project)."
	Digital identity Sharing Privacy Confidence Perseverance	"I avoid putting any pictures of myself up there and keep it and I certainly keep it private." "I feel more comfortable and confident in my approach to tech"
	Using and citing OER Images (Creative commons) Repositories Resources/Textbooks Articles/Webpages Revising/Remixing	"When you search activities and find one that has been created by another teacher you can either post it to your class as is or you can copy the activity and edit it to meet the particular needs of your class. I most often edited the activities I chose to use that were shared by other teachers. As a French Immersion teacher there are limited activities available in French and so I would often take activities that were created in English and edit them to be presented in French (especially math activities)." "The second practice I look forward to adding to my retinue is finding ways that Open Educational Resources (OER) can support what I am teaching in the classroom."

(Contd.)

THEMES	CODES: SECONDARY CODES	EXAMPLES
Creating connected communities	Collaboration Presentations Supportive comments/sharing	"I have learned so much from reading your blog and discussion posts. I also feel like I have a good starting basis for this learning, and am excited to continue it once the course wraps up." "Please use the link below to view our presentation on critical pedagogy and equity of access by *[students]* and myself We welcome your comments and questions, Thank you"
	Making connections (internal and external)	"Thus, it seemed like a good opportunity to build a PLN for myself that specifically curates resources for my particular work context" "Inspired from this week's lesson materials, I will also be dipping my toes into the world of Twitter. I feel that there is still so much that I have to learn to truly become comfortable with this platform, but it's also clear that there is much networking and knowledge to be gained by actively engaging with a Twitter audience."
	Scaffolding Feedback (peer/ instructor) Guidance	"I, like *[student]*, didn't realize you could animate PowerPoint like that, and I can see a lot of different uses for it in my own teaching context. Thanks for introducing me to a new teaching tool!" "This is an interesting set of threads you've brought together. I think you have the start of a few promising paper/project research questions. I think the approach to enabling students with disabilities in an LMS is both a technological issue and a design issue."
Agency/ Ownership	Choice Ownership	"In exploration of my topic, I have expanded my ideas to look more in-depth at the barriers that exist for students using an online classroom setting, particularly those with mental health disabilities."...Response "I am very interested in your research and your question hits the sweet spot!! Love it!!"
Reflective practice	Reflection, metacognition	As I come to the end of *[course title]* I realize my learning journey in educational technology – its uses, issues and considerations – has only just begun...Three new practices..."

Digital and Networked practices

Using participatory technologies

As highlighted above, navigating both the internal and external digital spaces used to share and communicate took time and attention for some. Participants did note their growing confidence with the digital tools and use of open educational resources. They also noted their appreciation for how others used tools or personalized their webspaces and valued the peer mentoring that happened in both individual and team activities. As one participant shared,

> "I now feel as though I have the wherewithal and confidence to persevere through tech issues, ask questions, and continue pushing the boundaries and innovations of the technologies that I currently use in my work context and are in need of updating."

Value and emphasis were also placed on the skills and/or attributes of being a good digital citizen. One participant noted that this helped her shift toward embracing and using technology, not just using it for entertainment. They also noted, in both posts and the focus groups, that they were taking the skills and knowledge they gained outside of the course to their own practice and networks. As one example "I want to be thoughtful about what skills I have that are transferable to other technologies, and which skills I am sharing with my students (and colleagues) to build their digital citizenship."

Sharing Knowledge and Resources

Connectedness as a design principle in the course was also noted as being evident and reinforced. Participants shared that because it was modeled in the course design, it opened up ideas for them about building networks using open platforms that were transferable to their own contexts. Students reflected on their COVID experiences and highlighted the benefits they found for using open platforms for creating connections across different groups, including distant colleagues, and reaching out beyond their own classrooms was evident. They also emphasized that this was different from the possibilities offered when working inside the LMS where one participant highlighted that it feels as if there is a "blanket around the course" where in an open platform there is more "reaching across the aisle."

And though they valued connectedness, navigating the open course space was at times challenging and, as was highlighted in the mapping of the course spaces, learners noted this in their posts and in the focus groups. They emphasized:

- There were many different spaces and places to interact and find content. Navigation was not always easy, and where best to share and collaborate was not always evident.
- Time had to be dedicated to figuring out the technologies.
- The open platform design required more self-direction and the need to forge connections.

Using and citing OER

Participants in both their blog posts and in the focus groups talked about their increased understanding of use and benefits of Creative Commons licenses and how they can be used in their own context, as well as an increased awareness of the benefits of using and sharing OER (among both their own students and professional networks (e.g. K-12 teachers). They noted they appreciated the flexibility of adapting and re-using resources/content, and also appreciated how this was used in the course design (all openly licensed content) and in the use of an open platform.

Building a digital identity

Participants noted that they encountered tensions in working in open spaces, and as one participant highlighted, it can be both "terrifying and exciting." In the focus group discussions, participants noted that moving from the relative comfort/privacy of a more traditional closed space like an LMS or F2F classroom, to a more open digital space was daunting, but they also recognized the opportunities it provides. They noted tensions in navigating this balance and the following questions/ideas emerged.

- Is my work good enough? When should I share? How do I determine my comfort with quality?
- Digital identity and privacy need to be critically examined. What boundaries are needed, and which ones may be worth crossing considering the perceived risks (of being surveilled, opening yourself up for criticism)? You have to move outside your comfort zone to interact with those with shared values, but where is the line?

They also noted that as they became aware of the benefit of using OER and open tools that they needed to negotiate their own sense of balance around personal privacy. In a discussion post participant P1 noted:

> "I recognize that I am a neophyte in digital education and OER and will need to release some of my desire to guard my digital life and presence closely, while allowing myself to share resources and accepting the peer reviewing process."
>
> "Yeah, I think that's a huge thing with putting yourself out in the open, and it's something I personally struggle with. It's like putting partial work out there and having someone critique it early. I think that's a big part of, I think being in the open as a professional."

As has been found in previous studies on faculty practices (Cronin, 2017; Paskevicius 2017), here students are also negotiating their own sense of a "digital life".

Creating a connected community

As highlighted in Table 3 above, participants valued the peer mentorship around technologies, knowledge sharing, both in and out of the course, and the affordances of the open participatory technologies to make these connections and sharing possible. Positive feedback and community building was exemplified by P3 who posted, "I know you previously said that you were not that confident in using technology, but I can see a lot of growth in your abilities and confidence."

Learners also commented on how the design of the program, using open tools and open pedagogical approaches, helped to create a model for them to change their own practices. This included learning from their peers and building out their digital skills and literacies, and in their posts and comments we see a reciprocal sharing and sense of appreciation for how the open community is also helping to build their own knowledge. As participant P5 shared in her blog "But now that I've gotten my feet underneath, it's really neat how connective all of those pieces are between, like the discussion threads going down and then being able to join other people's blogs."

As noted earlier, learners also shared how they were able to connect their learning to their own professional and informal learning communities. As P6 shared in the focus group:

> "I guess my biggest takeaway would be just how the technologies can act as a facilitator for online learning communities. Online communities, just whatever that community might be, whether it's my colleagues, behavior, support workers, or other students that I'm learning alongside."

Agency and Ownership

Participants shared that they felt an increased ownership of their work as the activities encouraged them to pursue their own interests, ways of collaborating, and in many cases technology tool choice. Participants also highlighted the importance of their work always being available to revisit and re-use. They contrasted this with previous course experience where they lost access when they no longer had access to the LMS. Though most did not necessarily personalize their course spaces, they did indicate that building their digital skills to manage their digital identity was an important aspect of using open platforms and other digital tools in the course. As participant P5 shared, "Open education practices of building within the community to develop our resources...sharing them to get that peer review piece to it. A grass roots approach is actually leading this ... It's not coming from the top down."

Reflection

Throughout the comments, posts, and insights shared in the focus groups, learners' surface reflective practice. They openly share about the value of peer and connected learning, their journeys into building new skills, and how the principles of OEP have allowed that to happen within the course environment. Reflection is woven into all aspects of their posts, and this underlying practice focus was echoed by P1 when they shared

> "I recognize that I am a neophyte in digital education and OER, and will need to release some of my desire to guard my digital life and presence closely, while allowing myself to share resources and accepting the peer reviewing process."

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings show that learners are experiencing openness in ways that challenge their own approaches and ideas, allowing them to embrace elements of open platforms for collaboration, peer review and networking, and opening up possibilities for making connections beyond their formal learning spaces. Other studies have reported how OP provided students with ownership, agency and the ability to contribute knowledge to external communities (Lazzara et al., 2024). This study highlights the importance of how open platforms contribute to these aspects of OEP, as participants noted the importance of having ownership of their learning spaces, leveraging these to connect to each other and external communities, and being able to use open licensing to more widely share their work. They also highlighted how impactful working within these environments was to building practical digital networking skills and deeper knowledge about privacy and the implications of ethical uses of digital tools. At the same time, working in open digital spaces also created challenges, through navigation, a steeper learning curve, required time and ongoing negotiation with creating public digital identities. As other studies have highlighted OEP approaches can challenge both learner and instructor assumptions (Lazzara et al., 2024; Short et al., 2024) and the digital tools available to educators are institutionally provisioned and may not align with pedagogical approaches. Additionally, though students seemed to value the affordances of the open tools, they did not always use these in ways that were intended by the designers. Fawns (2022) suggests that we need to align and constantly assess our "values, purposes, and contexts" (para. 3), balancing different needs in our design and practice. As this study suggests, this negotiation needs to be ongoing to ensure that we can open our learning spaces for transformative practice but also consider the kinds of supports learners need for their digital practice to thrive.

In previous work analyzing open boundaries that occur on the peripheries of the traditional provisions of the institution, I described the remixing and repurposing practices of the technologists, tutors and participants in courses as *wrangling* their spaces. Wrangling means both "contending or struggling" and "managing or herding" for control, and we see here that the course design, supported by open technologies, both aligned and conflicted with the arrangements for learning, where all those involved had to wrangle the different spaces to create a coherent learning framework. In the focus groups,

learners reflected on this process, noting challenges, but emphasizing how it contributed to their learning and abilities to use this model to create new communities within their areas of professional practice. As noted by Araos Moya and Damşa (2023), this kind of meaningful boundary crossing between formal and informal learning provides opportunities for students to critically engage with online technologies and platforms, and, as we see echoed in this study, also increases awareness of privacy and the implications for sharing both learning and professional identities in more open spaces. Learning designers and instructors need to attend to the affordances and challenges and perhaps focus specifically on the kinds of digital literacies that might be most relevant. Particularly as we are just starting to grapple with the implications for AI on education, and how it can be best harnessed in OEP, Tlili and Burgos (2022) note that we need to go beyond just considering concerns of privacy, security, and uses of personal data to include new issues such as "*affective privacy* (e.g. the right to keep your thoughts and emotions to yourself), emotion induction (e.g. changing how someone feels), and virtual relationships where learners enter a relationship with virtual agents" (p. 4) in our educational designs. The integration of OEP and GenAI into our design spaces is an area of future research. How students use and interact with the digital platforms and tools that we provide as part of our educational experiences are becoming increasingly important as complexity and literacy skills continue to shift.

Working in environments grounded in open educational practice where they need to navigate open licensing, open platforms and more loosely structured connections requires learners to expand their digital literacies and constantly negotiate their own digital presence and identities. In this case, tensions related to quality, privacy/visibility, time requirements, and the complexity of the learning environment all had an impact on how the learning spaces were perceived or enacted. In this push to create what we perceive to be more permeable boundaries; we also need to consider what new exclusions may be introduced and at what cost. Bayne et al. (2015) argue that many approaches to openness in education have been based on assumptions that all learners are highly motivated and self-directed, and that the only barriers to uptake are provided by "institutional structures, financial constraints and geographic distance" (p. 248). These assumptions fail to recognize the different expectations, skills and values that learners bring (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019), and, as highlighted in this case, many learners noted they had concerns about how their work would be perceived, struggled with the myriad spaces for connecting, worried about surveillance and privacy, and needed to build their digital fluencies while also focusing on the cognitive requirements. Though they valued the designed elements of openness, including being able to use these in their own professional and personal communities to create connections, we can also see this as a troublesome space where participants crossed and blurred boundaries between their professional and learning identities, work/home/digital spaces, and visibility/anonymity. The impact of this tension was that learners did less reaching outside than what was perhaps expected or hoped for by the course designers and instructors, and similarly to what has been reported in other studies, stuck to course activities and more traditional spaces for communication, underutilizing the open and community-focused affordances of the open tools provided.

This study has limitations, including a small number of participants within one open, online program at the graduate level, which restricts the generalizability of its findings. However, it does address a key gap in the research in OEP, which is to critically examine the digital practices of learners working in learning environments supported by open learning technologies. The findings in this particular case may offer transferrable value to educators, designers and learning technologists who want to build digital spaces that allow for boundary-crossing, promote learner agency and help model and build new digital practices. Additionally, it helps provide a snapshot and model for building similar programs using open digital technologies.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

This study is linked to the following SDG(s): Quality education (SDG 4) and Reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

ETHICS AND CONSENT

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Michelle Harrison is responsible for: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

AUTHOR NOTES

Based on *Academic Integrity and Transparency in AI-assisted Research and Specification Framework* (Bozkurt, 2024), the author of this paper acknowledges that the abstract was generated with the assistance of Microsoft Copilot and later edited by human authors. These sections were subsequently reviewed, critically edited, and validated by the human authors to ensure academic rigor and adherence to ethical standards. The final content in these sections is the sole responsibility of the human authors.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS


Michelle Harrison orcid.org/0000-0003-0794-9852
Thompson Rivers University, Canada

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