

Open(ing) Education: Theory and Practice

Dianne Conrad and Paul Prinsloo, editors

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Reviewed By

Matthew Bingley
Georgia State University

The open education movement seeks to make quality learning materials freely available to all. Its proponents argue that everyone benefits when they have access to quality education. More recently the open education movement has sought to define open education not just in terms of sharing materials, but to open up education as an activity, to make it more participatory and inclusive. In this spirit Conrad and Prinsloo present an anthology of articles on a variety of open educational contexts.

The authors define “open” in contrast to what is “closed.” If closed connotes “hegemony and power” (2), then open suggests practices of collaboration, sharing, and, especially, inclusivity. This dichotomy is only a starting point, however. The book is about educational practice in the liminal spaces created by the constructs of open and closed. With this understanding, much of the book uses the metaphor of an ecology to describe open (or opened) practices. What is open is variously applied to resources, pedagogies and classroom practices, disciplines, institutions, and multi-institutional collaborations, as well as to the concept of education itself. Opening education can mean deprivatizing institutions, as chapter 8 argues, or it can refer to cross-disciplinary collaboration, as chapter 13 illustrates. As a “pedagogy of small” (364), open education locates participation in and ownership of education and knowledge in communities, whether physically present or online.

The strength of the book is the vision it lays out for what education could be with open practices in mind. Open education aims to “develop critical digital/web literacies and to foster agency on the part of all learners” (18). Open education is transformative in facilitating people’s agency to engage in culturally meaningful activities (41). Open education is a public good (341).

This book also presents case studies for how institutions have put openness as access, collaboration, and inclusivity into practice. Chapter 5 shows how local knowledge preserved in open formats fosters sustainable development. Chapter 11 discusses how a multi-institutional collaboration called OpenMed shares open resources to improve educational quality. Chapter 14 presents a case study of how Birkbeck College made learning available online, asynchronously, to include learners who would otherwise be barred from attending in-person daytime classes.

The book does raise critical issues with the misappropriation of openness. For example, chapter 4 shows how the idea of openness can be used cynically, such as when private institutions use MOOCs to advance their brand recognition, effectively using a tool of open education to advance the agenda of a private or “closed” institution. While “one of the core concepts of openness is inclusivity” (3), chapter 7 argues that since open resources are not regulated, many educational materials may not be accessible, effectively walling those materials off from some potential learners.

This anthology is not a how-to manual for incorporating open practice in your classroom. It a framework for transforming the practice of education. None of the articles deal with teaching in religious studies specifically. *Open(ing) Education* provides a useful and aspirational framework for deconstructing educational hierarchies that limit student engagement with learning, and examples of how this can be done effectively.