Taking Care of Business: Reimagining the Art College in the 21st century

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Abstract
This paper advances the case for open models of higher art education in the 21st century. To achieve this, we propose using open educational practices (OPAL, 2012) as a form of social entrepreneurship, supported by digital technologies. Based on our own and others recent experiences in open education we outline the nature of the problems we face, some of the practical working responses that have already appeared, and describe emerging potential solutions that can build on the progress achieved to date.

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1. The Current Situation

**Challenges**

Art Colleges and HE are, in our view, facing a set of *external* challenges:

- Funding cuts, staff redundancies, course closures and a changing market
- Demographic trends: ageing society and an increasingly diverse student population
- Demand outstrips supply
- Growing expectation and need for more flexible learning opportunities
- ‘Knowledge economy’ discourse mystifies the fundamentals (Facer, 2009)

This situation is compounded by a set of *internal* factors that, in our experience, act as ‘force multipliers’ for the impact of the external challenges:

- Conservative pedagogical cultures - makes alternatives difficult to conceptualise
- Managerialism - financial data as the basis for planning
- Short-termism - concentration on current contexts limits long-term development
- Inflexibility - in assessment, certification, administration, employment and budgeting
- Narrow social base - UK visual arts are less diverse than most disciplines (NALN, 2005)

**The Mystery of Closed Education – Moving from Scarcity to Abundance**

Traditionally, university’s prestigious position in society has largely been based on monopoly control of access to scarce resources, in terms of education and information. Access to information and learning resources, especially in the form of libraries, was (and is) a major component of higher education. This monopoly (especially for learning resources) is being rapidly eroded by the internet, leaving access to learning opportunities as the remaining area of monopolised scarcity.

Universities tend to be dominated by what Laurillard (1994) describes as the ‘medieval information technology of the lecture’ - devised as a means of transmitting information to groups of students as an economic alternative to scarce and expensive handwritten books. In art education the dominant form is the studio and workshop. In both cases the ‘pedagogy of place’ is the dominant form organised around the routines and demands of the academy. The challenge to both is how to make the opportunities for learning more open in terms of location and time, as well as choices about the mode of study (face to face, online, blended), duration of study, type of assessment etc. and, crucially, making it affordable.

The choice of what to teach, how to teach and the supervision of the quality of the teaching was, and still is, conflated with the research interests of the teachers and the institution – a throwback to the theological origins of this educational model. However, excellence in research is no guide to the quality of teaching, as a
policy briefing for UNESCO (Bacsich, 2012) observes. Governments, policy makers, academics, and students need to move on from using research as a proxy for teaching quality, as there is no evidence of a link (Hattie & Marsh, 1996), but it does serve an essential function in maintaining the mystery of higher education. Burke & McManus (2009) provide a trenchant critique of how traditional art education operates in informal ways to perpetuate a self-serving mystique. Like most mysteries, closed educational systems do not always make sense from the ‘outside’ and, as Facer (2009) implies, a discourse about alternatives and openness is likely to be a challenge for those on the ‘inside’.

**Reaching the Limit of Traditional Educational Models**

Despite its drawbacks, traditional higher education, in the OECD countries has been pushed and cajoled by politicians and policy makers into delivering more (with and without technology) to a wider student body than ever before. But, as Greller (2013) observes, progress in this area has been obscured by the recent media ‘noise’ surrounding the MOOCs and their evangelists (Yuan & Powell 2013). The truth, however, is rather different. Old-fashioned outreach initiatives, instigated by the public sphere, have over the last 20 years delivered some startling progress. As can be seen in the OECD statistical analyses (OECDa, 2012), it accounts for a much larger rise in education levels than MOOCs are ever likely to achieve and with lasting success. Over the past 15 years, tertiary type-A graduation rates equivalent to a degree in English speaking countries (OECDb, 2012) have risen by 20 percentage points on average among OECD countries. Even more encouraging is that across all OECD countries, “an average of 47% of today’s young women and 32% of today’s young men will complete tertiary type-A education over their lifetimes”. Note these figures are about completion and graduation, not registration figures or certificates. These dwarf even the wildest claims currently made for MOOCs, which currently have a dropout rate of 90+% (Rivard, 2013).

A presentation by the UNESCO Chairs in OER (Open Educational Resources) at the Cambridge OCWC 2012 conference outlined the fundamental problem we face with higher education in the developed world. It is that the rapid expansion of the last 20 years has enlarged, virtually unchanged, a system designed to educate a small elite drawn from a narrow social and educational background into a de-facto mass education system, which it was never intended to be (McGreal, 2012). As Bacsich (2012) observes, this strategy was problematic even in the ‘days of plenty’ before the current economic crisis. Now that this is economically unsustainable - that particular paradigm of higher education is breaking down.

**Avoiding the Rhetoric of Crisis**

Martin Weller (2012) at the OU cautions that we should avoid the language and rhetoric of crisis in education such as phrases like ‘Education is Broken’, as this usually translates into a sales pitch for a technical or commercial ‘fix’. George Siemens (2012), one of the original inventors of the MOOC concept, describes the rapid and well-connected development of venture capital backed initiatives to provide such ‘fixes’. As Klien (2008) describes, with detailed examples, the language of crisis as well as the actuality, has been used in political campaigns for the privatisation of publicly owned goods and services. In Europe the higher
education system is still largely free at the point of delivery. We need to be aware that any open education initiatives that we participate in are going to be operating in a politically and commercially contested environment, facing pressures from internal conservatives and from an increasing number of private players (Facer, 2009). Rather than privatisation we see a widening public sphere in educational provision as the future, especially in relation to the idea of the ‘commons’. In the following section we describe some exciting examples that are providing a foundation for alternatives to the status quo, it is important to appreciate that the concept of the ‘commons’ is not a form of state ownership, it is bigger and wider than that.

2. Public Good and Public Goods: The Emerging Political Economy of Open Education – a foundation for the future

When socio-economic paradigms break down as they are currently doing for education, there is also an opportunity for innovation and experimentation. We can already see positive signs in the innovative responses to these problems that we list below, that are relatively simple, lo-tech, and hold out the promise of being resilient. Such innovations are not accidental; they are part of a larger, evolving, social movement that is creating novel solutions to the current challenges. We think these developments provide essential foundations for the proposals we make for the future in the final section of this paper.

Legal Tools and Philosophical Leadership

The Creative Commons (CC) licensing system has been widely adopted by educational policymakers over the last 10 years and has become the legal ‘lingua franca’ of open education. This in turn has helped to support the (re)introduction of the concept of the ‘commons’ into civil discourse at a critical time when commercial interests were (and are) trying to privatize as much of the existing public sphere in society as possible. By using the language and codes of property law in relation to defining and protecting the idea of shared public spaces and public goods, CC licensing has been a profound innovation at a critical juncture.

Policy Leadership

The American Hewlett Foundation (Hewlett Foundation, 2013) has been prominent in supporting and funding open education initiatives for over 10 years and their lead has been followed in recent times by state authorities in the USA, UK, Europe, and elsewhere. These and other initiatives have led to the current growing ‘open education movement’. The message for Europe is clear, learn from experience elsewhere and prepare strong policy interventions with a long-term plan.

In the US, such as in California (Hewlett Foundation, 2009) and elsewhere (Creative Commons Polska, 2012) the lo-tech but high-impact tactic of state education authorities funding the creation of free and low cost digital textbooks and mandating their take-up and use by colleges is a dramatic example of practical measures designed to cut the costs of access to education for the less privileged. In the USA this is having rapid positive effects and is supported across the political divide, despite lobbying by the publishing industry.
**Institutional Leadership**

The entrenched perception that lectures are the epitome of university education is showing signs of breaking down. Why not record the best lectures, illustrate them with good quality resources, make them available for anytime access and review and use the time saved by academics to provide extra and better contact experience for students? As Vijay Kumar, the Director of MIT’s Educational Innovation Office, puts it; ‘then, during class, the focus is on hands-on exercises not passive information reception’ (Kumar, 2012). This model has become known as the ‘flipped’ classroom. It depends on being specific, open and clear about the syllabus and increased upfront planning as compared to the traditional approach to teaching where planning and process are largely hidden from view. The implication is clear – if an elite institution can benefit from this then so can other universities. This also helps those arguing for change that are working in institutional contexts still in thrall to the lecture and traditional teaching methods.

**Political Leadership – Sophisticated Interventions**

There are signs that politicians and policy makers are getting more sophisticated about how to orchestrate funding, licensing, and policy to improve and open up education together with the grounded and realistic use of technology. The following example from California is a good illustration (outlined further in Creative Commons USA, 2012) building on the previous success of the Californian Open Textbook initiative. In 2012 a bill went before the California state senate proposing to address the problem of a shortage of college places that resulted in 400,000 students not finding a place on one of 50 introductory courses needed before they were able to progress with their education. The proposal aims to create a state funded online course ‘market’ where 3rd party providers (including MOOCs) can bid to offer online courses to these students. In return, the state is demanding that the 3rd party providers who want to enter this market (and get paid) must make their course learning materials and textbooks openly licensed using a range of designated CC licences. This neatly leverages the power of public money to add to the educational commons (a kind of reverse privatization) and pressures the existing traditional education system that cannot meet the demand. In the USA a common phrase to describe the philosophy behind this is ‘public money for public good’.

**Open Content and Open Access**

There is a rising demand from politicians and within academia that publicly funded research, learning resources and other information artefacts like maps and data sets etc. should be returned to the public free of charge for social and economic benefit. This is a movement that is developing rapidly, making redundant the traditional role of commercial gatekeepers in the publishing industry. Concrete examples of this include; the UK government Finch report on open access to research outputs (UK Government, 2012), the $2 billion US government programme creating free learning resources for colleges (Whitehouse, 2011) and the California education authority open textbooks initiatives previously described.
New Economic Educational Models

The growing amount of OER in circulation acts as a form of shared intellectual capital that in turn can be drawn upon to increase social capital. The US ‘Bridges to Success Project’ (BS2, 2013) is a strong example of this. High quality OERs from the UK Open University (OU) in Maths and Learning Skills were redeveloped and customised by a consortium of universities and colleges for US community college students. These were re-released as OERs. The powerful innovation, however, was to use these OERs to support inter-institution collaboration in the enhancement of existing programmes (including staff development) to support the progression of ‘non-traditional students’, with dramatic results (McAndrew et al 2012). Working together in this way and using shared learning resources was a new experience for the participants, and gives credence to Butcher’s (2011) assertion that what we are seeing is the de facto assimilation of open learning tools and methods into ‘closed’ education.

Assessment and Credit

Assessment and Credit are part of the traditional powerbase of closed education; it is also a point of vulnerability and a vector for change. In the UK getting a university to accept and credit learning that has occurred outside their control can be a long and tortuous process. In the EU the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) has long been established as part of the Bologna process for harmonising undergraduate education but it is still difficult to get academics to accept and credit learning that has happened elsewhere. This is one area where traditional closed education is vulnerable to competition from the open sector.

In the mid 19th century the University of London was involved in a number of substantial open education innovations that built on earlier innovations. Chief amongst these was the introduction of open and distance learning methods, including the separation of teaching from examination (still seen as radical in mainstream HE). This meant that students could be examined on their own learning, conducted independently of the institution, only needing to pay the fees of registering for an exam. In the USA this method is called the ‘challenge exam system’. To this day it is possible to complete a University of London Degree in this way for a total cost of less than £4,000 (UoL, 2012). This approach should be an important component of a future open education infrastructure as a means to ensure equality and rigour, so that the accreditation of open learning can be effectively endorsed in the ‘Educational Commons’ in a trustworthy way and gain public acceptance. Involving leading institutions in this development will be important in driving this process forward.

Digital Innovation in Assessment and Credit

Assessment and credit has been recognized as ripe for innovation in the digital age by the Mozilla Foundation with its Digital Badges initiative (Mozilla, 2013). This is essentially a way of providing a digital equivalent to the traditional paper exam certificate. However, because this is a digital artefact it can include proof of learning in the form of links to a portfolio of completed works and examples of application of knowledge and skills. This is especially important for employers who traditionally complain that a university exam certificate tells them very little about the attributes and skills of the person who possesses it, other than
that they have passed a university exam. Trialling and adoption currently under consideration by leading institutions will be a major advance.

**ODL Methods and Tools**

Although Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been practiced in higher education for over 150 years it is only very recently that it has been taken seriously by the mainstream, facilitated by developments in technology. There are a number of tried and tested methods and tools that have emerged out of this sector that mainstream universities are now turning to in order to meet demand. An important and lucid guide to Open Educational Resources published by UNESCO and COL (Butcher, 2011) makes the significant observation that this is providing a way of introducing such open education techniques into the closed realm especially in relation to the role of resource-based learning.

3. **Next Steps**

**Building on Success**

In our view, the developments described in the previous section provide a great foundation for further development. Here we briefly describe how we think open (art) higher education can be taken forwards. Developments at Coventry, London and elsewhere open up exciting new possibilities for art education other than contraction and decline, by proposing different levels and modes of participation with a variety of assessment and accreditation models. The Department of Media in the School of Art and Design at Coventry University have, for several years, been making extensive use of social media (blogs, Vimeo, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and iTunes U etc.) to present and collate resources to support a ‘Hybrid Open Class’ approach with interactions coming from a student ‘front of house’ and a ‘back channel’ to and from the social media world (Coventry, 2013). In the University of the Arts London (the largest art and design institution of its kind in Europe) there has been experimentation with online open ‘studios’ to share processes and the development of innovative use of rich media and progressive pedagogies to share elements of ‘tacit’ knowledge acquisition that have traditionally been thought impossible to share (UAL, 2013). In the emerging open educational model the whole institution is beginning to be ‘flipped’ and defined by the academy going to where the students live, both online and, in a return to traditional forms of outreach, dispersed physical locations, working with community organisations and employers as equal partners. In this scenario the academy is defined by its community, not just it’s location, although the latter will likely always be important. As Facer (2009) observes, how institutions (and disciplines) manage this transition will be a major determinant of their future success.

**New Paradigms for Progress**

The challenge of changing higher education in difficult times is a classic example of what has come to be known as a ‘wicked design’ problem. Such problems are often ill defined, involve stakeholders with different and conflicting perspectives and have no clear ‘correct’ solution. Using standard methods cannot solve them; by their nature they demand creative solutions.
Because of the need for creative thinking, there has been a growing interest in applying design techniques to these kinds of problems (Rittel, 1988; Stolterman, 2008). In response to this situation the field of participatory and co-design has developed. This proposes that to effectively solve such problems it is best to actively involve all the stakeholders in the design process in order to ensure the solution / product / service is optimal. The need for such approaches has been recognised at the European policy level by the Social Innovation Europe (SIE) pilot project (http://socialinnovationeurope.eu/) to support networking activities for social innovators in Europe, which has been funded by the Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry.

This design movement has formed its own international academic organization, DESIS (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) with a research and education network (http://www.desis-network.org) linked to leading art and design colleges across Europe and around the world. This could provide one of the future ‘hubs’ around which to cluster open art education projects. We think that for such initiatives to be successful they would need to incorporate and build on many of the innovations described in the previous section of this paper. We suggest a guiding principle for publicly funded developments in this area should be the US mantra ‘public money for public good’ and that all publicly funded work should be mandated to add to the commons in some manner. Below we summarise what we see as the main features for the next steps in open higher art education:

- Create ‘living laboratories’ (physical and virtual) to gather data, explore and test different solutions, especially assessment methods, accreditation and the effective evidencing of learning. These will demand the active participation of internal and external quality assurance agencies (Bacsich, 2012). This will provide valuable practical contexts for discussions to take place about options for the future of higher education and, crucially, to ensure evidence based decision making can be achieved to support policy proposals

- Instigate open education initiatives as collaborative enterprises between institutions as a way of overcoming traditional inertia and resistance (Facer, 2009. Laurillard, 1994) using the ECTS infrastructure more widely.

- Trial the use of Mozilla Badges to provide more granular information and evidence about learning achievements in existing degrees and to provide evidence of learning that occurs outside the academy that may be accepted as part of a degree.

- Use the outputs to redesign existing universities/art colleges and/or create new ones – bootstrapping our way out of the present impasse

These changes may be enabled by technology; however, the drivers of the change will be social, cultural, educational, economic and political, both inside and outside the academy.
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