

RESEARCH

Teaching Open Literacies

Sky Croeser

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry, Curtin University, AU
s.croeser@curtin.edu.au

University teaching, particularly teaching with and about digital technologies, can play a role in developing and expanding open literacies. At the same time, we face a range of challenges as teachers. The managerial focus on measuring and quantifying teaching and learning outcomes within academia often works against the evidence on pedagogical best practice. Despite claims made about ‘digital natives’, we find that students of all ages frequently have difficulty sorting through the mass of information available online. It is not enough, as teachers, to simply provide content to students, or even to ‘engage’ students through gamified learning and other digitally supported teaching methods. To effectively support open literacies within university education we need to question institutionalized practices, including commitment to discipline canon and to a depoliticized, depersonalized approach to teaching. In order to be effective, I argue that our pedagogies must be diverse, context-dependent, and reflexive.

Keywords: open literacy; pedagogy

Introduction

This paper was written in response to a call for reflections on ‘open literacy’, which was a useful prompt to think more about my teaching practices. Open literacy can be seen as a subset of ‘new literacies’: literacies that draw on new technologies and are more participatory, collaborative, and distributed, and less centred on expert knowledge (Lankshear & Knobel 2007: 7–9). In line with this, the Curtin University Centre for Culture and Technology’s call for papers (‘Open Literacy’ Call for Papers, 2019) defines open literacy as ‘user-centred and system-wide, “bottom-up” rather than “top down”’; as linked to experiments with new technologies; as encouraging ‘user-led social innovation in times of uncertainty and change, across demographic borders, at global scale’; and as playful and frequently exploratory rather than purposeful. The research symposium invited us to consider of extending open literacy ‘to whole populations, across demographic borders, at global scale, for purposeless but nevertheless pedagogic play, and for social innovation, instead of being a mere instrument for profit, power and mass persuasion’. In the current political and environmental context, there are urgent reasons for considering how we might support these practices.

The idea of widespread, rapidly adapting digital and media literacy seems incredibly important in an era where we’re experiencing both the rise of the authoritarian right, severe climate collapse, and economic instability associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Right-wing ideology and violence has a long history, especially in settler states such as the USA and Australia, but it is manifesting in new ways in the current political and technological moment; Daniels (2008) is among those arguing that the Internet is implicated in the current spread and structure of the far right. In addition, the personalized nature of social media seems to play a role in people’s willingness to believe, and spread, information – including information that they know is not trustworthy (Hodson & Traynor 2018: 1). At the same time, understanding our communication online as shaped by a range of social factors offers possibilities for making the urgent shifts necessary in our attitudes and behaviours required to take action on climate change (Hodson 2019). Better understanding how to support open literacy – particularly a version of open literacy that is politically engaged, in the broad sense – seems vital in a situation where we need to organize in response to the spread of fascist ideas and work in solidarity towards broad systemic shifts.

Sadly, the structure of universities does not naturally support efforts to facilitate open literacy. The idea of ‘teaching’ open literacy at university, in particular, is inherently contradictory. The dominant model of



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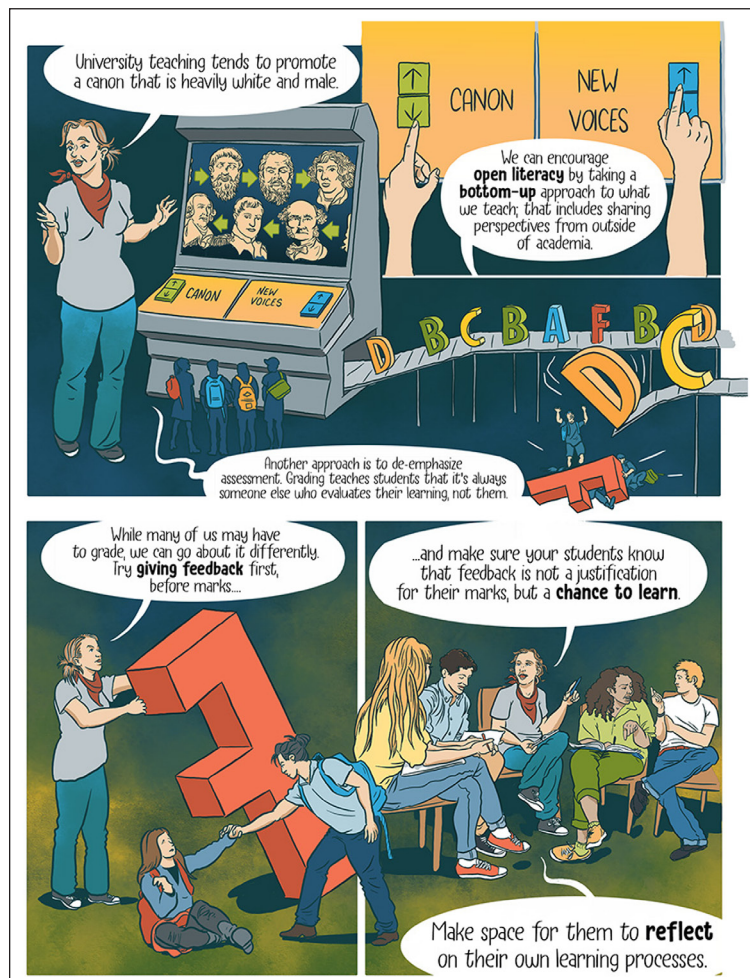
university teaching is organized around experts who set the syllabus, guide students through their learning, and assess students' learning through standardized assignments. There are certainly spaces where this model is challenged, including through the free university movement, 'self-organized projects [which] aimed to liberate knowledge and learning from the constraints of the established university on the grounds that "anyone can teach" and "anyone can learn"' (Amsler 2017: 10). However, these projects remain at the margins (at best) of the university system. The structural context of my own university teaching is one where I am required to claim and demonstrate my expertise to managers and colleagues as well as students; where we need to set and assess specific learning objectives for each unit; where learning objectives must be linked to central university 'graduate capabilities'; and where assessments need to fit a set framework in terms of timing, format, and percentage of overall mark. This significantly constrains the room for open, decentralized, and free-flowing learning (especially purposeless and playful learning).

Difficulties for open literacy

The increasing adoption of digital technologies in university teaching has often been associated with a rhetoric of increased openness and playfulness, including through gamified learning and massively open online courses (MOOCs). Many of the claims made around MOOCs seem in line with the social, networked approach to open literacy. FutureLearn (a UK platform for MOOCs), for example, says that its purpose is to 'transform access to education' by harnessing 'the power of the community, where learners can make immediate use of their newly acquired skills by sharing their knowledge with their peers' (FutureLearn 2020). However, despite the fact that any student with Internet access and the requisite language skills might be able to access a MOOC, in practice attrition is high and students who do not already know the field well, or who are not well-off financially, are much less likely to complete MOOCs (Ng'ambi & Bozalek 2015: 451). Takseen Adam argues that MOOCs' focus on automated testing, rather than the processes of learning, tends to 'limit the ideals and aims of emancipatory and affirmative education', while the dominance of English-language MOOCs from Western universities reinforces colonial knowledge systems (2019: 372). Similarly, gamification in tertiary education is, arguably, not so much a manifestation of the ludic playfulness we might hope for

as it is, rather, an exemplification of the application of neoliberal logic to learning (Tulloch & Randell-Moon 2018). There are many committed educators trying to use the managerial enthusiasm for these trends to create space for more liberatory pedagogies, just as many worked within older educational systems in creative ways: FemTechNet's Distributed Open Collaborative Course model is one such example (Rault & Cowan 2017). Overall, however, it is difficult to see academia's incorporation of MOOCs, gamification, and related trends as a shift towards a form of learning that we might call 'open literacy'.

There are also more subtle ways in which the academic institutional context works against the emergence of diverse, decentralized, bottom-up literacies. Even though universities frequently proclaim a commitment to student learning, in practice research is valued significantly over teaching (Dennin et al. 2017). This makes it challenging for many academics to prioritize making time to (re)think pedagogical practices. Increasing workloads in most academic contexts limit the time and resources available to change existing syllabuses or to try approaches to teaching that may be unfamiliar or require experimentation. The increasing reliance on casual, insecurely employed teaching staff also plays a role. Universities do not release data on the proportion of teaching carried out by sessional staff, but some estimates are that around half of Australian university teaching is done by sessional workers, many of whom do not have access to desks, offices, or other resources (McKenzie 2017). These teachers are often delivering content that they have limited control to shape, and where they do have the opportunity to develop a syllabus it requires substantial unpaid work – and significant risk – to experiment with pedagogical approaches outside of the mainstream. Implementation of standardized measures of teaching such as student evaluations create further risks for teachers attempting non-mainstream pedagogical practices. These measures already tend to reinforce existing gender and cultural biases (Fan et al. 2019; Boring 2017) and, in addition, there is evidence that students do not evaluate more effective teaching more positively (Boring, Ottoboni, & Stark 2016). Negative teaching evaluations may make it harder for casual teaching staff to find secure employment – or even to get rehired – and affect promotion prospects for more secure staff. There is therefore substantial pressure on both secure academics and sessional staff to stick to familiar, and 'safer', teaching formats.



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In combination, these aspects of the structure of the current structure of most universities mean that efforts to support bottom-up, playful, purposeless approaches to learning will necessarily be limited and partial. My suggestions here are not intended to offer a full program for supporting open literacy in university teaching. Offering a single comprehensive plan for open literacy would, anyway, be contradictory – and not just because it would mean claiming an expertise that I'm far from possessing. My thoughts here are grounded in over a decade of teaching – at the accelerated pace required when teaching is an area running four Open University study periods and two on-campus semesters a year – but it has taken a long time for me to engage in a process of reflecting on and questioning my teaching practice. In part, this is *because* of the rapid pace of teaching, which allows few breaks to pause, evaluate, and consider new approaches. Like most universities, there was very limited formal training in teaching methods at the institution where I completed my PhD: I completed an optional, part-time course over several weeks, which by necessity did not engage with teaching theory in any depth. Much of what I learned came from informal mentoring from colleagues at my current institution, Curtin University, where I have had the privilege to get a hands-on education in teaching approaches that engage critically and thoughtfully with new technologies and with non-standard approaches to learning and assessment design. What I write here is, therefore, intended as a prompt for others like me who are taking small steps to foster a less hierarchical mode of learning in the cracks of the current system, often with limited resources.

This partial and incomplete approach to fostering open literacy is tempered not only by an awareness of the limitations of our academic teaching institutions, but also by the belief that even mainstream approaches to academic teaching serve important functions. Although I dislike the push for students to write 'objective' essays that use convoluted phrasing to avoid use of the first person, I do enjoy the process of encouraging students to develop and share their arguments more effectively in the essay format. And, while there is frequently an expectation that students will be digital natives who automatically know how to skilfully navigate new technologies, there are huge gaps in most young people's ability to critically evaluate online material (McGrew et al. 2017), and many face understandable struggles with safely navigating the complex

privacy challenges involved in social media (Cho 2018). Teaching students to better understand the landscape of the Internet, including the ways in which it is dominated by capitalist interests, seems genuinely valuable and can be deeply rewarding.

At the same time, it is useful to look for ways in which we might flatten the hierarchies involved in university teaching, and open up space for playfulness that is not directed at any kind of neoliberal productivity. This requires taking a specific stance: at the least, deciding that we *want* to challenge traditional teaching methods. When we simply continue with teaching as we were taught, and in line with the expectations of our institutions, it is easy to see this as taking no stance at all. When we teach 'standard' essay-writing, teach the canon, lecture and expect students to take notes, it's easy to see all of this as 'neutral'. Of course, this is the neutrality of standing still on a moving train – we are still perpetuating a particular set of ideas and skills that are laden with values that we may or may not support. Pushing back against the canon, and against familiar teaching methods, may feel uncomfortable because it becomes more obvious that we are taking stance – and one which might be uncomfortable, impolite, or even dangerous.

Reconfiguring academic teaching

Academia is built on a system of scarcity. We believe that there's only so much work – especially secure work – to go around. Only so much media attention. Only so much grant funding. And, in the classroom, only room for the *teacher* to be in charge and be the expert. Of course, much of this is true. On the other hand, academia is also built on practices of collaboration and openness – on practices of abundance – and we can look for ways to foster that in our teaching, and our research. This is easier, and safer, for some teachers than others. Those of us who do have access to the privileges of whiteness, of job security, of a reasonable workload, or other resources, should put particular effort into reconfiguring academic teaching.

One way to do this is to demonstrate that we value multiple forms of expertise, including technical skills and the expertise that comes from lived experience outside academia. Many of the assessments in my current teaching area, internet communications, leave the choice of format to students, allowing them to draw on their skills in video editing, music, or other content creation, as well as academic writing. Students often produce work that demonstrates a level of technical proficiency and creativity that I would not be equipped to teach them. Critical pedagogies, including feminist pedagogies, centre the use of 'experience as a resource' while also encouraging critical reflection that connects individual experiences to collective and structural contexts (McCusker 2017). This might mean prompting students to discuss ways in which the topics being taught affect their lives; asking students to bring in examples relevant to the unit themes to shape learning; or specifically designing assessments that connect personal reflection with critical analysis. It is also something which I increasingly try to model in the classroom, discussing ways in which my own life has shaped my research approach – and the areas of the syllabus I might previously have missed (for example, my failure to address disability until recently the unit, *Power, Politics, and the Internet*). The texts which we set also demonstrate the kinds of knowledge which we value. I have gradually been shifting the readings in *Power, Politics, and the Internet* to decentre white, male, US perspectives on issues such as online privacy. For example, Sadie Slyfox's (2018) analysis of US anti-trafficking legislation is thoughtful, detailed, and grounded in her own experience of sex work. We might also consider the ways in which we can prioritize students' expertise about their own lives in the bureaucracy that increasingly surrounds academic teaching, including by taking students seriously when they request extensions rather than requiring external documentation such as a doctor's certificate. We have many opportunities to unsettle hierarchies of knowledge in academia, and to switch between sharing our expertise and learning from others.

Assessment is one of the focal points for the hierarchical model of university learning, and removing, de-emphasising, or shifting the power relations around assessment is one of the most powerful steps we can take towards supporting open literacy. This is difficult to do in many academic contexts, and not just because of institutional pressures towards standardisation: students are often studying at university because they want accreditation that can aid them in their search for employment. Nevertheless, most research demonstrates that assessment undermines and skews student learning and motivation, and where grades are provided often students don't read or engage with more detailed feedback (Schinske & Tanner 2014). Jesse Stommel (2018) suggests a range of approaches to 'ungrading', including self-assessment and 'grade-free zones' for some portions of the semester. Given the rigid framework around assessment at my institution, I have been working to be more open with students about the problems with assessment (including sharing research on the ways in which assessment can undermine their learning); and trying to explicitly reframe their (and my own) picture of a 'good' student. In response to a recent student email in which the learner shared a loss of motivation from getting lower grades than usual, I wrote:

You're a good student. Not in the sense of getting good grades (although I see that you do). But a good student in the sense that you're curious about the world, that you care about your learning, and that you're willing to put in the work. There are going to be times when you get grades that are lower than what you're used to – it might be that it'll happen in this unit, it might happen in the future if life gets in the way of your studies, it might happen at another point because you're graded unfairly or you're studying an unfamiliar area or you misread the instructions or something else entirely. If that does happen, I hope it won't let it daunt your enthusiasm for thinking about how the world works and about how you can navigate (and change!) it.

This was an important moment for me as a teacher in that I needed to actually articulate to the student – and to myself – the ways in which assessment fails, and that learning and grading don't always line up well. It also felt like a moment in which I was able to shift away from the standard academic eyerolling in response to students who feel they are a better judge of their own learning than we are: just consider the usual responses to students who say they 'deserve' a better grade. Fostering open literacy must mean that we take these claims seriously, as well as building practices and structures that encourage students who may not have the confidence to advocate for themselves to do so.

Peer feedback and assessment also offer potential for upending academic hierarchies and helping to support open literacy. Many units in internet communications at Curtin University currently have some element of peer feedback incorporated, from suggestions that students provide informal feedback on each other's work in progress through to formal requirements around offering productive suggestions around each other's ideas and drafts. We do, as always, come up against the problem of assessment: students frequently only engage with each other when this is assessed, and their engagement is usually structured around the assessment requirements. Building meaningful peer engagement that creates space for students to learn from and with each other might work better in ungrading contexts, and in spaces where assessment is necessary it may require involving students in the creation of rubrics, or even assessment design.

Peer assessment has been a useful part of my attempts to create space for genuine, meaningful collaborative learning. We know that discussion and collaboration help students to learn – and, of course, underpin open literacy – but this is not immediately obvious to all students in a university setting. Learning through collaboration has been central to one of the units I now teach, *The Digital Economy*, since it was first designed (as *Internet Commerce and Consumers*). The aim was explicitly not just to require teamwork, but also to improve their ability to 'utilize effectively the online tools and techniques relevant to these skills' (Tay & Allen 2011: 156). We spend a lot of time at university teaching students how to write essays and (much to many students' dismay) the finer points of referencing. In most university programs, students will be expected to engage in teamwork or some other kind of collaboration (even if this is just classroom discussion) with very little active attempt to foster the skills necessary to do this effectively. The current version of *The Digital Economy* includes readings about effective collaboration (including around the need to encourage and support diversity in collaboration); provision of resources that support project management, communication, and other aspects of teamwork; and peer assessment. The rubric prompts students to consider effective communication (specifically including letting each other know if work, caring responsibilities, or other issues were likely to lead to a gap in communication); how well students have engaged with and supported each other; and the more usual 'research and writing' category. Providing this rubric early on in the semester has been useful in shifting the culture of cooperation around teamwork and making the work of collaboration more visible. I am hopeful that giving students positive experiences of collaboration, and prompting them to develop skills that support collaboration, will make them more likely to engage in open learning and cooperative networks outside of university.

Finally, as much as possible, we should be honest with students about how academia works. The university system remains, for many students and people outside of academia, a black box (or an ivory tower). We should be open about job insecurity, the casualisation of academic teaching, the limitations of assessment, what 'peer review' actually means, the ways in which academia excludes particular forms of knowledge – and the privilege that has opened doors for many of us, the ridiculousness of academic publishing, how student assessments of teaching are used, and anything else that students exhibit curiosity about. Allowing students to understand how our own expertise as academics has been created may allow them to see the gaps in that expertise, and in the university system more generally.

Conclusion

There are myriad ways we might try to support open literacies in the cracks of the current system. Some readers may even be in the lucky position of having the resources to shift how the current system works. New technologies have been extensively deployed in the increasing standardisation and surveillance of university teaching, intensifying the neoliberal turn within academia. We cannot, therefore, assume that digital technologies alone will help shift us towards more open, inclusive, and decentralized forms of learning. We must be prepared to actively look for ways in which we can turn academia towards (occasionally playful) resistance to neoliberalism, towards climate action, towards community and shared networks of knowledge, and away from power and profit.

What works in one space won't work in others, and there might be times when we need to remain below the radar of university management. There will also be ways in which we can use the language of 'innovation' and 'impact' to find space for these practices. Hopefully, along the way university teachers will also be connecting and learning with others outside of academia about how to build open literacy.

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Competing Interests

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