

# Navigating the Open Educational Practice Landscape

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Open education is an evolving term that covers a range of philosophies and practices aimed at widening access to education for those wishing to learn, with the current focus predominantly on practices based around reuse and sharing. This current focus can be traced back to the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement, and the use of open licences, such as Creative Commons licences. However, it also has links to open universities, open access publishing, MOOCs, open source software and open approaches to teaching.

The current interpretation of open education is heavily influenced by the OER movement with an emphasis on the ‘5Rs of reuse’ (Reuse, Revise Remix, Redistribute and Retain - Wiley 2014). The profile of open education has been further raised in recent years by the popularity of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Although they do not always meet the 5Rs criteria, MOOCs are open to all and freely available, and have gained considerable attention and funding. Another growth area is that of open textbooks, which can be viewed as a specific form of OER, and is particularly prevalent in North America through projects such as OpenStax and BC Campus

This focus on OER as the dominant, or even sole form of open education has implications for how open approaches to education develop. For instance, Wiley (2013, 2017) defines open pedagogy as the ‘set of teaching and learning practices only possible in the context of the affordances of open educational resources as enabled by the 5Rs’ and talks of OER enabled pedagogies. However, concepts and practices associated with open education have a longer history than the OER movement. Peter and Deimann (2013) highlight open education practices stretching back to the Middle-ages with the founding of universities which “contained in them the idea of openness, albeit by no means comprehensive. This period highlights ‘open’ as learner driven, resting on a growing curiosity and increasing awareness of educational opportunities” (p. 9). Open education can be traced through the 17th Century with coffee-houses and then into the industrial revolution with schools and working clubs. Then in the 20th Century the founding of ‘open’ universities such as the UK Open University and the University of South Africa developed a model of large-scale provision.

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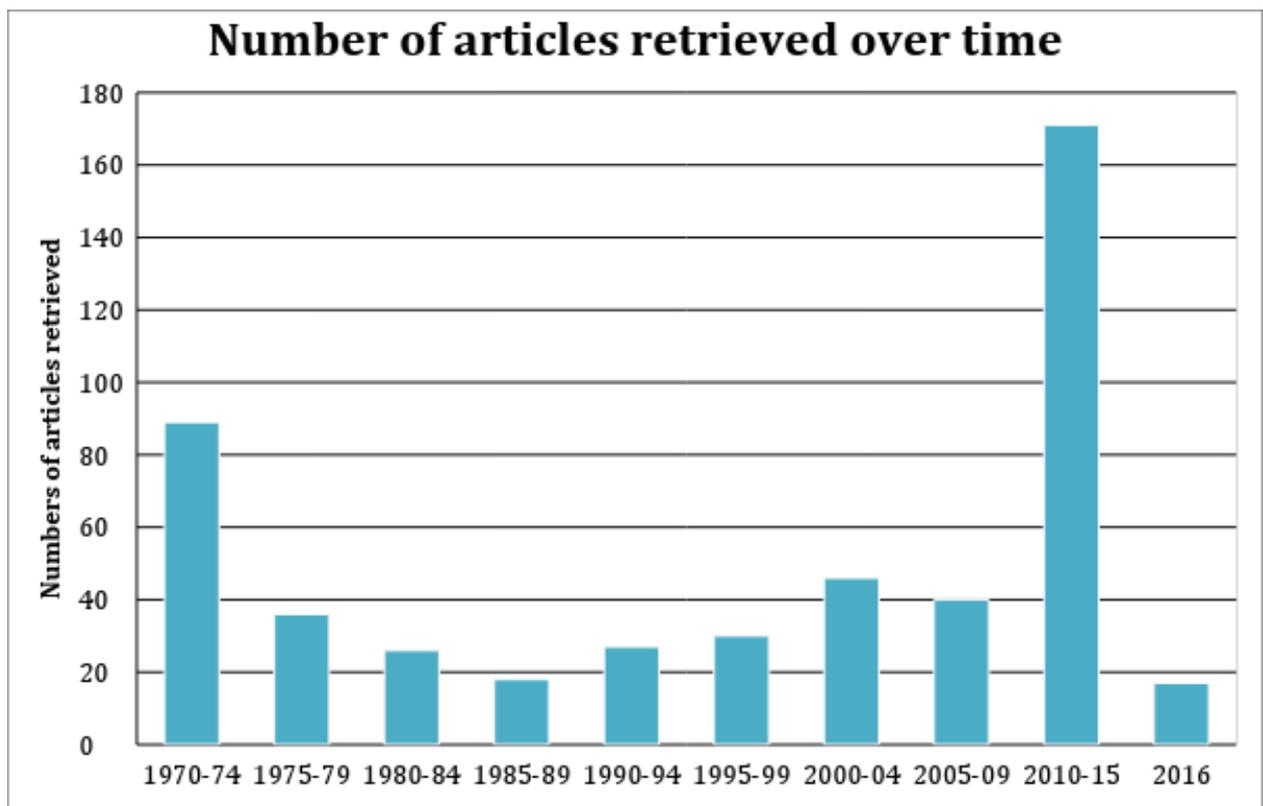
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Open education can be viewed as a broader concept, of which OER is only part. Weller (2014) proposes three core antecedents for the current open education movement, namely open universities, open source software, and web 2.0 culture. From these a number of coalescing principles can be derived, including: freedom to reuse; open access; free cost; easy use; digital, networked content; social, community based approaches; ethical arguments for openness; and openness as an efficient model. These shared principles are significant for the work that follows, as it suggests that even though practitioners may be working in tightly focused and defined areas of interest, there are commonalities across much of open education. However, while this suggests that the current manifestation of open education has its roots in previous interpretations and developments, much of the current literature in what can broadly be defined as open education fails to acknowledge or cite this earlier work.

There is a strong tendency to be self-referential in the OER area, with little reference to open education prior to the founding of the OER movement. A preliminary systematic search (Rolfe, 2016) for “open education” across a number of databases, retrieved over two hundred articles and revealed that there was an initial peak in the period 1970-74, with articles deriving largely from the concentrating on open pedagogy in UK infant schools, and also from the founding of the Open University. The next significant peak in publications is found in 2010-15 as MOOCs, open textbooks and OER gain traction (Figure 1).

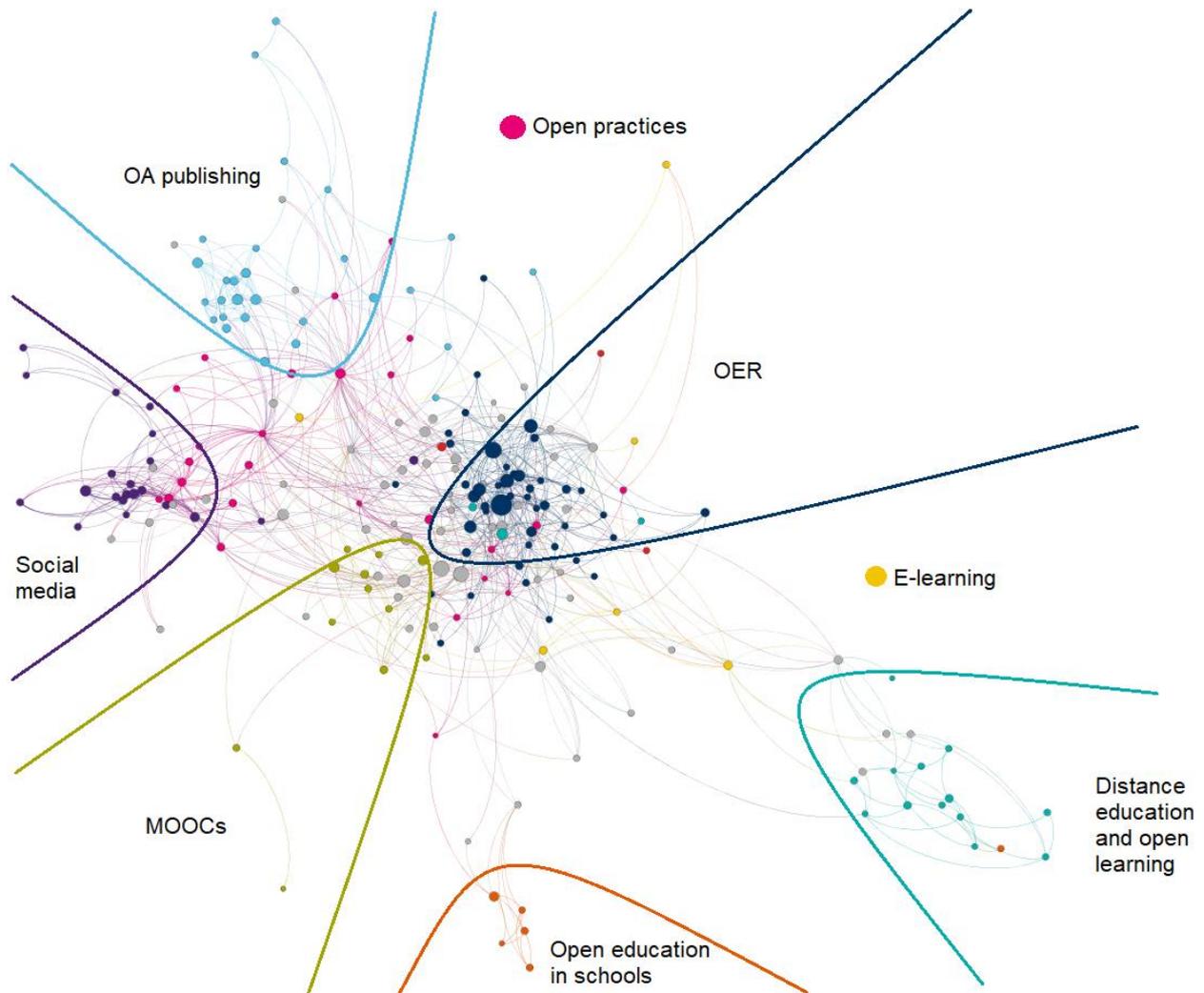


**Figure 1: Frequency of published articles on open education over time**

Working with colleagues Katy Jordan, Vivien Rolfe and Irwin DeVries, we set out to determine if our informal impression that work in the open education field tends to be conducted in islands or silos of interest, with little referencing or awareness between them.

Using a citation analysis method, the landscape of research in open education could be constructed. This method proceeded by gaining an initial sample of 20 documents on the

basis of literature database searches for items which referred specifically to the history or definition of openness (“open education”, “open learning”, openness) AND (history,definition)). The references of these articles were then extracted, and the papers which were cited by at least two of the original sample items were then added to the sample to include their references in the next iteration. Although this process could be repeated indefinitely, four iterations have been carried out and it was felt that meaningful clusters had emerged at this point. At this point, the network included 5,217 references from a total of 172 publications. Using the social network analysis tool Gephi, a network of citations could then be plotted. Clusters within this could be identified, and appropriate labels imposed. The resulting network is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Annotated version of the network. Colour coding indicates categories applied by the researcher, and node size is scaled to reflect the number of times each item is cited within the dataset**

From this network, eight distinct areas of interest emerge: Distance education, e-learning, open education in schools, OER, MOOCs, Open Access publishing, Social media, and open practices.

What the network demonstrates is that our impression that there is little cross referencing between these areas is borne out. In some areas this might be understandable, for example many articles on open access publishing are from an information science, librarianship perspective, and similarly the work on social media emerged from a communications focus and evolved into consideration of academic use of such tools. Given the similarity in aims and issues faced by MOOCs and OERs, the absence of much overlap between them is surprising. The lack of a basis in foundational work in elearning and open education speaks to a ‘year zero’ mentality that posits this work as revolutionary and new.

Perhaps the area of most interest is that of Open Educational Practices (OEP), which acts as a bridge or glue between many of the other clusters, located as it is at the intersection of social media, open access publishing, and OER. It includes articles focused upon digital scholarly practices, and open educational practices, spanning both the research and teaching remits of higher education. This may demonstrate that once initial foundation of content has been established, the more interesting work relating to what it means for educators and learners in terms of new opportunities, changes in practice, and critical analysis can commence. This work is more likely then to make connections beyond its immediate category, linking to pedagogical theories, sociology, computer science and general education.

It is our contention then that providing connections between these bodies of research in open education is mutually beneficial for researchers and practitioners. The studies into practice since the 1970s have produced an extensive body of theory in open and distance education, which can add valuable insights for current researchers and practitioners. In addition, researchers and graduate students will be able to enrich their studies by tracing ideas, connections, discontinuities and patterns gleaned from the analysis of earlier studies. Further, current discourses about the meaning of openness in education may well benefit from an understanding of historical patterns of open and distance education research, in particular the challenges faced. Open educational practice provides one means of encouraging these connections and overcoming silos of practice.

For a full account of this research, see:

Weller, M., Jordan, K., DeVries, I., & Rolfe, V. (2018). Mapping the open education landscape: citation network analysis of historical open and distance education research. *Open Praxis*, 10(2), 109-126. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.10.2.822>

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