An experiment in form and content, its aim is to be a guide and map of some of the opportunities to develop more open and networked practices while navigating the potential downsides of social media, including perceived loss of privacy and amplification of disadvantage and abuse. It is an excellent and accessible starting point for, as well as route to, a deeper understanding and a more sophisticated use of social media.

—Prof. Shân Wareing, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, London South Bank University

How does social media affect working life in Higher Education? How are universities harnessing its power to aid student learning? This innovative collection brings together academics and those working in professional services to examine these questions and more. The diverse and expert contributors analyse the many ways social media can be used to enhance teaching and learning, research, professional practice, leadership, networking and career development. The impact of social media is evaluated critically, with an eye both to the benefits and the problems of using these new forms of digital communication.

This is the first volume to give such detailed attention to this area of high interest. Its innovative approach extends to its creation, with contributors found via their presence on Twitter. The short and impactful chapters are accessible while retaining an academic focus through their application of relevant learning theories and educational context.

Social Media and Higher Education is essential reading for any professional working in higher education, including lecturers teaching education courses. It is also significant for researchers looking at more recent developments in the field and what it means to work in a modern higher education environment.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: Photo by Francisco Gomes on Unsplash at https://unsplash.com/photos/kktq8zzmPEo. Cover design: Anna Gatti
10. Bursting Out of the Bubble: Social Media, Openness and Higher Education

#Beginner #Medium

Jennie Blake, Chris Millson and Sam Aston

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the use of Medium.com to anchor a course’s commitment to openness in HE. Its presence online has shaped student engagement with the content and the assessments, driving their work beyond the topics discussed on the day and inspiring them to create lasting content for the wider community. Finally, bursting out of the bubble of the academic community and VLEs has allowed everyone linked to the course to connect with other practitioners and discuss and disseminate the effects of these efforts.

The Context

Open Knowledge in Higher Education (OKHE) is an open module exploring openness in HE, offered through the online writing platform, Medium.com (Medium, 2018). The initial materials were developed by The University of Manchester Library to support an optional module in the University’s Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PG Cert HE), a taught programme for staff, comprising a number of optional modules.
Because of the Library’s preference for openness, and the obvious connection with the subject matter of this module, we have taken an approach which is open in a number of ways. It is important that we are honest about how we got here. What we describe in this chapter — a course both exploring and exhibiting many aspects of openness (although of course with much room for improvement) — is not something we can honestly say we could describe in detail from the start. Instead, it is and will continue to be the result of a developmental journey. Our reflections on openness as course developers, many of whom have been prompted by being part of the course ourselves, learning from experts and participants alike — and our building some of this into each iteration of the course. So, if we did not have a detailed plan to take us from conception to the current state of the course, how did we get here? Openness can mean a lot in education (Prunie and Scheller, 2017), but by committing to being as open as we can at the time, to reflecting on this, and improving the course, has led us to where we are.

Where Did We Start, Then?

Initially, we had a couple of aims for the assessment. Firstly, we wanted the process of completing the assessment to contribute to participants’ learning, in other words an emphasis on ‘assessment for learning’ (Brown, 2005) rather than ‘assessment of learning’. The course deals with topics such as open practice (and communicating online as one way this can take place) and ownership and licensing (and deciding how to share your work). We wanted participants to have an opportunity to explore and experience these topics for themselves, as they worked on their assessment.

Our first idea was that assessment would provide an opportunity for participants to contribute to a wiki. The wiki would contain discussions of and reflections about openness in higher education; participants would write and/or edit pages in it, thus expanding the resource. As part of our commitment to openness, it would ideally be public and open to all. Ideally it would also be open to contributions by all, i.e. ‘our’ participants’ contributions could be identified for ‘assessment’ purposes, but that we would also be contributing a resource to the wider sector.
We considered a number of ideas around this — for example, how easy would it be to amalgamate one person’s contributions, and ‘mark’ them? Was this against an open, collaborative ethos anyway (‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ etc)? Would we ask them to write a blog post or reflective piece exploring what they had achieved through the course, referencing their contributions?

The above ideas seemed to have mileage but didn’t quite fit. For example, where would the ‘core’ course materials be hosted? This might include things like session times/dates, the mark scheme for assessment, and so on. We were following an idea that participants were contributing to the course materials, and trying to avoid the classic separation of assessment and other materials (for example, a ‘closed-off’ wiki or blog within a VLE course — alongside non-wiki materials). We were also looking for a platform where anyone could contribute. However, putting information such as session dates and times in a public wiki felt problematic in a couple of ways. Firstly, anyone could edit them, and that felt wrong for such fixed, official information with the University’s name on it. Fine, a definition of openness will ideally be open to anyone to comment on and edit. But details of when and where sessions take place should be fixed. To change it would be unfair to participants.

Separating this information out, e.g. having ‘core course materials’ locked up in Blackboard, plus ‘student contributions’ in a public wiki, made the wiki feel synthetic. We wanted all of us to be contributing to the same materials, the course materials, and for this to be of genuine value.

It is clear that our wiki idea exhibited some forms of openness, but wasn’t quite what we were looking for. At this point we explored other options, and considered the idea of using a more social platform. Some advantages of this are that authors are more prominent. For example, viewing a Twitter thread on ‘Open education’, we can read a discussion, and very easily see who contributed which parts to it, without having to look deeper. In comparison, a wiki page may present a more coherent narrative, but superficially, the authors are not acknowledged. The primary concern of a wiki is the content. Behind the scenes we can see an edit history, with associated usernames, but this is more concerned with process and accountability. We wanted something which would: allow participants to write ‘as themselves’ rather than being a near-invisible
contributor; at the same time, to contribute to something bigger, and to be part of a conversation. Twitter or a traditional blogging platform (such as WordPress) might achieve the former. However, bringing the conversation together is difficult in these examples. Perhaps a hashtag could be proposed on Twitter which would bring conversations together. But this could be subject to ‘noise’ from anyone contributing to it, and Twitter is less successful at surfacing anything but the latest content. It might not feel like a ‘home’ for the course, more a snapshot of discussion on it. Giving or allowing participants to create a ‘traditional blog’ is not a new idea in education. Some advantages are that they can write more at length than a network such as Twitter, they create their own space and can consider it as part of their online identity. However, it may also lead to ‘single-serving blogs’, i.e. those set up for the course, only to go stale afterwards; it is also hard to bring these blogs together — effectively each writer runs their own publication — and we would have the task of unifying all of these publications, along with one or more publications of our own to contains core course information. It felt like we would be running another Library.

Why Medium is Different

In exploring blogging and social networks, we were becoming familiar with one newer platform which seemed capable of achieving our objectives: Medium. The platform was set up as a ‘writing platform’ or ‘ideas platform’. While this may sound like a pretentious refusal to ‘just call it a blog’, we realised that there is in fact a difference to the way Medium operates. Whereas a system like WordPress gives each writer a publication (and indeed, there is no way to publish a post on WordPress without first setting up a publication, effectively a website), and all that one can do with their account otherwise is comment on others’ publications, Medium does not. Creating an account on Medium allows you instantly to publish content. This content does not live on your website/publication/blog, but simply on Medium. Thus, it is a blogging platform but its posts are hosted centrally. This helps us in a number of ways. Firstly, there is no single-serving blog. Just as Twitter does not look stale after one person stops tweeting, Medium continues to highlight the community’s content after one person stops publishing. Secondly, there is no setting-up of a blog, only a personal profile. On WordPress,
your profile allows you to comment. On Medium, it allows you to post. In fact, Medium makes very little distinction between comments and posts — much like Twitter, comments (or responses) are posts; posts which reference other posts.

Our open approach has a number of implications. While the Library initially developed and maintains the module, from its first year onwards, most of the materials have been contributed by participants. This learner-contributed approach has continued, and we are continuing to develop it. For example, in the second year of running, we explicitly referenced participant contributions in core course materials. In the third year, we set participant contributions as reading, and featured past participants in every classroom session.

Pedagogy of Open Assessment

From its conception, it was clear that the module had the potential to live and breathe openly through every part its soul. As developers it was vital that within the constraints of organisational policy there was a transparent commitment towards openness in the pedagogical approach, into assessment, throughout the learning resources and in how the unit approached the outcomes of the overall certificate. It was also necessary to consider the cohort of students and their professional experiences connected to the module outcomes. It was with these elements in mind that social media became the vehicle which would allow the module to burst out of its bubble.

Social media has been used to support pedagogical innovation by educators in higher education for a number of years, as it has the flexibility and accessibility to support learning in the HE sector (OU, 2016). In particular, social media has thrived in the arena of openness through its ability to support networks and communities of practice, driving collaboration while allowing for individuals to maintain their individuality and a voice in the conversation. Social media is also recognised as a space where an ongoing dialogue can take place. Therefore, it made sense to align a method by which we could connect with and facilitate the connection to openness as part of the modules assessment. Going beyond the tool the beauty of social media is that it places the voices of the individuals involved at its heart.
Individually, every participant’s voice is heard as they submit written assessments to the OKHE publication. Through their online engagements, participants are engaged in open networked participatory scholarship (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012). Contributing posts that connect their personal experiences with openness in HE to the publication is an integral feature of the open scholarship that OKHE extols. OKHE publication permits individuals to authentically explore the concept of openness in the context of their professional role, in keeping with the purpose and the philosophy of social media. There is the further added strength of placing the ownership of content into the participants own hands, prompting participants to consider their online identity and creating a backwash of development for each individual’s digital literacy skills.

Participants have explored a range of current topics, including how Sci-hub provides access to non-open access research; how openness is considered in relation to academic integrity and academic expectation; as well as MOOCs and their role in openness. It is through the transparency of using a social media platform that participants can connect with current conversations.

In the same way that the publication opens up the voices of the individuals, the publication operates as the mouthpiece for the community that the module draws together. As a community the posts that the publication exposes are the thoughts of professionals at University of Manchester (UoM), those at the ‘coal face’ that are not only engaging in open education but contributing to and opening up the wider conversation. The publication that is being created by the community is what is used to support the growing community of cohorts: it is a community-built open educational resource.

Framing the participants as co-learners and co-creators on the module was a deliberate objective which social media was able to facilitate. The UoM Library has a reputation for open educational practice and the creation of open educational resources through its My Learning Essentials (UoM, 2018) skills programme and our approach to this module proved no different. As co-creators, the participants’ thoughts are collated in one single space that is open for engagement with the wider community.

With the publication acting as a transparent virtual learning environment, Medium has facilitated the opinions and thoughts of the
cohort being shared widely, as well as being available to each other and to the learning community at UoM. Dalsgaard and Thestrup (2015) refer to the three dimensions of openness: transparency between students and teachers, communication between educational institutions and partners, and joint engagement with the world. The Medium publication is representative of the first two dimensions, with the aspiration of moving towards working partnerships with others in the wider online community.

The design of the course acknowledging the professional experience of the cohort the developers have used Medium to level the classroom. The cohort are made up of a wide variety of professions from across the University staff: lecturers, researchers, library staff, e-learning technologists and professional support services. It was therefore vital that we provide the right support in the right format. As mentioned previously, there have been a range of topics covered through the cohorts: the online publication of the assessment tasks is a record of the conversations taking place about openness at the UoM. Writing and publishing in this way has enabled the thoughts and reflections of the participants to be a part of the conversations that are taking place in the sector.

**Beyond The Ivory Tower**

Moving students ‘beyond the mark’ has been one of the perennial struggles of education. Much work has been done to try and drive students to think of their work as part of a learning journey, as part of a community, and as part of a process of collective thought. Even more rare (though it is becoming more common), is work that deliberately places the assessment into the public sphere, and participates in raucous conversations, from the off. The assessments within the OKHE module, as described earlier in the chapter, take a deliberately, and potentially provocative pedagogical approach and ask that participants join in with the conversations already occurring, and, in the second assessment, make deliberate connections to what they hear in that space.

Higher education, and academia in general, is often dismissed as an ivory tower, a silo, or disparaged as comprising of disconnected and self-indulgent thought exercises. To these critics, it is the very opposite of ‘open’; a place where the only sound is the echo of its own voice. The
pernicious cycle of a closed system is described by Thomas Pynchon, in his ‘Slow Learner’ collection, where he states:

What I mean is something like a closed circuit. Everybody on the same frequency. And after a while you forget about the rest of the spectrum and start believing that this is the only frequency that counts or is real. While outside, all up and down the land, there are these wonderful colors and x-rays and ultraviolets going on. (Pynchon, 1985)

It is as part of our effort to combat the closed circuit that we built social media into our module. After committing to open knowledge as a topic, we felt that putting our discussions, resources and assessments behind the walled-garden of a virtual learning environment would directly contradict the aims of the course. Instead, we pushed everything, and everyone, out into the open. The results: a group of participants that must think about their place in the conversation; pieces that deliberately add to current and ‘live’ conversations, and, hopefully a more powerful voice when the work ‘joins up’ in the public sphere, are all down to the use of this open platform. We are, quite deliberately, putting our module where our content lives, in the space where academia and open networks overlap, which, more than ever, has a social component.

Reflecting on the Medium

Using the Medium publication, we have been able to relocate the conversation from what might be a self-contained silo to a wider audience. This has a knock-on effect immediately as the participants must think of their audience beyond the typical groups of others on the course or course convenors to, potentially, include those with an interest in open, an interest in Manchester, or just a liking for Google’s ‘I’m Lucky’ button. This hasn’t been without hiccoughs, and though we support the ability for participants to post anonymously to the blog, for some the act of putting their thoughts online (and often reflective and personal thoughts at that) is a truly disconcerting one, prompting them to stop, reflect and possibly self-censor in a way they wouldn’t feel necessary in a closed conversation. One participant took this reflection even further, looking at what we, as staff in HE, might need to do when we enter the ‘open’ world:
What the OKHE course has enabled me to understand is that openness inevitably brings with it challenges, and by being open you will facilitate views that you dislike or challenge your own views. In order to preserve an open environment I think that as staff members [we] have to stop thinking of ourselves as the owners of these online communities and try to engage with them as participants instead.

This type of reflection, one that might not have occurred without the open assessments, materials and resources, highlights a major change when we join in on social media. Often, even with a blue tick-mark in evidence, the hierarchies that we depend on for respect and acknowledgement are absent, forcing us to join in on a level playing field and make our voices heard from the crown instead of at the podium. Indeed, what might seem appropriate (and what might be rewarded) in a closed-system is very different from what resonates and is rewarded online, and for those comfortable with the status-quo, moving to ‘open’ can be revealing in its discomfort.

Beyond assessment, the OKHE Medium site is meant to drive our participants to think about where their reflection sits in the cohort, in the community and in the wider conversation. Our placement of our assessment, and the entirety of the course, on an open social media platform, allows us to encourage, though not guarantee, that we hear the ‘x-rays and ultraviolets’ that are happening just outside the bubble we are existing in. Because the posts of previous cohorts are kept online, along with all of the talks and supporting materials, the students are participating in a course that builds links in time as well as between topics. We can see how our thinking has changed, and detail our reactions to those changes, in a way that is predominantly absent in a traditional course.

This change also allows the course to impact the open community beyond the work of one or two stand-outs. Because we are operating as a collective, we are not dependent on the presence of a well-known (or well followed), individual. Instead, the course itself, through the work of the participants, convenors and those giving their talks, makes an impact because of what everyone is doing together. This has meant, in practical terms, that those we reach out to give the talks on the module have often already heard of the course, that the work we do for assessment gets looked at, and imitated in other areas of the University of Manchester, and that we get invited to write book chapters like this one!
References


