

# Open with intention: situating equity pedagogy within open education to advance social justice

Stacy Katz

*Leonard Lief Library, Lehman College, Bronx, New York, USA, and*

Jennifer Van Allen

*Department of Counseling, Leadership, Literacy, and Special Education,  
Lehman College, Bronx, New York, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper is intended to contextualize the major themes of the special issue, “The Intersections of Open Education and Equity Pedagogy” in the *Journal for Multicultural Education*, by providing a brief history of open educational resources (OER) and open educational practices (OEP) and highlighting the growing focus on social justice within the field. The purpose of this paper is to generate discussions around the potential of OER and OEP to increase equity within education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This featured paper summarizes and reviews a brief history of OER and OEP, discusses the integration of equity pedagogy within open education, elaborates on the rationale and process for developing the special issue and concludes by identifying challenges and ongoing conversations for the field as a response to the need for social justice action.

**Findings** – Despite increasing acceptance of OER, educators are not aware of how to implement OER and OEP with equity in mind. As OER and OEP continue to expand, teachers across all educational sectors need examples of how to teach effectively with these resources and practices. There is also a rising focus on culturally relevant and sustaining teaching practices, which OEP can complement.

**Practical implications** – The authors provide this featured piece to contextualize the special issue for those new to open education. The authors hope to further the discussion of social justice and equity pedagogy within open education.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides background for the special issue, to orient readers to the field of open education.

**Keywords** Open educational resources, OER, Equity pedagogy, Open education, Open educational practices, OEP, Social justice

**Paper type** General review

## Introduction

It is no secret that educators at all levels spend much time finding, adapting and developing resources for their classrooms. Some search for teaching and learning materials to

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supplement their curriculum, whereas others search for materials that serve as alternatives or can be used to develop their own curriculum (Van Allen and Katz, 2020). With increased access to technology and connectivity, a global community is now available with which to share resources and collective knowledge. The pandemic led to greater and more widespread use of digital materials and necessitated an emphasis on developing digital literacy skills. Along with growing digital literacy skills, awareness of open educational resources (OER) also continued to increase during this time (Seaman and Seaman, 2022b). OER are defined by the Hewlett Foundation as “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others” (Hewlett Foundation, 2022, para. 4). These resources may range from individual modules and textbooks to full courses and can reside in formats such as streaming videos, software and documents, to name a few.

While most educators are returning to brick and mortar classrooms, research shows there is a greater acceptance of digital materials at all educational levels and continued concern regarding the cost of commercial textbooks in higher education (Seaman and Seaman, 2022a, 2022b). Although awareness and usage of OER continue to grow in higher education, a decline has been noted in K-12 settings despite teachers reporting that they modify textbooks to suit their classroom needs. Open educational practices (OEP) encourage educators to adapt and create openly licensed materials, often with their students as cocreators of content (Bali et al., 2020). OEP encourages and empowers students to actively engage with the content and also facilitates the creation of more equitable learning materials, as they are developed with student voices at the forefront (DeRosa and Jhangiani, 2017).

Our goal for this special issue, “The Intersections of Open Education and Equity Pedagogy” in the *Journal for Multicultural Education*, is to highlight practical applications of OEP with a social justice focus, particularly how educators teach with OER and OEP. We frame this piece within the context of open education with the ultimate goal of stimulating discussions around the potential of OER and OEP to increase equity within education. Thus, this featured piece summarizes and reviews a brief history of OER and OEP, discusses the integration of social justice practices within open education, elaborates on the rationale and process for developing the special issue and concludes by identifying challenges and ongoing conversations for the field as a response to the need for social justice action.

### History of open education

The term “open” has long been used among educators to define freedom in teaching and learning. Open in this context also referred to materials that were made freely available online as the internet was popularized. Funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, the first repository of free online curricular materials named Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) started in 1997 (Bliss and Smith, 2017). Through MERLOT, educators could connect and easily share resources globally. In 2002, “open” began to take on new meaning with the development of Creative Commons licenses. These licenses continue to allow creators to state how others may use, share and repurpose their work while providing attribution to the original work, as a layer on top of copyright (Creative Commons, 2019). Simultaneously, conversations about open sharing were happening, such as providing open access to research and developing freely available online learning content. In response, repositories such as the MIT Open Courseware Project, OpenStax, OER Commons and other large-scale efforts were created and are still widely used by educators today. Much of the support for OER has come from generous funding provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Bliss and Smith, 2017).

At the start of the movement, funding was aimed at developing resources for higher education to reduce the exorbitant cost of textbooks for students (Bliss and Smith, 2017). As a result, more faculty-created resources have been developed and adapted for high enrollment introductory courses such as biology and psychology and shared in popular repositories. Recognizing that needs exist beyond those courses, open initiatives have funded the development of textbooks for more advanced as well as niche courses, such as Early Literacy Education and Ancient Etruscan Art. The Open Textbook Library, a referatory with reviews of open textbooks, boasts links to over 1,000 openly licensed textbooks (Center for Open Education, 2022). These resources have been adopted and adapted globally, resulting in greater access to resources and cost savings for millions of students.

Given the uptake of OER in higher education, more emphasis is currently underway to develop and raise awareness of OER in primary and secondary schooling. Calls from the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for quality education raise OER as a possible solution for ensuring all children around the world have access to an equitable education (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). In the USA, the #GoOpen campaign focused on supporting states, school districts and educators transitioning to the use of OER in place of traditional instructional materials (Office of Educational Technology, 2022). Efforts in other countries have focused on developing OER as professional development for teachers (e.g. OER Africa), low or no-cost books for children learning to read (e.g. Storyweaver) and even entire curricula (e.g. Open Up Resources). Though awareness of OER is not universal, it is clear that it continues to enable wider access to knowledge and learning materials (Van Allen and Katz, 2020).

### *Expansion to open educational practices*

While OER broadened access because of their availability online and without cost, some realized the potential of open education beyond consumption. Rather than focusing on teacher transmission of knowledge, the Open eLearning Content Observatory Services project suggested that OER can make a bigger impact on teaching and learning by creating experiences that are “real, rich, and relevant” (Geser, 2007, p. 17). The resulting report named these recommended learning experiences as OEP defined as “practices that involve students in active, constructive engagement with content, tools and services in the learning process, and promote learners’ self-management, creativity and working in teams” (Geser, 2007, p. 37). This idea was also incorporated in the 2007 Cape Town Open Education Declaration, which illuminated that:

Open education is not limited to just open educational resources. It also draws upon open technologies that facilitate collaborative, flexible learning and the open sharing of teaching practices that empower educators to benefit from the best ideas of their colleagues (Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2022, para. 4).

In the last decade, research on OEP has proliferated resulting in contested definitions and ongoing discussions of what characterizes these practices as well as the terms used to define them, for example, open scholarship, critical digital pedagogy and open pedagogy (Cronin and MacLaren, 2018). OEP as well as the values underpinning it are familiar to educators as an outgrowth of constructivist pedagogies (Cronin and MacLaren, 2018). This emerging concept continues to develop and shift as constructivist educators learn of and incorporate open licensing in existing practices. For example, open pedagogy centers on students as creators by providing options for students to share their work (DeRosa and Jhangiani, 2017),

such *A Student's Guide to Tropical Marine Biology* which is an open book written by students enrolled in a class (Keene State College Students, 2019). Social annotation is another practice often defined as OEP because it empowers students to engage in open discussions with others (Bali *et al.*, 2020). However, when social annotation is conducted within a group or behind a login, this practice is collaborative but not necessarily open. The multivalent and varied descriptions and definitions of OEP reflect the contentions around the underlying values and attributes characterizing open.

We draw on several explanations within the literature to clarify the definition used in developing this special issue. Broadly, OEP includes open pedagogies and open sharing of teaching practices, as well as the creation, use and remixing of OER through collaborative learning processes, knowledge creation and learner empowerment (Cronin and MacLaren, 2018). OEP includes the process of learning, as well as the product (Bali *et al.*, 2020). In this conception, open is conceived of more as a verb than an adjective. Open is not the “[...] binary opposite of closed, if there are degrees of openness, and different ways of opening” (Havemann, 2019, para. 5). OEP acknowledges that “knowledge consumption and knowledge creation are not separate but parallel processes, as knowledge is co-constructed, contextualized, cumulative, iterative, and recursive” (DeRosa and Jhangiani, 2017, p. 13).

#### *Call to focus on social justice*

Critical voices have questioned the assertion of equity as an essential value of open education:

What happens when something is ‘open’ in all the ways that open education and open source and open data advocates would approve [...] And yet, the project is still not equitable. What if, in fact, it’s making it worse (Watters, 2014, para. 47).

In 2018, Lambert conducted a critical analysis of contemporary open education literature to determine the extent to which social justice principles were evident within open education. Findings revealed that although social justice principles were present in early OER literature, ongoing discussions that dominated the literature as the field progressed deemphasized social justice ideas. Thus, Lambert (2018, p. 239) called for recentring social justice within the field and proposed a social justice aligned definition of open education: “Open Education is the development of free digitally enabled learning materials and experiences primarily by and for the benefit and empowerment of non-privileged learners who may be under-represented in education systems or marginalized in their global context”. Likewise, Cronin (2019) continued the conversation by posing questions for educators to consider while critically analyzing their utilization of OER and/or implementation OEP:

- Q1. Who defines openness?
- Q2. Who is included and who is excluded when education is “opened,” and in what ways?
- Q3. To what extent, by whom, in what contexts and in what ways do specific open education initiatives achieve their stated aims of increasing access, fostering inclusivity, enhancing learning, developing capacity and agency and empowering individuals, groups and communities, if at all?
- Q4. Can open education initiatives, in practice, do the opposite of what they are intended to do?
- Q5. What does emancipatory open education look like? (p. 5)

OEP affords social justice-minded educators the opportunity to address questions of equity, such as who creates knowledge and who is, or is not, represented in learning materials. An open, critical approach can consider how to center those who are marginalized and engage students as creators. Through a social justice approach to open, educators engage with

redistributive, recognitive and representational justice (Lambert, 2018) to implement equitable pedagogies interacting with economic, cultural and political dimensions of justice (Bali *et al.*, 2020). However, educators must be mindful of the contexts and situations facing individual students. For example, if a student does not have internet access, OEP will not increase their ability to participate fully in a class (Bali *et al.*, 2020). As discussed by Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter (2018), economic, cultural and political dimensions of social justice demand attention to realize the full potential of OEP.

*Connections to equity pedagogy.* A focus on equitable practices necessitates a change in pedagogy. During the Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s, historically underrepresented groups made demands for inclusive curricula that acknowledged and represented ethnic and cultural diversity (Banks, 2016). Through these efforts, our current understanding of multicultural education was initially conceived. Banks (1993) developed this concept by explaining it through five dimensions: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy and an empowering school culture and social structure. While all of these dimensions interact to define multicultural education, equity pedagogy centers on the student and recognizes that teaching is a multicultural encounter where the complexity of students' lived experiences (e.g. cultural, racial, ethnic, gender identity, abilities, etc.) enrich the classroom (McGee Banks and Banks, 1995). In 1995, McGee Banks and Banks released a seminal article defining equity pedagogy as:

Teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate, a just, humane, and democratic society. This definition suggests that it is not sufficient to help students learn to read, write, and compute within the dominant canon without learning also to question its assumptions, paradigms, and hegemonic characteristics. Helping students become reflective and active citizens of a democratic society is at the essence of our conception of equity pedagogy. (p. 152)

While equity pedagogy incorporates practices such as culturally relevant and culturally sustaining teaching and learning, it encourages educators to look beyond just culture to recognize and respond justly to the insidious and often implicit and intersectional inequities experienced by many students, including racism, xenophobia, heterosexism, ableism, economic injustice, islamophobia, sexism and other oppressions (McGee Banks and Banks, 1995). When teaching with equity pedagogy, educators ask students to generate knowledge and create new understandings, identify and interrogate the positionality of knowers and the knowledge they create, construct their own interpretations of reality, generate multiple solutions and perspectives and become effective agents for social change. To engage in this work, educators must identify, examine and reflect on their own attitudes toward different ethnic, racial, gender and social class groups and their own privilege and "look beyond the physical characteristics of students to consider the complexity of their individual and group lived experiences" (p. 157). As educators design learning experiences, they should enlist a broad range of pedagogical skills and align those to the needs of the diverse students in their classroom, recognize and respond to multiple student characteristics when designing curricula and class activities (e.g. making informed decisions on when to use culturally sustaining pedagogy and when to focus on student characteristics) and, most importantly, prioritize student-centered teaching (McGee Banks and Banks, 1995).

At the intersection of OEP and equity pedagogy, students openly contribute to a global community of learners who acquire, interrogate, reconstruct and produce knowledge (McGee Banks and Banks, 1995). In this special issue, we sought examples of how educators and learners address critical questions about open education to center equity pedagogy in their research and practice, particularly in primary and secondary schooling and in contexts

traditionally underrepresented in the literature. We believe there are many examples of intersections between open education and equity pedagogy in our quest for social justice and equitable educational experiences for students. We hoped to highlight those intersections with a focus on the pedagogical practices used by educators in this quest.

### Development of the special issue

In valuing the process of creation, in addition to the product, we provide an outline of how this special issue came to be. We include challenges and questions we faced, as well as privileges we were afforded. We offer this as a resource to others looking to expand on this work and create further discussion regarding equity in open education.

In 2020, the *Journal for Multicultural Education* issued an ongoing call for papers focused on inclusive education practice in a time of collective crisis. The collection identified challenges and solutions designed to alleviate burdens during the COVID-19 crisis and included a piece we authored titled “Teaching with OER during Pandemics and Beyond”. In this article, we introduced the journal’s readership to the concept of open education and the value of sharing resources in all educational contexts during the immediate pandemic and also discussed OEP as a long-term solution to address educational inequities. It was the first publication on open education in the *Journal for Multicultural Education* and the foundation for our discussions with the journal’s editor, Dr Sherry Deckman, who proposed that we coedit a special issue on open education for the journal.

While excited by the opportunity, we faced a dilemma of praxis. Was the opportunity to coedit a special issue on open education worthwhile within the context of a journal with article processing charges (APCs), a fee charged to authors for publishing their work open access? We debated the contextual decisions of open ([Cronin, 2017](#)) for this special issue. For example, we considered our position as scholars and tenure-track faculty who need to “publish or perish”. However, we also identify as open practitioners who believe research, particularly research on open, should be freely available to all. We wanted research on open education to reach new audiences, particularly the readers of the *Journal for Multicultural Education*, including teacher educators and teachers interested in equitable education, despite copyright restrictions and APCs. In response to these dilemmas, we problematized the issues and sought counsel from colleagues in our university. In fact, our colleague, Dr Shawna Brandle, posed this conundrum in a graduate-level digital humanities course on open as an ethical case study. After much deliberation, we clarified our vision for the special issue and decided to first try to seek funding for the article APCs to ensure the entire issue was open access.

As past OER Fellows, a fellowship for early career OER researchers to encourage research on the impact of OER, we were aware of the Hewlett Foundation’s generous philanthropy in open education scholarship and their desire to reach new audiences. In reaching out to the Hewlett Foundation, we found support, in the form of funding and advice, to proceed in making the special issue open access and more inclusive. The Hewlett Foundation Program Officer, Dr Angela DeBarger, suggested that we facilitate sessions for authors at upcoming open education conferences and provide guidance for first-time authors. As a model, we replicated a brainstorming session for prospective authors similar to the one held by Dr Sarah Lambert and Dr Laura Czerniewicz for their 2020 special issue of the *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* which fostered connections among potential authors. Their session design helped us to consider how we might generate interest, foster collaborations and offer support to authors. While we were not able to offer in-person conference sessions, given that our issue was developed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we offered interactive sessions on this special issue at OpenEd21, OE Global 21 and OER Camp. The interactive sessions used an open Padlet that included a video

introduction, explained the aims of the issue, provided submission information and linked to asynchronous discussion spaces for prospective authors to share ideas and request collaborators via Google Docs. During the aforementioned conferences, we also attended sessions that we felt might be appropriate to the special issue theme and encouraged those presenters to develop their presentations as papers. We shared the Call for Proposals through Twitter and listservs and sought reviewers through those means as well. Throughout the submission period, we checked in with potential contributors, particularly first-time authors, to answer questions and encourage their submissions.

While we aimed to be as inclusive and supportive as possible in the development of this special issue, our outreach was focused on those within the open education community. A major limitation of our approach was that scholars of multicultural education and social justice/equity focused education also interested in open education, who may have provided a different perspective, may not have received the call. Thus, we suggest that future editors who are interested in applying our approach remain cognizant of potential contributors from a variety of fields and reach out through listservs and conferences in those fields as well. Another suggestion we provide is to extend the support for first time authors, perhaps facilitating writing groups among potential authors for ongoing feedback during the development of their work and/or writing accountability groups. Throughout the development of the special issue as first time guest editors, we learned a lot about peer review and the publishing process. We are immensely grateful for everyone's thought-provoking questions and contributions that shaped the development of this special issue.

### Ongoing conversations and challenges

Looking at the development of the open education movement, from consuming OER to empowering students with OEP, an important progression is to shift the focus of the movement to how educators are using these materials for sustainable, equitable education for all. This shift meets the UNESCO sustainable development goals for quality education ([United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2022](#)). However, without ongoing conversations and challenges by students, scholars and educators, social justice may remain an afterthought. These efforts are increasingly urgent as culturally relevant and sustaining teaching practices ([Ladson-Billings, 2014](#); [Paris, 2012](#)) are essential to equity, yet also under attack in the USA and in other parts of the world. Envisioning and implementing equitable practices is too often unsupported, or worse, cause for reprimand. The COVID-19 pandemic increased reliance on technology and digital tools without examining equity, because of the rapid shift to digital teaching. However, the remains of the aftermath of the pandemic have not increased considerations of and thoughtfulness around the implementation of technological practices. Educators were not provided with systematic support for online teaching ([Hartshorne et al., 2020](#)), and any professional development they did receive generally did not extend to equity ([Gálvez and Yood, 2022](#)) or open practices.

Platforms that generate revenue by charging small amounts to access resources or ask users to upload materials for free access to other resources have developed a model of sustainability. Yet, these practices are antithetical to the principles of open education because they do not allow unrestricted, free access to resources, do not allow users to easily adapt materials and reshare the new artifacts and do not encourage a diverse and inclusive global community of knowledge production and reproduction, among other issues. Sustainability remains a key challenge for the open community as continued institutional and individual commitment, such as time and funding, is necessary for ongoing professional development, repositories for creating and hosting open resources and support for OEP, to name a few. Engaging students as creators, while providing them agency to choose if they

share openly, provides a possible pathway for creating inclusive, sustainable and equitable learning materials.

This special issue, *Intersections of Open Education and Equity Pedagogy*, is intended to extend the discussions of open education by showcasing practical applications of OEP with equitable teaching at the forefront. We draw on the conversation started in the *Journal of Interactive Media Education's* special issue on *Open Education and Social Justice* which challenged the assumption that open education is inherently equivalent to social justice. They also framed open education within Fraser's trivalent theory of redistributive, recognitive, representational justice (Lambert and Czerniewicz, 2020). Bali *et al.*'s (2020) article analyzes specific OEP through these lenses to discuss how and the extent to which these practices are truly transformational for social justice. This special issue extends that work by presenting applications of equity pedagogy and OEP in various learning contexts. Research has highlighted the importance of these practices and our special issue provides explicit examples of how educators have engaged with OEP.

We invite readers to consider these examples and innovate within their own practices. The need for open educators to interrogate and disrupt hegemony through a critical approach is ongoing. The power of open education lies in the ability to center the margins and create opportunities for socially just practices with their students' individual and collective agency at the forefront.

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### Corresponding author

Stacy Katz can be contacted at: [stacy.katz@lehman.cuny.edu](mailto:stacy.katz@lehman.cuny.edu)

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