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The Discourses of OERs: how *flat* is this world?

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the provision of open educational resources, drawing on the concept of a ‘flat world’ (Friedman, 2005). A discourse analytical perspective (Fairclough, 2000) is used to discuss data from example OER initiatives. We enquire how flattening such initiatives are in terms of widening participation and empowering individuals through the access to knowledge.

1. Introduction

Thomas Friedman (2005), in his bestselling book ‘The World is Flat’, introduced a new way of describing the social changes that have been taking place in the world due to technological advances: the metaphor of *flatness*. Saying that the world is flat means accepting the view that the playing fields are levelled and that competition and collaboration are now more fine-grained; they happen not only on a societal and institutional levels but also amongst individuals.

The metaphor of flatness is supported by the concept of *openness* - it is the trend in businesses, government and education. Being open nowadays offers a way to remain competitive, rather than providing a threat to one’s ideas and assets. Alongside this *openness* comes a second factor, the one of *collaboration*. The more open the more visible. The more collaboration is in place the more expertise and outreach one can gain. Collaboration has become intrinsic to the notion of openness and is also intrinsic to this metaphor of a flat world.

But what is the relationship between this idea of a flat world and open educational resources? We come from the premise that OERs have been claimed as part of this flattening world, directly or indirectly. OERs are freely available online for access by anyone, anytime. And they are made available under the ideal that knowledge should be free and made accessible to all. Knowledge is a powerful currency in today’s society. The one who has knowledge is more competitive. OERs represent the openness to knowledge access and as a consequence to the path that leads to

competitiveness. OERs are also a path for collaboration: between countries, institutions and individuals in this sharing of knowledge. OERs, therefore, can be seen very much as part of this ‘discourse of flatness’.

However, the extent to which OERs are real flatteners in education is yet to be assessed. It is not the aim of this paper to provide such assessment: long term, detailed research would be necessary. What we propose instead is the use of discourse analysis as a powerful tool to identify some of the discourses that constitute this discourse of OERs, and to assess to what extent they are aligned with the discourse of flatness. We propose a critical view on this notion of flatness and on the discourses associated with it in the OER movement.

2. Discourse analysis: a powerful tool to investigate the discourses of OERs

There are different forms of discourse analysis in social science research, each one assuming particular terminology and coming from slightly different theoretical positions depending on the subject of concentration: psychology, education, politics, anthropology or linguistics, for example. This shows how truly interdisciplinary discourse analysis is. In this paper we draw on concepts of discourse analysis mostly from a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1979) perspective and on some concepts of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, Fairclough, 2000).

Discourse, in this paper, refers to the institutionalised spoken or written language in use. We also extend this notion of discourse to include other types of semiotic activity such as visual images (photography, video, diagrams etc) and sound (podcasts, lectures). Discourse is a particular way of constructing a domain of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). It is more than simply putting together spoken or written words – discourses carry a contextual, ideological and historical perspective. They regulate social practices to the extent they define what is part of a domain of practice and what is not. Discourses are the particular ways in which people think, talk and act about things – they are constitutive of the social practices at the same time constituting them.

Discourses are institutionalised because society is institutionalised: government, business, politics, schools, health care, media communication – these are all institutionalised social bodies which have their own practices. These practices are materialised through language in use. By studying the discourses we are studying the way people think and act, historically defined, and the ideologies which are carried through their language choices. We are studying more than written and spoken words, we are studying the ways in which identities are created and social relations are performed.

Discourses can be identified through language in use. However, they are not fixed or immutable. Discourses interplay with each other, in a very fluid way. One could be talking about religion in a political perspective for example, in which case both political and religious discourses would be interplaying and creating meanings, defining social practices. This fluid and interoperable way discourses work is called *interdiscursivity*. No discourse is closed in itself. In fact, a discourse only comes to existence in its relationship with other discourses. There is no ‘pure’ discourse.

Having said that, when we talk about the ‘discourse of flatness’ we are talking about this discourse and many others that constitute it. The discourse of flatness is populated with the discourse of openness and the discourse of collaboration, for example. And so is the discourse of OERs, as we aim to explore in this paper.

2. The flatteners: Friedman’s concepts found in the provision of OERs

In his book Friedman presents the ten ‘flatteners’ responsible for levelling the ground worldwide and how these flatteners converge to make the world even more flat. Amongst the ten flatteners presented by Friedman we use two of them to discuss in this paper, and to draw upon the different discourses that constitute these flatteners in an OER perspective. These flatteners are ‘open sourcing’ and ‘in-forming’.

2.1 Open sourcing

Open sourcing, as described by Friedman (2005) supports the notion that “companies or ad hoc groups would make available the source code – the underlying programming instructions that make a piece of software work - and then let anyone who has something to contribute improve it and let millions of others just download it for their own use for free”. Friedman uses two varieties of open sourcing as examples: the intellectual commons and the free software. The intellectual commons, according to Friedman, is rooted in academia, aiming to share research amongst groups of interest to advance science. He quotes Andreessen (2005), who says “Open-source is nothing more than peer-reviewed science [...]”. That is, science reviewed in a free and open way. Wladawsky-Berger (2005), also quoted by Friedman, points to the advantages of open sourcing and says “This emerging era is characterized by the collaborative innovation of many people working in gifted communities, just as innovation in the industrial era was characterized by individual genius”. To Friedman (2005) the intellectual commons form of open sourcing is a real flattener, because self-organized collaborative communities are working towards levelling the playing field in their areas. Friedman claims that many people like to share their findings to earn the respect of their intellectual peers. He sees it as a new form of collaboration that has been facilitated by the flat world and is flattening it even more.

In relation to free software, Friedman claims there is a movement inspired by the idea that software should be free and available to all, relying on open-source collaboration to produce and distribute them for free. Both the *intellectual commons* and the *free software* are concepts intrinsic to the OER movement. Universities involved in producing OERs are acting under an intellectual commons framework, making their knowledge available to people all over the world that can connect to the internet. Very often this knowledge is made available under the [Creative Commons](#) License, which means that the materials have only *some rights reserved* as opposed to the traditional *all rights reserved* premise of copyright law. Free software has also become very popular in distance education and in the OER movement. [Moodle](#), for example, is an open source virtual learning environment which is proving to be of greater popularity amongst distance education providers than commercial software.

2.2 In-forming

Friedman (2005) describes in-forming as “the ability to build and deploy your personal supply chain – a supply chain of information, knowledge, and entertainment. In-forming is about self-collaboration – becoming your own self-directed and self-empowered researcher, editor, and selector of entertainment without having to go to the library or to the movie theatre or through network television. In-forming is searching for knowledge. It is about seeking like-minded people and communities”.

Friedman offers *Google* and *Yahoo! Groups* as examples of internet-based tools that allow for in-forming and for flattening the world. He claims that in-forming means to empower the formation of global communities across all international and cultural boundaries. Global acting, to Friedman, is a critical aspect of the flattening function. OERs are meant to be a global flattener for education. The fact that these educational resources are internet-based means that they have a global reach. Anyone in the world who has an internet connection and a computer can theoretically have access to OERs.

One of the main characteristics of the ‘in-forming era’, for Friedman, is the changing way in which companies are setting up their businesses. Friedman mentions *Google* and *TiVo* as examples of companies who learned to collaborate with their users, by offering them tailored shows and entertainment. They have learned to thrive not by pushing products and services on their customers but by enabling the customers to pull their own. Some OERs initiatives also have this characteristic. Some of them not only offer content but also technological tools which enable the users to collaborate and communicate in order to gather the information they need and tailor it for their purposes.

3. The Discourses in the OER movement

Most of the discourses found in the OER movement are aligned with the ones of *flatness* from Friedman. For the purpose of this paper, we draw on discourse analysis to identify two of these discourses: the discourse of collaboration and the institutional discourse.

3.1 The Discourse of Collaboration

Collaboration is a key concept in the flattening of the world. The term itself appears in Friedman’s book many times. Friedman claims that the world flatteners are all reliant on the principle of collaboration. To him, collaboration ‘turbocharges’ the flat world. Open sourcing, in-forming, outsourcing, offshoring, supply-chaining, to cite a few, are all forms of collaboration that have been either made possible or greatly enhanced by the advance of technology and the Internet. He claims:

“And as more and more of us learn to how to collaborate in these different ways, we are flattening the world even more”.

(Friedman, 2005:81)

The Discourse of Collaboration, as in Friedman’s flatteners, is also present in the OER movement. Here are some examples taken from two open content initiatives showing how the discourse of collaboration is present in the OER world:

MIT OCW is committed to open systems and will share its approach with those who may want to launch similar efforts.

Extract 1: from [MIT’s OpenCourseWare website](#)
"intellectual commons" available to educators and learners around the globe.

Extract 2: from [MIT’s OpenCourseWare website](#)

What does The Open University bring to the open content field?

[...]

- A vast quantity of high quality learning materials: we specialise in content and support designed for distance and elearning; this includes self-assessment tools, collaboration forums and a personalised learner experience.

[...]

Extract 3: from [OpenLearn website](#)

[Latest news](#)

International collaboration extends to Pakistan

Extract 4: from [OpenLearn website](#)

Sharing knowledge, expertise and ideas are ways to collaborate with peers in a given community. In the extracts above the words *sharing/share* and *collaboration* are indicators of the Discourse of Collaboration in the OER movement and of its alignment with Friedman’s world flatteners. In extract 2, for example, the intellectual commons flattener is spelt out. This has been classified by Friedman as part of the ‘open sourcing’ movement.

Collaboration presupposes that both parties involved in it have something to offer. In OER initiatives collaboration happens on different levels. It can happen between institutions, between the learners and the OER provider or between the learners themselves. However, most OER initiatives so far, although acknowledging the importance of collaboration, still pursue it in a position of dominance: it is the provider offering the content to the user; it is the most knowledgeable institution

offering guidelines to the novice ones, it is the technological tools offered by the provider to support the learning process.

Although some initiatives do open up opportunities for the users to create and publish their own content, it is not the dominant discourse in the movement, and is not reflected in the structure of most websites. Most of the initiatives emphasise how the user can get hold of high quality content but not how they could use the website to publish relevant content to a given community of interest. Although the discourse of collaboration is present in the conceptualisation of the OER movement, the practice shows that in this discourse there are other embedded discourses which shape the way in which collaboration is fostered. Most OER initiatives are still based on the principles of the web 1.0 rather than the web 2.0. The former is based on the affordances of the web for making information available whereas the latter, besides that, also explores the potential of the Internet for the joint construction and dissemination of knowledge and information.

The practice of the OER initiatives at the moment is lacking the emphasis on truly ‘empowering the users’, as in the Google and TiVo examples mentioned earlier. Rather, the concept of ‘empowerment’ has been used in a single-sided perspective, where the provider *offers* the user what they think is needed for them to be part of the knowledge society. In relation to this view, the extract below briefly discusses the content provision in the OER movement and how it lacks ‘regionalisation’:

“Many, if not most, content initiatives using ICTs tend to ‘push’ external content towards local communities. In other words, they mainly provide ‘access’ to other people’s knowledge. With a few exceptions, new technologies are not used to strengthen the ‘push’ of local content from local people. Generally, the balance between ‘push’ and ‘pull’ – or supply and demand – is heavily weighted towards non-local rather than local content”

(UNESCO Portal, 2007)

There are other discourses embedded in the discourse of collaboration in the OER movement, and this is what is called *interdiscursivity*, as mentioned earlier in this paper. All discourses are constituted by other discourses. These discourses shape the social practices associated to them. In the case of the discourse of collaboration in OERs, the institutional discourse, the media discourse, the widening participation discourse and the globalization discourse are some of the many other discourses which work together shaping up the field. We now illustrate the institutional discourse working alongside the collaboration discourse in the movement.

3.2 The Institutional Discourse

The MIT OCW project aligns closely with MIT’s institutional mission (*to advance knowledge and education and serve the world*) and is true to MIT’s values of excellence, innovation, and leadership.

Extract 5: from [MIT’s OpenCourseWare website](#)

Open content is consistent with the University's commitment to social justice and widening participation in Higher Education

Extract 6: from the [OpenLearn](#) website – power point presentation introducing the project

OpenLearn...
[...] Could be a way of building markets and reputation [...]

Extract 7: from [OpenLearn](#) website –power point presentation introducing the project

MIT department heads believe that MIT OCW is a tool that indirectly aids in recruitment.

Extract 8: from the [MIT's OpenCourseWare 'How To' website](#)

The institutional discourses of both OER initiatives exemplified above are present in their approach to justify their participation in the movement: OERs are aligned with their mission (extracts 5 and 6) at the same time being beneficial to the image of their institutions and consequently to students recruitment (extracts 7 and 8). The institutional discourses in these extracts interplay with the media discourse of the institutions in the movement, which although it is not exemplified in this paper, plays an important role in shaping up the field. The media discourse of OERs draw on the globalization discourse and widening participation discourse to foster the image of the institutions, their mission and their role in the society in creating knowledge and *a better world*.

The institutional discourse in the OER movement is an example of a discourse of which the interdiscursive relations will be more apparent depending on the circumstances. To the OER user and to the broader society, it strongly draws on the discourses of widening participation and social inclusion, and highlights how open content can benefit the society while at the same time being in alignment with the institutional missions. To a specialist audience, whose concerns also include financial sustainability matters; it will draw on the media discourse and present the institutional benefits that being part of the OER world can offer to raise the institutional profiles. The interdiscursivity of the discourses is what enables them to create new discourses, contextualized in time and history. These discourses are not *drawn upon on demand*, but instead they coexist and constantly shape the social practices in a field and are shaped by them. It is a cyclical relationship between discourse and practice.

When the discourses of widening participation and social inclusion are emphasised in the institutional discourse of an OER initiative, the discourse of flatness are also embedded in it. Widening participation means to ‘flatten’ the opportunities for everyone. In Friedman’s book this is addressed in a few occasions:

“There is no bigger flattener than the idea of making all the world’s knowledge, or even just a big chunk of it, available to anyone and everyone, anytime, anywhere.”

(Friedman, 2005:153)

“If someone has broadband, dial-up or access to an internet café, whether a kid in Cambodia, the university professor, or me who runs this search engine (Google), all have the same basic access to overall research information that anyone has. It is a total equalizer [...]”

(Sergey Brin, in Friedman, 2005:152)

“Flattening the world means there is no discrimination in accessing knowledge”

(Eric Schmidt, in Friedman, 2005:153)

This concept of access to knowledge being central to the OER movement resembles Foucault’s (1979) discussions of knowledge and power. In society, having knowledge means having more power, to compete and to succeed. Foucault (1979) claims that knowledge works in society as power. Power and knowledge are mutually interrelated – there are no relations of power without them constituting a field of knowledge and, reciprocally, all knowledge constitutes new power relations (Foucault, 1979).

In the flattened world, knowledge means power. In the OER movement, knowledge means power, too – the OER discourses claim that access to knowledge enables widening participation in education and imply that, as a result, a wider range of possibilities for social inclusion will be opened. The relationship between knowledge and power is an important notion to the understanding of social inclusion. This relationship is at the heart of social practices and also at the heart of the institutional discourses of OERS and to the flattened world. The question is whether access to information is really enough to level the playing field and to be a ‘total equalizer’, in particular in the field of education; and whether this information can be transformed into knowledge (via learning) and be recognised by the society in order to truly promote social inclusion.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we brought together a number of different concepts: the metaphor of a flat world and the main components that can be transferred onto the understanding of the OER movement (open sourcing and in-forming); some of the discourses that are embedded in this metaphor (openness and collaboration, for example); how the discourses of OERs resemble this metaphor of a flat world; and finally, some of the discourses that constitute the discourses of the OER movement, such as the discourse

of collaboration itself and the institutional discourses. Due to the interdiscursive nature of all discourses, we also consider some other discourses that are embedded in the discourses of OERs, although we have not focused on them in this paper (the discourse of widening participation, the discourse of globalisation, the discourse of social inclusion and the media discourse).

Our aim was to explore the potential of Discourse Analysis to identify these discourses and to offer a tool for the critical understanding of the shaping up of the field. Discourse Analysis, in particular CDA, is a critical approach to data analysis and urges the researcher to take up a political stance on the discourses of the social practices. In the data we presented, we drew on sample extracts from two institutions which are part of the OER movement. By no means the discourses identified in the sample data are exclusive to these two institutions. On the contrary, they serve as examples of dominant discourses in the open content movement as a whole, and if space permitted, many other sample extracts could have been drawn upon. These institutions, in being part of the OER movement and of a world that is said to be flat, draw on these available discourses that interplay in the field. Here is the cyclical effect: by drawing on these discourses these institutions (and others in the movement) are shaping the field, at the same time being shaped by these discourses. It is important to emphasise, however, that drawing on these discourses is not an intentional action. These discourses are what regulate the social practices and the language used to foster desired actions. In this sense, they are very powerful and subtle, because they can be taken for granted if not brought into evidence.

We discussed how the discourse of collaboration is present in both the flat world metaphor and in the open content movement. We also pointed to other discourses in the open content movement that relate to the concept of flatness, with a focus on the institutional discourses. The institutional discourses and their interdiscursive relations with other discourses allow for the discursive practices in the movement to be shaped according to the immediate needs of the context. For example, for the general user of OERs, the institutional discourses draw on the discourses of widening participation, social inclusion and on the ideal of creating a *better world*. For a more specialist audience, that also takes into consideration the financial sustainability of the OER initiatives, the institutional discourses of the initiatives draw on a business-oriented perspective of their educational enterprises, which can be found in the media discourse of the movement, supported by the potential of the provision of OERs to raise institutional profiles, leading to possible increase in students' recruitment. The latter discursive practice of the field, which aims to raise institutional profiles, is driven by the marketization of higher education in the past years and the increasing local and global competition for existing and new educational markets.

Within this scenario, the title question of this paper 'The Discourses of OERs: how flat is this world?' has been partially answered. The educational playing field has not yet been levelled by the open content movement as many suggest and expect. By analysing the discourses of the field, we point to some of the possible reasons: a) most OER initiatives are still based on Web 1.0 and take up a one-sided approach to content provision, b) OER initiatives can draw strongly on institutional discourses that aim to raise profiles, leaving to a second plan the commitment to offering true possibilities for the knowledge construction, its regionalisation and use/re-use by its

potential audience, c) some OER initiatives might not have yet decided the position they would rather take faced with the various discourses and agendas of the field.

Discourse analysis would also allow for other interpretations within this context. But we hope that the initial evidence we gathered demonstrates the need for a more critical view of the field and its aims. Further research is necessary to identify and analyse in more depth these and other discourses of the open content movement, and to provide a better understanding of the practices associated with the field.

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