

Reviews / Comptes rendus

The Pedagogy of the Open Society: Knowledge and the Governance of Higher Education

*By Michael A. Peters, Tze-Chang Liu, and David J. Ondercin
(Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2012, 127 pages)*

In *The Pedagogy of the Open Society: Knowledge and the Governance of Higher Education*, the authors, Michael Peters, Tze-Chang Liu, and David J. Ondercin, examine the profound changes in education provoked by greater and greater access to knowledge provided by new technology. From their perspective, it is clear we have already crossed the threshold to a new world, where information and communication are available on a scale unimaginable in the past. These changes offer enormous potential for the extension of democracy and decentralized participation in it. Indeed, the authors see current commodity-based capitalism being supplanted by a “knowledge economy,” with knowledge being a good that cannot be consumed in the traditional sense of the word. In this new economy, nonhierarchical communication and exchange of knowledge by academics and researchers can lead to a creative synergy that will transform the nature of education and universities. In fact, changes are happening so quickly that administrative and legal systems now lag behind, and the challenges to catch up are ever more pressing. The authors argue that these traditional approaches to knowledge and education need to be abandoned and new ones developed.

If there is an underlying theme uniting the eight chapters of this short book, it is the concept of “radical openness”: open knowledge, open education, open pedagogy, and open learning systems. This new openness leads to what the authors describe as “knowledge socialism,” where knowledge is freely available and readily transferable for the greater good of society. Throughout the book the authors examine vitally important questions and bring energy and erudition to their study.

That being said, there is a certain innocence to their writing, and their approach at times seems to border on technological determinism. There is little sense of underlying societal powers or competing and conflicting interests in their analysis. It is as though they assume everyone is in agreement and working together for the greater good. While the Internet and social media do offer tremendous potential for communication and knowledge sharing, a quick look at current reality belies their optimistic prognosis.

If we take the debate over global warming as an example, this becomes clear. The vast majority of the scientific community agrees that human activity, such as burning fossil fuels, is a major factor in global warming. However, the fossil fuel companies have sponsored a few scientists to cast doubt on this view and have created pseudo-civil society groups that use social media to deny global warming is occurring. Despite the open knowledge accessible on the Internet and lauded by the authors, the result is confusion among the populace and lack of action in the face of a major threat to our way of life. The access to knowledge offered by new technology can also be limited by governments, and not only by authoritarian regimes. In Canada, hundreds of federal scientists claim they have been pressured by the Harper government to exclude or alter technical information in government documents for nonscientific reasons. The tremendous power of the Internet also offers increased methods of social control, as evidenced in the United States by the National Security Agency's surveillance of emails, texts, and phone calls. Unfortunately, this darker side to the information revolution is nowhere to be seen in the hopeful perspective of the three authors.

Nonetheless, choosing to concentrate only on the positive potential of open knowledge and its educational implications is perhaps justifiable and acceptable.

Another aspect of the book, however, is a fundamental, and rather inexplicable, weakness. Unfortunately, the text is riddled with errors and poorly written sentences. For example the sentence "Open knowledge promotes knowledge production and a type of open culture that encourages openness" (p. 1) brings to mind Monty Python's famous "Department of Redundancy Department." Other sentences, such as "Later on, as civilization developed, education was remained limited in society" (p. 40) or "However, there is some questions about equity issues that only those who have capital of using these technologies are benefits" (p. 120), cry out for editing; they are inexcusable, especially given the very open knowledge and available support discussed in the book.

The book is thus something of a diamond in the rough. The authors consider some weighty issues that are fundamentally altering our society, our universities, and our human potential and offer some interesting ideas about how society as a whole can benefit from these changes. However, the interesting and well-researched content of the book is marred by all-too-frequent, yet easily correctable, grammatical and stylistic errors.

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