**OPEN PRAXIS**

**icde** INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

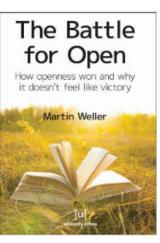# Book review of The Battle for Open: How openness won and why it doesn't feel like victory

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Has the openness movement won the battle to transform itself into a mainstream phenomenon in higher education? If the answer is yes, does this mean that the disputes with other educational technological solutions, in particular restricted, have definitively ended? Or rather is it only the beginning of a long confrontation to take center stage in a digital ecosystem that is increasingly more nuanced, where the number of actors keeps growing and the limits on what is open is ever more diffuse?

In this new book, Martin Weller attempts to find answers to these questions. To do so, he introduces a group of quite varied subjects on evolution and the current state of higher education. As such, his contribution turns into an authentic reference manual for everyone who has an interest in the digitization of education.

For years, and since its beginning, the open movement has generated multiple tensions and provoked conflicts in the *status quo* in academia. To understand the idiosyncrasy and reach of the conflicts, Weller begins by describing three of the main settings where the battle of open is being waged:

1) The conflict between different visions of what *open* is. There is a battle between, on the one hand, those who defend free access to educational materials, to reuse them and develop new work methods and, on the other, those who view openness as a way of attracting public to platforms that represent a limited work environment.

2) The spoils won in successive victories. There exists an estimate by governments of growing expenditures on education, especially in developing countries, which allows expected profits by the publishing industry, which has been working in this sector for many years, to be quantified.

3) The decisive battle for who is able to establish the hegemonic narrative of the facts; a matter of great importance given that, as Weller reminds us, history is written by the victors. The key principle to a narrative is found in its capacity to influence and intervene in the progression of events and become a self-fulfilling prophecy, making sure that the desires and ideas expressed end up becoming reality. The tension between narratives is seen at least between two opposing visions. On one side, we find an interpretation of the facts known as "the Silicon Valley narrative", which repeatedly states that the current educational model is broken as a consequence of the digital revolution, and affirms that its restructuring is fully dependent on it being able to incorporate a whole series of disruptive technologies that radically transform the educational space. This interpretation looks for endorsement by proposing the introduction

of measures following the same prescription that has previously been used in other business sectors, such as music or publishing. Opposing this narrative is strong criticism that points to this as an intervention in the system that leaves the main agents in the educational system pushed aside, that the proposals leave the axis of action on technology and do not take into account the true social implications implied by digital change on the entire educational space. This technologically skewed narrative does not take into account the opportunities that digitization can offer the educational community in terms of interconnection, access to knowledge, experimentation, methodological innovation and for the training of students, all members of the educational community and, most notably, of society itself.

Once the scope and major arenas where the battle is being waged are identified, the author analyzes in great detail various specific fields of the open movement that are generating tensions within academia:

- Open Access Publishing.
- Open Educational Resources.
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).
- Open Scholarship.

In each of these fields, a series of principles in higher education are being consolidated that make the battle worth the effort. Weller mentions these principles in his analysis, and also makes reference to the circumstances that explain why open approaches prevail over restrictive. The description is so exhaustive that by the end of the journey the reader fully understands the keys behind the main disputes in academia since, at the beginning of 2000, the Creative Commons open licenses appeared and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology decided to offer, open and free of charge, a large part of its lecture material on the OpenCourseWare site.

The author documents clearly and constructively a wide group of situations in which open operates. He does this using precise but very clear language that is especially useful when subjects of certain complexity are developed.

An example of simplicity and precision is his analysis and description of the field of open access publishing. The subject of open access has been considered the exclusive domain of publishers and librarians, and as such its arrival has been habitually stained with all types of technicisms surrounding author´s rights, the publishing chain or production costs. Despite these types of analysis being correct from a formal point of view, paradoxically it is certain that the technical complexity in the publishing world—with the corresponding absence of content producers and users of the documents—has kept reflections on open access at a distance from researchers, professors and students. It is precisely the collectives with greatest interest in widening the diffusion of their work and openly using scientific and study resources that end up being totally forgotten in the discussion on open access. Weller´s great achievement in this book consists in avoiding mere technical description and presenting directly and accessibly the casuistry that surrounds the routes towards open access—Gold & Green route—and how the relationship between author and editor changes as a consequence of the ability to finance the publication of an open text. With these barriers surmounted, the book focuses on openly presenting the multiple contradictions associated with a model still under construction. On one side, Weller reviews how the Gold route, which puts the emphasis on journals, does this at the cost of taking funds away from researchers and institutions. On the other, how the Green route underlines the role of open access repositories, but compensates publishers by putting an embargo on articles, which at the same time diminishes reader interest in open publications. In between both models, a series of initiatives of interest are mentioned that are

differentiated from the previous basically because they apply principles from the digital economy, mostly absent from conventional approaches proposed by academia or the publishing industry.

The same constructive approach is applied to analysis of MOOCs. The objective in this case is not so much to detail the history and evolution of open courses in-depth, but rather to show the evident contradictions hidden behind their current formulation. The disputes surrounding MOOCs take up two chapters: first a tour is taken that underlines their initial connection with open educational resources and experimental pedagogy. Then later the evolution towards the commercial and directly restricted sphere—according to the parameters that measure educational openness—is shown, until finally arriving at a review of how their current global presence and the ensuing media attention is serving to introduce a biased discourse in favor of the technology industry, which seeks to enter higher education institutions, fundamentally tossing aside its protagonists. As happens with the rest of the subjects, the interpretation of events related to MOOCs cannot be considered in isolation, which encourages a reading of the history of open to be done while considering the rest of the levels involved in the battle.

In 1993, the Nobel Prize winner Leon M. Lederman turned to a well-known aphorism to title his scientific book on particle physics: *If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* Weller seems to confront a similar dilemma when he proposes a hypothesis that establishes a direct relationship between open education and education. For Weller, open education cannot be considered a subset of education, but rather should be understood in a broad sense as a general characteristic of education. So if someone is interested in education, they should be equally concerned with the direction the battle for open takes. Given that the evidence shown in the book fully validates Weller´s initial hypothesis, it can then be correctly affirmed that the result of the open battle hides the solution to the dilemma: if education is the answer, what is the question?