



Catherine Cronin

“Openness is not a one-time decision and it is not universally experienced; it is always complex, personal, contextual, and continually negotiated”

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Interview conducted by

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Catherine Cronin is an open educator, open researcher, and Strategic Education Developer at the *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* in Ireland. Her work focuses on digital and open education, critical approaches to openness, digital identity practices, and exploring the interplay between formal and informal learning. She began her career as a Systems Engineer in the 1980's, eventually changing paths to pursue a master's degree in Women's Studies completing her dissertation in gender and technology. Catherine has achieved over 25 years working in higher education. In her PhD research (2018), She explored the use of open educational practices (OEP) in higher education.

Recently you have been co-chair of the OER19 Conference, an important event about open education. We are really interested in knowing the principal achievements after that conference regarding some basic questions developed on this conference: Why open? Open for whom?

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Of course, I am happy to talk about OER19! This was the 10th annual OER Conference – the first (back in 2010) was an outcome of the UKOER programme. Particularly in the past 3-4 years, this conference has been grappling with more complex, critical questions about open education and openness. With this year’s theme ‘*Recentering open: Critical and global perspectives*’, Laura Czerniewicz and I as co-chairs hoped to continue and honour that trend, and also to extend those conversations.

The gathering in Galway was quite unique in many ways. A diverse and international gathering of people who engaged in open education shared their work, their ideas, their ideals for ‘open’ as well as their deep concerns about realising the potential of open education in a time of increasing inequality.

I highly recommend the OER10 website as a place to explore these ideas further, particularly the many and varied blog posts that were published before, during and after the event – a tapestry of voices and a source of hope.

Catherine, in your PHD you explored the use of open educational practices (OEP) in higher education, could you share with our readers the principal conclusions of your research?

I completed my PhD in 2018, late in my career. Like many people, my career in higher education has followed alternative paths and a few countries. This included working in the computing industry, working as a community educator, and then adding an MA in Women’s Studies to my engineering degrees so that I could study and teach in the area of gender and technology as well as computing – in the community and at university. About 15 years ago, my role was academic coordinator of the first fully-online MSc programme in software engineering at NUI Galway, and shortly afterward I became aware of the broader open education movement. My work thus began to combine online education, open education and feminist/critical pedagogies, all inspired by an impetus toward social

justice – this has been my work of the past decade or so, including the PhD.

The aims of open education are well-known: to increase access to education, to improve its effectiveness, and to reduce inequality. But what does this look like in the *actual* practices of learners and teachers? In practice, open educators create and foster opportunities for learners to **access** education (e.g. through the use of open educational resources (OER)); to **collaborate** with others, across the boundaries of countries/cultures/institutions/systems; to **create** and **co-create** knowledge, inspired by Freirean ideals of education; and to **integrate** formal and informal learning practices, networks and identities, a process which requires the continual development of critical digital literacies. Collectively, these are known as open educational practices, or OEP.

While openness has many potential benefits, it also entails negotiating new forms of risks and tensions – particularly within higher education. Educators may wonder: What is my institution’s position on OER and open sharing of knowledge? Can open web tools be used to facilitate student collaboration beyond the institution, for the purposes of learning and even assessment? How do institutions, and specific curricula within institutions, enable the development of critical digital literacies by students and educators? What if I teach openly and something goes wrong, will the institution support me? Such was the space I sought to explore in my PhD research, i.e. meaning-making and decision-making by university educators regarding whether, why and how they use OEP in their teaching. The findings were illuminating.

There are many complexities, of course, but my PhD in one sentence? Openness does not involve a one-time decision, and it is not universally experienced; the use of open educational practices is *complex, personal* and *contextual*, and also *continually negotiated*. Openness is always personal – we engage in open web spaces using digital identities which we ourselves create and enact, in contrast with institutional role-based identities in institutional online spaces such as the VLE. Openness is always contextual – it depends on our geographic, cultural, institutional, disciplinary, departmental, community, personal (etc.!) contexts – and we must be aware of context in all that we do, particularly as teachers. And openness is always continually negotiated. Among the educators I interviewed, the issue of most concern was balancing privacy and

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openness – this was overwhelmingly described as both an individual decision and an ongoing/continual challenge. I found that individuals seek to balance privacy and openness in their use of social and participatory technologies at four levels: *macro* (global level), *meso* (community/network level), *micro* (individual level), and *nano* (interaction level). You can read more about this work in this [short article](#) or on my [website](#).

We know you are involved in an interesting project called *Equality Unbound*, could you explain to our readers the aim of that project and the benefits that you find on it?

Equity Unbound (#unboundeq) is an open curriculum that was developed in 2018 by Mia Zamora, Maha Bali and myself – following conversations we had at the OER18 Conference. The intercultural, equity-focused curriculum focuses on building critical digital literacies in a global context, highlighting issues of web representation, digital colonialism, safety and security risks, and how these differ across contexts. The curriculum is open to all as a set of learning activities as well a collection of resources that you can dip into. We invite anyone to add to the curriculum as it continues to evolve. Mia, Maha and I each used the curriculum resources in our own courses in the US, Egypt and Ireland in 2018-19, with everyone invited to engage in a central question: “what does equity mean for the open web?”. We used various collaborative online activities – via Twitter, blogs, Hypothes.is annotations and live YouTube recordings of key conversations.

Equity Unbound has been an amazing learning experience for us all and we continue to reflect upon it, to engage with others about these ideas, and to plan to develop the curriculum further for 2019-20. If you are interested, please do get in touch.

Catherine, to conclude with the interview, what is your hope for open education, and for the future?

At this moment in history, many of us are thinking deeply about our roles as educators and as citizens in a time of increasing inequality, rising authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism, environmental degradation and climate change. The many challenges we face within higher education – some global and some specific to our own contexts – must be considered within this bigger picture. For those committed to social justice, democratic practices, and working towards greater

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equity, open education has great potential. But this potential will only be realised if we stay alert to the pitfalls, not least the collapsing of contexts that devalue and 'other' many people and knowledges. As those engaged in higher education in this moment, each of us has an opportunity – to see, to ask questions, to speak up, to propose alternative strategies, to advocate critical approaches, and to continue doing this in the face of apathy and even resistance. What should (higher) education do and be today, in 2020, in 2050? You have a voice, please use it.

I would love to continue this conversation with anyone who is interested. Together are stronger than we are individually. Strength and peace to you.