

# The future isn't what it used to be: Open education at a crossroads

Keynote Essay

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This keynote was delivered by Catherine Cronin and Laura Czerniewicz at the Open Education Conference ([OER24](#)) on 28 March 2024 at Munster Technological University, Cork, Ireland. The keynote is divided into three sections: (I) The big picture, (II) Open education at a crossroads, and (III) Creating better futures.

## I. The Big Picture

We begin this keynote with big picture issues and emphasise that this is not simply obligatory “context”. Rather we believe that it is essential to name the issues in which open education is entangled because these issues shape the possibilities and the risks of open education. They are the issues to which the open education community responds but also the issues which the open education community can, even must, influence. Open education, like higher education, reflects, responds to, guides, and changes society itself.

### Polycrisis

Society globally is suffering a concatenation of crises –a polycrisis– where each crisis impacts on and magnifies the others. These crises, all of which are relevant to open education, include: inequality, exacerbated by Covid-19; the climate crisis and ecological degradation, worsening each year; a human rights crisis, linked to polarisation and othering; debt and cost of living crises; as well as conflict, wars, rising autocracy and involuntary migration. We understand that these global crises are experienced locally.

The crisis of inequality is intersectional and horizontal; it is the thread that runs through all other crises. While there are stark disparities between the Global South and North, no continent is immune to extreme inequality. In the USA, 19% of national income goes to the richest 1%, the same percentage as in South Africa (World Inequality Lab, 2023). Globally, ten percent of the world's population owns 76% of the wealth, takes in 52% of incomes, and accounts for 48% of carbon emissions (Stanley, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically exposed inequality in general, including across all education sectors. It has been low income communities that have endured a much harder recovery from the multiple shocks of the pandemic, climate change, conflicts and the rising cost of living. Ironically, the pandemic was a boon for profit-making. Since 2020, two-thirds of new wealth has gone to the top 1%, all tied up with corporate and monopoly power which evidence shows to be “an inequality-generating machine” (Oxfam, 2024).

The climate crisis pervades everything. We know that it is accelerating, that 2023 exceeded 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming on average for the first time, a key limit in the Paris Climate Agreement. It is tragically the case that greenhouse gas emissions from high-emitting countries have caused substantial economic losses in low-income, tropical parts of the world, and economic gains in high-income, midlatitude regions (Callahan & Mankin, 2022) and that the emissions from a billionaire’s investments produce a million times more carbon than the average person (Oxfam, 2022).

The growing interest in the impact of technology on greenhouse gas emissions is to be welcomed (Digitalization for Sustainability, 2022; Sattiraju, 2020). While some attention has been paid to the carbon footprint of higher education (RAT, 2022), there is a need for a much more concerted focus on the role of higher education in this regard, especially with the post pandemic rise of blended learning and the infiltration of big tech into the sector.

Other crises which contribute to the polycrisis cannot be ignored either. Open education, with its values of inclusion and care, operates in a period in which conflict polarisation and “othering” have seen democracies across the world decline (EIU, 2024). Authoritarianism and “fake truth” dominate discourses, socially and even educationally. Indeed, in an era characterised by human rights crises, where the entire human rights system that undergirds democracy is arguably in peril (HRW, 2024), the tenets of freedom, justice and peace enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 are seriously threatened.

## **A digital, datafied world**

It is a digital, datafied world; this is the water everyone is immersed in. The question isn’t *whether* one is connected, but rather the *nature* of that connection, or disconnection. The “digital divide” simply morphs as digital technologies evolve and as the goal posts shift.

The most ubiquitous devices are cell phones, with almost 80% of the world’s population owning phones and three-quarters being connected (ITU, 2023). These

numbers, however, hide the ways that access, ownership, use, skills, costs and benefits are skewed by wealth and urban/rural divides in every country (ITU, 2023). Digital divides for students are ameliorated to some extent by on-campus connectivity, as was vividly illustrated during the Covid pandemic "online pivots". At the same time, cell phones turn everyone into data points which can feed into the structures of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Digital IDs, being rolled out everywhere, have a similar effect. Let's not simplify the issue of data though; the lack of data and data systems is to the detriment of development in many countries, as is the lack of data education management systems a risk to students in need (Okunoye, 2024).

Unfortunately, the earlier optimism of an open digital world to empower all humanity, and to foster collaboration, compassion and creativity, has largely been dashed. A thousand flowers have not bloomed (Tenison, n.d.). The state and/or the market control the web and the dominant business models through closed, extractive surveillance systems. In many countries the digital world is controlled by the state – which can turn it off. In 2022 there were 187 shutdowns across 35 countries (Rosson et al., 2023). Within and across countries, the digital world is overwhelmingly in the hands of proprietary platforms. The 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Maria Ressa, describes big tech as "connective tissue", "at the cellular level" of society (Ressa, 2024). Thus, open movements and open education are constrained by closed, opaque infrastructures, and platform infrastructures and models limit the possibilities of open education practices.

Add into the mix the dramatic mainstreaming of AI just over a year ago. We are amongst those who believe that AI is a paradigmatic shift. While there are certainly some progressive possibilities, including for higher education, AI reflects the world we are in, and even then, the reflection is partial and "skews hegemonic" (Bender, 2023). No-one is immune from being "excoded" (harmed by algorithms) and those already marginalised are at greater risk (Buolamwini, 2023). Some of the immense implications of AI for open education are touched on later, and of course in the programme of this conference.

## **Public higher education being eroded**

Finally, also of note is the erosion of public higher education. This crisis has been well documented, with widespread agreement that underfunding and neoliberalism are at the root. Underfunding in most places is characterised by staffing cuts, the growth of an academic precariat, rising costs for students, widespread resource restrictions, loss of programmes (particularly liberal arts, social sciences, humanities), and more. Financial hardship often leads to exclusion, especially affecting marginalised students and communities.

The culture of the market is embedded in the sector (to a greater or lesser extent) across the world through privatisation of practice, discourse and culture. Boosted by the pandemic, tech companies infiltrated the tertiary education sector with attractive offers that struggling institutions and national education departments found difficult to refuse. These contract conditions are exceedingly difficult to negotiate as individual institutions, and ideally require sector-wide bargaining. The costs have included a loss of autonomy and control, opaque data flows, threats to academic freedom (Fiebig et al., 2023), potential privacy violations, and the ability to sell data to third party providers. It is essential to ensure that the digital transformation of higher education does not equate only to outsourcing digital infrastructure to commercial technology companies and activity tracing via digital data.

Even prior to the dramatic impact of Covid in 2020, many higher education staff had been close to despair, as had we. Determined to find ways out of the morass and to imagine alternatives, we set about convening a process of fostering glimmers of hope, resulting in the book *Higher Education for Good: Teaching and Learning Futures*, published openly (CC BY-NC) in October 2023 (Czerniewicz & Cronin, 2023). The 70+ authors, from diverse contexts in many countries in both the Global South and Global North, address the current crises in higher education. Each offers imaginative proposals on how to move forward. As editors, we synthesised the findings of all chapters, proposing a “manifesto for higher education for good” which we will return to later in this keynote.

Concluding this section, and to guide us forward in our consideration of these issues, we pose three questions:

- How can the open education movement and open education values flourish in an increasingly closed, authoritarian, anti-democratic, othering world dominated by platform capitalism and surveillance capitalism?
- What is the role of the open movement in general, and open education in particular, in responding to this increasingly dominant world order?
- How can we, individually and together, meet this moment?

## II. Open Education at a Crossroads

We move now to explore the past, present and potential future(s) of open education, using the metaphor “open education at a crossroads”. The concept of crossroads is embedded in cultures across the globe. The phrase “dancing at the crossroads”, for example, has been used in Irish culture for decades. The phrase originates in actual crossroads dances that were popular up to the mid-20th century in rural Ireland, where people would congregate in the large cleared space of a crossroads to play

music and dance. In ancient Greece, Hecate was the goddess of the crossroads. She is associated with crossroads, borders, city walls, doorways, and with realms outside or beyond the world of the living. She is particularly associated with being “between” and with protection, often depicted holding torches or keys (Moore, 2021). In many countries including Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Cuba and Brazil, Esu is the god of the crossroads. Wole Soyinka points out that Esu is a dialectician, one who says that reality is deceptive and one who always looks beneath the surface. He is mischievous and sometimes confuses human beings (Soyinka, n.d.). Each of these interpretations captures an element of liminality and transition -- which speaks to us as we consider open education now. We are not the only ones who have employed this metaphor at this time of crisis; recent work exploring democracy, data, and copyright, among others (Walker, 2024; Connected by Data, 2023; SMU, 2024) has used the “crossroads” metaphor, echoing our sense of urgency and agency.

## **Open education as part of a broader ecosystem**

The open education community is one amongst several others which define themselves as, and are based on, the principles of openness. These communities have domain specific but overlapping foci: these include open access, open data, open science and open source software. Recent studies of the open ecosystem (Tarkowski et al., 2023) are fascinating in many ways; from the perspective of open education the most striking finding of their analysis is how silo-ed the open education community is from the rest of the open ecosystem. We are concerned by this, especially in light of the serious crises we all face. Across the ecosystem we believe there are shared concerns, values and foundational commitments (e.g. open licences). There would be several advantages of forming conscious alliances, including reducing duplication, sharing strategies for influencing decisions and altering directions, and strengthening movements towards justice and sustainability.

## **The recent past: how open education has changed (or not)**

The tensions and complexities of open education have been on our minds over these past few years. In preparing this keynote, we were curious to explore how open education has changed (or not) in recent years. We chose OER17 as a starting point, a solid seven year review. That conference’s theme was ‘The Politics of Open’; the conference was held in London, chaired by Josie Fraser and Alec Tarkowski; we were on a final panel together with Muireann O’Keeffe. We then chaired OER19 together in Galway, with the theme of ‘Re-centring Open: Critical and Global Perspectives’.

To explore the evolution of open education, we reviewed OER conference programmes and scanned programmes of other open education conferences over the

past seven years. We also undertook online searches of “open education” plus terms such as “social justice” and “the commons”, with fascinating results.

We would welcome detailed research. For now, these are our observations. So let’s wind back 7 years... What we have noticed is that some of the conversations in those early days were prescient, some topics have stayed at the same level of interest and activity, some changes have been encouragingly positive, and of course some things were completely unanticipated.

### **Awareness then, more embedded now**

It has been so encouraging to see how themes focusing on social justice, equity and critical approaches have further permeated open education and higher education, and become even more widely recognised. Of course it is not enough yet, but there has been a greater recognition of, for example, the importance of other epistemologies, e.g. inclusion of the Global South, in open education in general.

There has been increasing recognition of links and interactions between national and international politics (e.g. democracy crises in specific countries, refugee crises) and higher education, as well as other education sectors. There has also been increased engagement with feminism and feminist theory, particularly intersectional feminism. OER19 was the starting point of the FemEdTech Quilt of Care and Justice in Open Education, for example.

### **Some awareness then, some awareness now**

Over the years, there have been observations that there wasn’t enough discussion about the commons and that various components of open are too silo-ed. This continues to be the case: [a review of OERConf programmes](#) and our online searches since then have shown no change; there remains little happening in this regard with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Luke, 2021; Stacey, 2023; Tarkowski, 2017).

The area of open education policy still lacks widespread attention and focus; this is surprising, given the broader changes in the sector. Notable work is being developed (e.g. Atenas et al., 2020; Atenas et al., 2022; Coyne & Alfis, 2021; Havemann, 2021; National Forum, 2021) but more is needed.

Finally, there were early observations that open educators were not engaging sufficiently with copyright reform (e.g. Tarkowski, 2017), and even that some were unaware that Creative Commons licences are only one aspect of copyright. Preliminary indications are that this still seems to be the case which is especially worrying given the turbulence in copyright at the present time, as discussed later.

## **Some awareness then, key issues now**

There has been recognition within open education of the constraining role of digital platforms, and the possible risks to open education. We could not have anticipated *the extent* to which big tech companies would come to infiltrate higher education, including but not only due to the acceleration during the pandemic lockdowns. Similarly, the huge surge in artificial intelligence could not have been anticipated, a few years ago it was on the outer edge of the open education agenda. There was little preparation for the impact of AI in education, and we doubt that there could have been, given the immediate priorities of the times.

## **Unforeseen**

Completely unforeseen was the dramatic arrival and consequences of COVID-19 pandemic and associated trauma, the shutdown of economies, and extreme social isolation. Education systems too were shut down, here too inequalities were manifest in the rapid move to online learning. Open educators experienced the stresses of everyone in education, while also meeting the need to create and share open content.

Also unanticipated was the worsening and splintering of the social media ecosystem, including appropriation by bad actors, with a resulting corrosion of the primary platform that had been a reliable, horizontal communications tool for many open educators for over fifteen years.

Lastly here, we must mention the unanticipated enclosure and platformisation of open content. In what has been coined the “paradox of open” (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis, 2023; Keller & Tarkowski, 2021), content made available under open licences is increasingly being used by proprietary companies to financially benefit themselves, and via models which ironically close off or limit access to the OERs which are meant to be improving access. With those platforms financially profiting the companies that own them, neither the content creators nor the users benefit.

## **The present: open education marked by fluidity and instability**

So, with this consideration of our wider global and social context, and a look back at the recent past of open education, what is happening *now* that makes us say that open education is at a crossroads? The current situation is clearly one in which beliefs, assumptions and foundations of open education have been shaken up, questioned, challenged. Fluidity is an opportunity, but it needs to be moulded to just outcomes, otherwise it is likely to harden into shape as is. We explore both exogenous and endogenous factors, as well as fundamental challenges to the meaning of open.

## Exogenous factors

Arguably, the most significant exogenous factor emanating from outside the open education community is the current mainstreaming of AI into all aspects of society, including education. AI itself has many tendrils, each of which requires focused attention. We touch on four here, mindful that these are preliminary comments and that there are more dimensions to consider. From the perspective of open education, there is the prospect of human harm caused by AI, including that which involves open education content itself; the lack of transparency in AI; dilemmas regarding open licences; and the current copyright turmoil caused by AI-generated content.

Multiple forms of **human harm** are caused by the creation and use of AI systems. At one extreme, we cite growing evidence of the contribution of AI to worsening the climate crisis (Luccioni et al., 2023) and the exploited labour used in the creation of AI models and content (Gebru, 2023; Okolo, 2023). Specific to open education, harm also has been caused by the incorporation of openly licensed images of humans into facial recognition training programs (used in employment, housing, surveillance, law enforcement, and more). Many of these programs have been found to be “laced with algorithmic bias” (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018), i.e. in the form of higher rates of misidentification of faces that are not perceived as white and/or male (Scheutz, 2021).

The **lack of transparency in AI** risks undermining the core values of what could be called the open movement. The opacity of AI models makes informed decision-making impossible. It hinders the development of revised forms of openness at several levels and restricts the democratic governance of new technologies (see more in Jernite, [2023](#)). This is especially relevant to sustaining a knowledge commons. Open education is premised on access, inclusion, recognition, respect and attribution. At present, there are copious court cases in process regarding the creation and ownership of AI content. Evidence indicates that artists’ work is being easily copied (Barker, 2023) and that visual creators are losing work to AI (Deck, 2023; Zhoo, 2023), as are writers (Verman & De Vynck, 2023), including, ironically ghost writers in both the Global North (Verman & Vynck, 2023) and Global South (Siele, 2023).

As Mazgal (2022) points out, if people start associating open licensing with a gateway to an abuse of their rights and a tool aiding oppressive systems of control, they will not use it, and may object to others using it.

Even prior to the recent rise in AI, there was healthy discussion about the **future proofing of open licences**, including whether they are nuanced enough for all cases, and whether they needed to be able to differentiate between different uses and purposes of open content. The principles of Creative Commons licences are

themselves currently being reviewed (Creative Commons, 2023). Consideration also has been given to alternative licences, including those based on concepts other than ownership such as the Maori-developed Kaitiakitanga licence (Kaituhi, n.d) which states that data is not owned but is cared for under the principle of kaitiakitanga (guardianship) and any benefit derived from data must flow to the source of that data.

The dramatic arrival of AI into education in 2023 has seen **copyright law in turmoil** for several reasons, including whether or not AI-produced content constitutes “fair use” and whether AI outputs are copyrightable or not. The details are beyond a talk like this. For open educators, what legal structures allow and how these legal arguments get resolved are only one consideration. There may well be a disjunct between that which is allowed and legal, and that which is considered ethical, responsible or simply comfortable for open practitioners.

We think all of these exogenous factors are relevant and important to open education, not only because they affect access and inclusion in education, but because we consider open education to be part of a larger and necessary impulse towards human rights and democracy in a fractured era.

### **Endogenous factors**

Globally, we observe **open education leadership in flux**. Several key open education organisations (including OE Global, Creative Commons, SAIDE, and ALT) have experienced leadership changes in the past year. Leadership transition is part of every organisation, but the changes in leadership (some sudden) experienced across multiple open education organisations within a short period of time is notable. Interim leadership is challenging and often underappreciated work, which we would like to acknowledge. There are consequences to these collective transitions, however, particularly in cases where interim leaders may not have the mandate for high level strategy, coordinated responses, and/or alternative imaginaries – and when there is so much at stake.

Open education requires **stable funding and sustainability models**. Financial sustainability continues to be a priority threat, as a March 2024 community conversation between three North American organisations (DOERS, NCOER and SPARC) discussing joint strategies reminds us (WICHE, 2024). Funding is exceptionally unstable at present; funders' priorities change and underfunded governments find it difficult to support the upfront costs of open content (despite potential money saving in the medium term). In addition, the time of educators is increasingly scarce. Those fortunate enough to be in permanent positions are overburdened, while increasing numbers of educators are underpaid contractors, gig workers for whom sharing and caring comes at a personal cost.

While open education suffers from the neoliberal structures in which it is located, our scan suggests that insufficient attention has been recently paid to how other business models may aid sustainability, nor how forms of governance such as the commons may provide appropriate alternatives. While this may seem an intractable challenge, there is no escaping it.

### **Rethinking the meaning of open**

In myriad ways, we see the **nature of open practices** and even the **meaning of open under scrutiny**. Extractive business models are rapidly creating new forms of privatised knowledge concentration, relying on free labour, without protections. It is becoming tricky to differentiate between openly offered practices and extractive free labour. Relevant to open education is the fact that corporations own the prompts created by those who innovate with AI for teaching and learning (see Torrey Trust, 2024). Effectively, by training virtual tutors, are educators training our replacements for free (willing and voluntary obsolescence)? In light of these growing and invisible extractive practices, based on free labour, our attention must inevitably turn to the nature, terms of engagement and governance of open practices.

**Old discourses in new bottles?** Periods of fluidity are often characterised by hype, some of which solidifies into mainstream beliefs, some of which are forms of open washing. There are, for instance, many so-called “open” names and claims by tech companies (Widder et al., 2023) while others repeat old tropes in new guises. At this moment, we see easy promises regarding how open education and AI together can assist the most disadvantaged in society, for example, making it sound so simple. These promises risk positioning technology as the saviour once again, instead of the hard real work of developing critical literacies and building cultural capital.

The fluidity and instability of open education provokes foundational questions about the meaning of open. They are reminders that open is a means to an end not an end in itself. It prompts us to review the purpose of open. We believe that open education is a key dimension in the global social polycrisis, and is arguably central to fighting for human rights, democracy, justice and sustainability.

## **III. Creating Better Futures**

One of the best things that happens at gatherings like these is making connections and generating sparks of ideas. We’re sure that many of you have had the experience of starting something new after conversations at such a conference-- a project, an article, a teaching approach, a new collaboration.

When we meet together, and whenever we share our work openly, with hope and humility, we have the opportunity to inspire one another, to change, and to effect change around us.

At this moment, our collective challenges are great, as we've explored. We now want to share our ideas for moving forward, effecting change and creating better futures – openly and together. We have adapted the “manifesto for higher education for good” (Czerniewicz & Cronin, 2023) as a framing device, using it specifically focused on open education. We look both within and beyond open and higher education for models that have been used to effect social change.



## Name and analyse the troubles of open education

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”*  
(James Baldwin, 1962)

The previous part of our talk provides our impressions of the issues facing open education during this time of particular fluidity. It is a broad overview, necessarily a partial picture; there is much we don't know. Yet there is no escaping the need to name and confront the challenges before us – both the open education-specific challenges and the wider social and political ones; the overt and the covert (the “water we swim in”).

We believe that understanding this shifting terrain is essential, that as educators, we must pay attention to this range of issues and map out the complex tensions and contradictions and what they mean for open education. We think that *naming* and *analysing* these issues is essential in moving toward better futures. There is valuable work happening in other parts of the open system, yet these analyses rarely mention open education, even where they are relevant. We also think we need to do more analysis within the open education community itself, work that requires us all. Always mindful of the underfunding and overworking that characterises open

education, we ask how it can be possible to undertake this work, and pose the following questions:

- How can we develop a process to map the issues in the open education movement during this period which we consider to be a turning point?
- How can we come to understand the ways that wider global crises –inequality, human rights, climate, conflict, and polarisation– emerge in and impact open education?
- We all recognise the need for deep research by and across the sector. How can cross-sectoral research agendas and projects be developed and continued, underpinned by equity concerns?
- We believe, as we elaborate later, that we need more collaboration in open education. Arguably, the mapping exercise and research we are proposing is best done as a joint effort. So we ask: how can we as a broader open community make the necessary projects happen, and urgently?

## Challenge assumptions and resist hegemonies

*“There’s really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” (Arundhati Roy, 2004)*

After naming and analysing problems, actively challenging and resisting that which is untrue and/or unjust is essential in any movement for social change -- which is where open education is arguably positioned. We concur with others who observe the power of resistance through both organised resistance as well as the resistance practices of daily life, as Angela Davis (2022) argued so eloquently when describing activism for civil rights and antiracism.

Resistance always takes courage, whether that resistance is directed outward or inward.

By definition, open education practices and processes challenge many of the dominant discourses of individualism, neoliberalism, and big tech. This may take the form of pushing back against dominant Silicon Valley narratives of education; challenging platformisation across education; challenging academic metrics systems; refusing, when possible, to use proprietary platforms and extractive tools; and resisting knowledge and cultural hegemonies.

Within the wider open education community (and in specific open education contexts) also we must be prepared to challenge assumptions about our own power relationships. We may be rightly proud of the fact that an underlying premise of our work is generosity. But generosity can imply unequal power relationships between

giver and receiver, and therefore risks being patronising. Core values of redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice must continually be emphasised and applied in our work in order to enable participation and flourishing for all.

Within open education, a commitment to social and epistemic justice is vital. For us, this raises the following questions:

- How can we take the opportunities, wherever possible, not only to advocate for the positive aspects of openness, but also to effectively challenge and resist dominant and harmful discourses, models, tools and practices?
- In what ways can we in open education resist dominant extractive systems, recognising the differences between educators with permanent jobs and salaries, wherever they are, contributing, and expecting volunteering from the precariat.
- How can we resist the extractive free labour built into dominant models? How can we better build requisite critical digital and data literacies to know the difference between choosing to contribute openly online and being exploited when using online platforms, particularly AI-based systems?
- How can we in the open education community consistently pay attention to our own terms of engagement? How can we ensure that governance arrangements include maximum inclusion and recognise the full array of assets which will strengthen our community?

## **Make claims for just, humane, and globally sustainable open education**

*“And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us ... We seek harm to none and harmony for all.” Amanda Gorman (2021)*

Making legitimate and explicit claims to better futures is necessary, both to fuel resistance to dominant narratives and to inspire the production of new visions. Individually and collectively, we must make claims for open education that recognise, value, and serve all, particularly marginalised individuals and communities, and all those hurt by increasingly iniquitous systems and structures.

We believe that open education should operate in and contribute to ethical, non-discriminatory, and non-exploitative technology systems where human rights are both preserved and extended to empower people and countries, and governance is guided by equity and care for all (e.g. Mozilla, 2023; RIA, 2023). This means

actively seeking, where possible, open platforms underpinned by ethical principles, difficult as this may be.

We also argue that the open education community has a particular responsibility to contribute in whatever way possible to address climate injustice, recognising that those who are least responsible for climate change suffer its gravest consequences. We argue, as does our fellow keynote speaker, Rajiv Jhangiani, that open education extends beyond access to social justice, or “participatory parity” as defined by Nancy Fraser (2005). Principles of social justice include human rights, equity, access, participation and the common good. And of course, open education’s values align with algorithmic justice, the application of the principles of social justice to the design and use of algorithmic systems so that they do not encode and exacerbate inequality and discrimination.

It is inspiring to see how many sessions here in the OER24 programme (2024) describe work arising from claims to just, humane, and globally sustainable open education. Our review of the programme shows several sessions on open education and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI); as well as sessions on social justice, antiracism efforts, and queer/trans/non-conforming initiatives. There are also sessions on OER and teaching vulnerable students; data ethics and data justice approaches for OER; AI, openness and feminism; and EDI and decolonisation in OEP. These critical approaches make imperative claims – countering dominant narratives and offering alternative visions of education in practice.

We thus present the following questions, to consider here together as an open education community:

- Is it viable for open educators to commit to using open digital infrastructure? How can this be realistically done within the closed systems where most educators teach?
- How can open educators work to change the dominant values and models of AI? Should open educators consciously look for better images of AI, use and contribute to open source LLMs?
- Do open educators have a particular responsibility to ensure not simply data protection but data justice, not just individual protection and privacy as per the law in some places, but need for data also to be regulated in the collective interest or for the common good?
- What is the role of open educators in raising the ecological issues of open-related work, given the open education value set?

## Courageously imagine and share fresh possibilities for open education

*“Only by shifting our imagination, can we begin to think of a world that is more egalitarian, less extractive, and more habitable for everyone and not just a small elite.” (Ruha Benjamin, 2019)*

We have noted already that resistance takes courage. So too does imagining and sharing new visions and possibilities, especially within dominant, oppressive systems and when educators are under so much pressure. Finding the space, will and support to be imaginative can be hard. Yet there are many small and large ways to imagine and share fresh possibilities – to think, collaborate and communicate in different ways, to cross borders of discipline, sector, geography, and more.

One approach is to use speculative approaches, in essence asking “what if” instead of “what is”. Speculative approaches, including the use of speculative fiction (Macgilchrist & Costello, 2023), can enable creative and even hopeful imagining and re-imagining (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2022). Generating and sharing ideas using alternative genres can also be a powerful way of inviting others to see anew. This could include the use of storytelling (Facer, 2019), dialogue (Scott & Gray, 2023), poetry (Auerbach, 2023), and artwork. As Davis et al. (2022) remind us, change rarely happens without the involvement of artists.

Another way of ensuring imaginative possibilities is to create opportunities for different generations to work together, blending diverse motivations, skills, experiences, and outlooks, but sharing a sense of urgency and purpose. The climate justice movement, peace movement, and various human rights movements globally provide potent examples of this. We are encumbered in particular ways in higher education from forging cross generational alliances, because of power hierarchies, but this is open to change.

- What methods are we in the open education community using to communicate and inspire change? How might we use more imaginative, alternative, border-crossing approaches?
- What is the age profile of people working in open education? Is there a new generation? How do they see the future? How can we encourage, develop and support a new generation of open educators and open policy makers?
- How can we create spaces, freedom and support for imagining alternatives?

## Make positive changes, here and now

*“It is in the many acts, small and large, acting in constellations and collectivities, over time and place that bear results.” Farhana Sultana (2022)*

Change is possible, and now is the time. Challenges are to be expected not only in terms of opposition but also in terms of collaboration. All effective social movements and communities for change contend with a plurality of voices, shifting coalitions, and conflict, even when there may be agreement on an overall goal. You might think of tensions evident in current debates about open education, as in wider debates about addressing global inequality, climate change, surveillance capitalism, rising authoritarianism, and more.

Some individuals may opt to work for incremental practical change, some for policy change, some for legal change, some for setting research agendas, some in classrooms, some on committees. Some may abhor the alliances that others actively support. Some see their work as deeply personal while others do not. There are opportunities for working towards just, humane and globally sustainable open education globally, locally, and intergenerationally. All approaches are needed, and all are needed right now.

The challenges faced by open education are shared by many others. Open educators can join and/or support campaigns and collectives making claims for just, humane and globally sustainable open education and act now through existing [intersecting initiatives](#).

- How do we create space and time for collective work and building power?
- Which initiatives can we as a community join and contribute to, within our existing constraints?
- How can openness in education at this moment be rearticulated? How can governance and structural forms be reconsidered?
- Finally, what changes can we make (or commit to) right now, as a group of conference participants, with minimal resources?

## Conclusion: Call to Action

We who imagine open education that is just and emancipatory are many and diverse. In the face of myriad complex challenges, it is understandable to feel discouraged and even despair. But other movements for social change, historical and current, remind us that a single action may not feel like much, but collectively and in coalition they add up and can affect long-term and structural change.

We conclude with a call to action recently expressed by Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, current Chair of the Elders, and longstanding advocate for gender equality, peacebuilding, climate justice and human rights:

*Our best future can still lie ahead of us, but it is up to everyone to get us there. (Mary Robinson)*

Our open education community is in a unique position to address the challenges we all face. This community has a longstanding engagement with both the imperative and complexities of equity and social justice approaches in education. This community has a record of research and action on many of the issues requiring attention in this moment: open infrastructures, critical approaches, digital and data literacies, working across global networks, and more.

This moment –a crossroads– requires all parts of the open education movement to work together: in communities, diverse partnerships, and coalitions. It is encouraging that formal and informal networks are already forming. These networks need to grow, and to extend beyond the Global North. Our final question in this keynote is **how can we genuinely grow a global alliance of open education networks** – one that could address the kinds of questions we have raised here, and many more.

The challenges we face are much bigger and scarier than the differences between us. Surely we can commit to what Cynthia Cockburn (1998) calls “careful and caring struggle in a well-lit space”. It is not easy, and it will be imperfect. It requires courage and trust. It may not be the “open education future” we had originally imagined. But it will be the future *we* make, all of us here, together with others with shared visions and values.

Our best future can still lie ahead of us. It is up to every one of us to get us there.

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