

Open Learning Design in Context: Expanding the Continuum

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Abstract

With the growing interest and focus on open educational practices to support open educational resources, the opportunity for analyzing open learning design has prevailed. In this conceptual design paper, we consider how instructional course design project participants balance the ethical tensions that are encountered through individual open learning beliefs and values, pedagogy, process, and products. These underlying tensions influence the design decisions which we hope to describe as a continuum of openness. This paper explores the multifaceted designs which could afford more open, equitable, accessible, and responsive learning environments for all learners.

Keywords: open education, open educational practice, open educational resources, OER, open learning design



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Introduction

As open-learning designers, we strive to integrate open educational practices (OEP) in all projects that we are invited to collaborate on. OEP have been broadly defined and include multiple elements of teaching and learning, such as participatory and critical pedagogies, the use of open licensing and open technologies, the development and adoption of open educational resources (OER), and collaboration with and recognition of multiple voices and perspectives (Tietjen & Asino, 2021). The responsive, contextual, and personalized nature of each person's open learning awareness and readiness makes open learning design a complex challenge in any learning environment. As Cronin (2018) highlighted, "Openness is not a one-time decision, and it is not universally experienced; it is always complex, personal, contextual, and continually negotiated" (p. 291). This points to a need to create a supported ethical journey to openness for learning design professionals, instructors, and learners, and in the design and learning process, providing choices around when open approaches might be appropriate, how and when to openly share resources and practices, and guidance and resources about privacy, risk, and the increasing role that technologies play in surveillance and digital monitoring.

Though there is not one overall definition of learning design, one way that it can be understood is as an explicit framework for describing a range of teaching and learning activities with a goal of improving student learning. Learning designs (as products) allow educators to represent, re-use, share, and discuss their understandings of the tasks, tools, and intended pedagogical outcomes of a planned learning experience. Rather than describing one open-learning design precedent (Gray, 2020), this article examines how we might start to build a learning design framework that can help guide educators on an ethical journey to include more open approaches. Our overall question is: How can we scaffold design decisions that are tied to personal contexts, but that include design principles that could lead to more open, equitable, accessible, and responsive learning environments for all learners?

We have been examining a variety of cases to look for emerging features that support OEP and have developed a conceptual model that includes three key elements (themes) that we feel underpin open learning designs. Our early ideas are captured in the [Open Learning Design Continuum](#) (OLDC; see Figure 1), an ever-changing and evolving collaborative learning design model that examines the potential principles of open learning design in multiple higher education contexts. In a comparison of case studies of open curriculum designs at two Canadian higher education institutions, we continue to examine ways that educators and learners have experienced a variety of approaches to open learning design, including the blurring of informal/formal spaces and the uses of open educational resources (OER) and open platforms to create more student-centered, equitable, and accessible learning spaces.

Emphasis on Responsive and Open Community Learning Design

Though there is not one definition of learning design, overall it can be understood as an explicit framework for describing a range of teaching and learning activities with a goal of improving student learning. Learning designs allow educators to represent, re-use, share, and discuss their understandings of the tasks, tools, and intended pedagogical outcomes of a planned learning experience. Dalziel et al. (2016) identified that a learning design should include guidance about activities/tasks/tools, be represented visually (include a design document), and be explicitly shareable. As for how openness can permeate the development of learning

designs, Paskevicius (2017) outlined ways that openness can be used: the development of learning outcomes with students or the inclusion of OERs. Roberts et al., (2022) described open learning design as something that “arises in the interaction between the mindset of an open educator, a person who understands and employs open educational practices, and the process of designing learning (experiences, tasks, or resources)” (p. 8). Describing what open learning designs look like in practice is a goal for the development of the OLDC model.

What distinguishes open learning design from other design frameworks is the emphasis on learning through and with community. Scardamalia and Bereiter’s (2014) principles of knowledge-building helped expand upon community knowledge-building by focusing on the contextualized elements of design that are negotiated within each team member’s design contributions. Scardamalia and Bereiter (2014) also integrated principles that help to describe: (a) the connections between social interactions, (b) connections and access to resources (content and people), (c) participatory and collaborative learning opportunities, and (d) an emphasis on considering multiple perspectives.

The OLDC Model—Ethical Considerations

When considering the possibilities for defining open learning design, there are many potential characteristics and considerations, which are always contextual and need to balance a variety of perspectives including privacy, values, epistemic agency, and pedagogy. This leads to ethical tensions in our work, as decisions around how openness is enacted in the teaching and learning space is not neutral. When we introduce open approaches, be it introducing an OER or an element of open pedagogy, or implementing open collaborative teamwork or open digital tools, we know they can also introduce barriers or challenges. This article highlights an attempt to examine the characteristics and themes that distinguish an ethical open learning design from other instructional design templates.

At the outset of any course development project, in our role as instructional designers, we are often faced with the ethical challenge of how to balance our beliefs and values as open educators with the realities of working in teams within larger systems. Specifically, one ethical challenge is how we negotiate our embodiment of openness (Adam, 2020) and how open learning design encourages us to reflect critically to go “beyond a design process of producing something that is open, to a reflexive process of being, manifesting and embodying openness as a mindset and a bodily state” (p. 181). How can instructional designers (as facilitators or project managers) balance the ethical considerations of a personal open educator identity?

In addition to our personal open educator experiences and beliefs, instructional designers are not usually the subject experts nor the instructors for a course, and are often “pedagogically inclined to become ‘observers’ of inequities, from the margins across our institutions ... and we find ourselves confronting ... the roles and perceptions of both learning design and open education in relation to accepted norms of campus-based teaching practices” (Roberts et al., 2022, para. 24). We encounter ethical tensions when our design strategies and pedagogical approaches are constrained by institutional guidelines which might not align with open, equitable, and sustainable practices that are part of our professional and educational values or identities. An example of some of the ethical tensions that arise in taking an open learning design approach can include: (a) institutional policies and procedures which limit or expand upon open learning design potential success, (b) cultural or historical contexts, and (c) project

team members' individual open readiness, open skillsets, and/or experiences. How these realities counterbalance our own personal open practice perspectives can cause time delays, influence platform choices, affect project final outputs, incentivize or frustrate team members, and initiate moments of reflection to ensure clear communication, commitment, and agreement.

Another example of an ethical tension is that one of the tenets of OER use is the reuse and sharing of resources. We recognize that as everyone engages with open practice in their own context, they may only be ready to adopt an OER, so at this stage of their own journey, the spirit of reciprocity and building of the knowledge commons may be missing. From a sustainability perspective, there is a requirement to constantly update materials, and the labour involved in adapting and creating OER can be substantial and is often supported through one-time grants or done "off the side of the desk." As we encourage teams to move towards a reciprocal relationship and deeper engagement with open approaches, how do we ensure they are supported and have the means to continue to build their open practice?

We need to consider a variety of contexts, platforms, mediums, perspectives, timing, flexibility, and approaches as we incorporate a continuum of open design decisions. We hope that by identifying the design principles that support open approaches we can create a shareable design model that can be used by teams to help support ethical decision-making about various elements of OEP.

The OLDC Model—Continuum

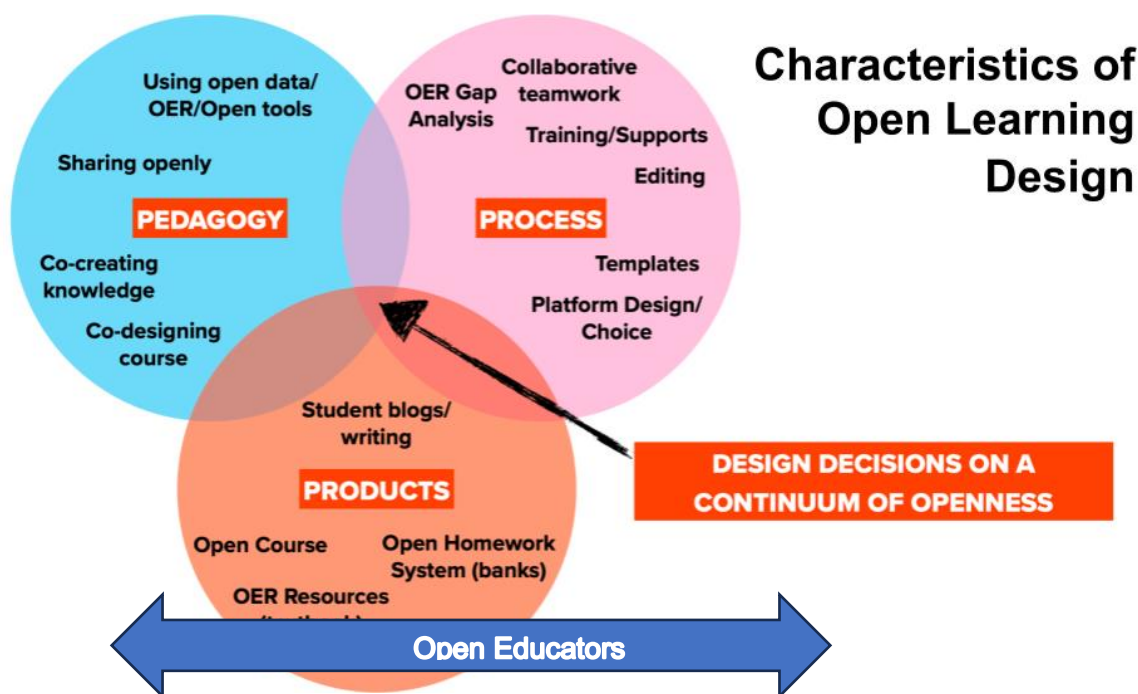
Based on experiences as learning designers working in open contexts and with support from the literature, our initial thoughts are that open learning design occurs on a continuum that includes the following elements of OEP (see also Figure 1):

- open educators (underlining the whole framework): the open experience, beliefs, values, and open readiness that the open learning design participants/collaborators bring to the project
- process: the process of working together collaboratively, reflexively, and openly on the design
- product: the final learning product(s) from the collaborative development process is shareable (could be a resource, a fully open course, or elements of courses, such as H5P files or WebWork questions)
- pedagogy: the intentional design includes some aspects of open pedagogy such as participatory technologies, people, openness and trust, innovation and creativity, sharing ideas and resources, connected community, learner-generated, reflective practice, and peer feedback (Hegarty, 2015; Tietjen & Asino, 2021)

We recognize that there are multiple continuums and mixtures of all four elements that designers and team members bring to each project. We hope to use that as a starting place to help frame design team discussions around practices and ways we work together.

Figure 1 demonstrates some characteristics that might be included in each element.

Figure 1
Characteristics of Open Learning Design



Note. From *Sharing the Many Ways to Design for Open Learning Through ZTC Pathway Courses*, by B. Smith, M. Harrison, and V. Roberts, October 17, 2022, Open Education Conference (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BLEHNRVKsA&t=1231s>). [CC BY 4.0](#).

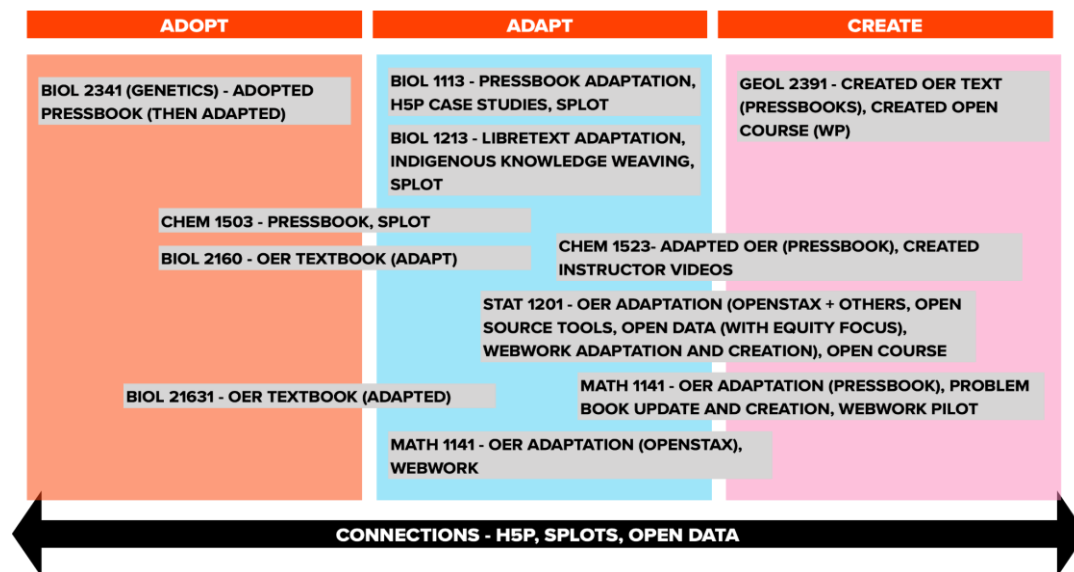
The OLDC was inspired by the variety of perspectives and approaches to open learning design that were revealed during the development of a Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC), Associate Science Degree program at Thompson Rivers University (TRU). Within each unique course project, the open learning design approach helped to identify the key intentional design choices (adopt, adapt, create and/or connect) made in collaboration by the design project teams when considering the use of open educational resources and/or practices. These initial ZTC project comparisons inspired the team to consider other open learning design examples that highlight students as co-creators and co-designers of open learning design projects in undergraduate programs at TRU and graduate courses at the University of Calgary.

The OLDC currently uses four intentional focus areas to help compare and contrast the multiple open-learning design approaches using OER and/or OEP.

- adopt an already-created OER
- adapt an already-created OER
- create an OER
- connect and expand upon OEP

These are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
A Continuum of Openness



Note. From *Sharing the Many Ways to Design for Open Learning Through ZTC Pathway Courses*, by B. Smith, M. Harrison, and V. Roberts, October 17, 2022, Open Education Conference (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BLEHNRVKsA&t=1231s>). [CC BY 4.0](#).

In our ZTC project, we saw a variety of ways that the OLDC was enacted. In Figure 2, we have mapped the many course development projects onto the continuum of openness, from adopt to create (with connections woven throughout each). One of the early courses (BIOL 2341) saw the team adopting an OER (pedagogical) using some open processes (shared templates, collaborative teamwork, an OER gap analysis) but did not have students or users creating or using open artifacts. However, on a subsequent course development project (BIOL 1113), the course author moved towards more open approaches, including adapting OER, adopting open pedagogical approaches (open student collaborations in SPLOTs, H5P case studies), and moving towards a more open collaborative process.

Where Do We Go Next?

The potential personalized and contextual design variations not only present unique opportunities for student-centred learning. They also provide ethical challenges in terms of equity, inclusiveness, and accessibility, and personal professional open educator identity. accountability. We look forward to examining the potential ethical strengths and challenges that open learning design affords instructional designers, educators and students.

Authors' Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the research and writing of this article.

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Ethics Statement

An ethics review was not applicable to this article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

As this is a conceptual article, data availability does not apply.

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