

Open Education 2030

Call for Vision Papers

School Education

Openness and Compulsory Rural Education 2030

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Try not to be so gloomy, once openness moves beyond the academy we will see the development of a more just society.

Introduction

Back in 2013 when I wrote a vision of Openness and Compulsory Rural Education in 2030 I never thought that I would ever look at it again. Here I am 30 years later, ruefully thinking about my own vision, and looking back to 2030. In this short paper I try to uncover why I was so wrong, looking at the things that influenced my own thoughts, but also looking at those things that I missed. In 2013 I was asked to a workshop in Seville Spain to talk about what was then an emerging area called Open Educational Resources, or Open Educational Practices, a term that has largely now fallen out of use. What we now regard as being “the norm”, that publicly funded content should be freely available, was somewhat of a novelty then. More of that later. First let me tell you a little about myself and why now, all those years later, I have returned to look at the out of date paper I sent into the School Education strand. I have returned to it because I am moving. At the age of 30 in 2003 I returned the West Highlands of Scotland to raise a family, I was 40 in 2013 with young children the same local primary I had attended, and now I am 60, and I am moving to the city. I work as an academic, and have a horticulture business, like all local food business we do very well, but I have 15 years of working life left, my bones ache, and I am looking for a new challenge. Therefore my partner and I have decided to leave our family home and have one last go at “city life”. Those ages with zero at the end make you think. My oldest son is 30, he is a systems developer working control and monitoring systems in low energy food production, with a wife and my first grandchild on the way. He is taking our home. Hence the review, dusting of old files, old ideas.

So what did I think that 2030 would look like back in 2013, well when I look at it now I think I was less influenced by thoughts about openness and more influenced by a Scottish Government review of Rural Education that came on the week I was writing. It was a long awaited review, as rural schools were increasingly under threat of closure, many thought this would provide some sort of guidance. It did not. However, it was my sense then that this lack would lead to inertia until the 2014 vote and 2015 elections, then school closure. I was pessimistic, openness would be a component, but just as a means for middle class well educated parents to supplement the reducing education provision in rural areas, while most pupils gazed onto screen, plugged into interactive content and doing online assessments. I was wrong in all sorts of ways.

OPEN EDUCATION 2030. JRC-IPTS CALL FOR VISION PAPERS. PART II: SCHOOL EDUCATION
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The second big influence was a systematic review of rural education provision that I had produced for the Open University in Scotland in 2011, at the time I was updating the review and thinking about submitting it as a journal article. The central argument behind the review was that there were two types of education in rural areas *rural* education, and rural *education*, with the former tending to be post school, centred on land based industries, and targeted at young men who did not get on well in school. The latter, focussed on “academic” subjects and the “brighter” pupils, it was about getting them into College/University, and rurality was not context, but simply a problem to be overcome. My assessment in 2013 was that little would change. We would still have an education system that favoured a particular type of learner and a particular type of learning. I suppose I was jaded, Education Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence had promised a more open and integrated approach to education, where grammar was assessed through History, or syntax through C++ coding, but it was not happening. Perhaps it was because they were attending the same school as I had, but somehow the liberal 1970's had provided me with a more open experience, seemed to have been replaced by managerialism.

The third big influence was an international conference I had attended in 2005 in rural Virginia. At the time my move “back home” had meant leaving behind Higher Education, as in those days people were expected to live close to their employer, and I was a youth worker, but still writing. I ended up in the education stream of the conference and during a group discussion we were asked how many of us had been told in school that if we did not work hard we would be stuck in this place for the rest of our lives, most had. When asked if anyone still lived or had returned to said place only two of us put our hands up. It seemed to me then that the purpose of rural schools was to facilitate rural depopulation, and I am not sure that thought has ever left me. In 2013 the open landscape was dominated by prestigious HE providers, my own work into social inclusion, technology and rurality had found that rather than technology allowing rural residents to access new opportunities, it actually meant that larger centrally based providers had greater access to rural markets. If the same pattern followed in open educational practices, then we would see content dominated by major providers in school, and (as noted above) middle class parents supplementing schools offer with content developed by prestigious providers. Content that did not really account for the needs of rural communities. Openness would simply accelerate the pace that young people were sucked out of rural areas.

I look back and I think how gloomy I was, perhaps it was the economic problems, the neo-liberal Government in London, the thought that Scotland might not vote YES, the global ecological crisis. I do not know. However, it's the bits I missed that surprise me now. First of all I missed the fact that I had returned, and I did not notice that lots of others had to. I did not notice that one of the main problems with our own small rural school was that it was crammed with pupils. Strangely the policy inertia of 2013 lingered on, school closure was politically too hot to handle, the Head Teacher needed our help. She could not keep the doors closed any longer, the school would burst, so she opened up the school to parents, to flexible content and flexible study hours. Another thing I missed, was the messages that were coming from chance meetings with people who shared similar interests in rural education. For example, a chance meeting at a conference with someone from what was then called Scotland's Rural Universities and Colleges (SRUC), SRUC had just been created, and it was in a state of “becoming”. A follow up pint in the local pub led us to talk about what rural skills meant, that the skills required by school leavers who want to remain in rural areas, it was not just about fencing, fish farming and forestry, but about enterprise, innovation, technology, and all the other things that people needed. As this was one of my favourite “couple of pints” topics I did not recognise the growing consensus that rural education was broken, and did not think it significant.

Increasing fuel prices and a more general awareness of energy and the environment also had a profound effect. First of all locally produced food became competitive, demand grew and people who had land started to produce food. Secondly, biomass heating meant the forestry market took off, the big threat was that it would be all for export, but actually through the Scottish Governments “Right to Buy” local communities started to purchase environmental assets. For example, we purchased the local woodlands, gave local people the confidence to set up business's, from furniture to wood fuel – it rebuilt the rural economy and rural hopes. The third thing that happened was that communities invested in local assets. For example, we bought a river and built a hydro scheme. With that money we invested in further renewables developments and started to build up a large community fund. It is also worth remembering (and reflecting on) just how novel that community owned land, community owned renewables was back then. Its obvious now, but back then the link between openness and community ownership was not clear. Let me spell out that thinking. These community enterprises needed to be open and transparent, a few of us across Scotland got together and based on open licensing created an open and accessible portal for communities, with open data, for example in energy production, to openly accessible business plans, and learning resources.

Suddenly, rural schools were being forced to open up, rural communities had confidence, resources, and young people had a reason to stay. The EcoSchools and Forest Schools movement provided us with a framework to take learning out of the classroom. That was great as it increased environmental awareness and helped to include a wide range of pupils by integrating educational content with practice. However, the type of education content we were now looking at required access to a broad range of resources, from education about GIS mapping, to coding of remote sensors, from fencing and ditching, to energy distribution and accounting. Renewables provided funding that helped with that capacity, but I now realise open licensing was crucial to making it work. Firstly open data was important, people (parents) could take open and accessible data from their work into the classroom and work with teacher and pupils to look at real world problems. That was great, but if I am honest I was nervous, I was not sure I had the depth of knowledge and understanding to become this new kind of parent -teacher hybrid. Oddly, we worried about capacity and how we would access content to support these new learning experiences. Looking back, parents (and grand parents) went into Schools in 2013. My own father went in to talk about local Gaelic traditions, as a language and a tradition bearer. What I missed in 2013 was that community ownership and open licensing started to change the way people thought about knowledge and practice. For example, after he retired from work my father started experimenting with social media, he was uploading all sorts of material online, stories song, video, audio, all openly licensed. It was part of a Gaelic revival, informal learning resources started to accrue, then we started using these in classrooms. I suppose I missed it because at that time it was still small online communities, I did not realise, parental involvement in schools would lead to the production of educational content moving beyond the academy, open licensing would make this content freely available.

Futurists are liable to end up red faced, as I have. At least it has turned out a lot more positively than I expected. Why did I miss all those things, perhaps it was because the emerging sense of openness was still largely seen as HE led, we had not really thought about what would happen if everyone started to practice openness, opening up schools, data, new opportunities. Well that is my excuse. I suppose you also might want to ask why I am heading to the city. Well property is very affordable in our cities, and I suppose I felt like it was time I moved aside and let another rural generation have a go. Plus, the challenge, our cities have been neglected for too long, I hope they might benefit from some rural expertise.