

## An Exploration of the Essence of Open Education

CHEN Jinying<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Doctoral student, Center for Foreign Literature and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

A platform to help the public climb up the social ladder, open education promotes education equality, providing every member of society with the opportunity to receive higher education and serving for people's lifelong learning and development. In practice, people with different educational backgrounds are admitted to this education system, which appears to be seemingly unpersuasive. Despite a history of 40 years, the Open University of China does not seem to be widely recognized by the society. Therefore, it is necessary explore the essence of open education from its very beginning. This paper reviews the evolution of open education and explores its essence, definition and academic debates with the aim to reach the core of open education.

**Key words:** Exploration; Open education; Essence

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Open education is namely an education program open to a wider group of participants. But it is hard to define open education as the word "open" carries a broad range of meanings and various educational practices have played their role in the learning and training of people.

Many scholars, though, have been exploring in different aspects. In earlier study, scholars tended to mix up the concepts of open education and open learning, but the exploration by some of them helps us to understand what open education truly means. For example, Mckenzie and some other scholars describe in their 1975 *Open Learning* that open learning is a term without certain connotations and denotations. It attracts a lot of admirers and enthusiasts with great potential. For its uncertainty, it can adapt to many different ideas and goals (Guo, 2000). Desmond Keegan even contends that open learning is not a term that would be used in administration. It is instead applied in theoretical and commentative domain. It can be conducted both online and face to face (Guo, 2000). Lewis's definition of open learning, widely recognized by the academic community, says that it is a student-centered activity that adopts a variety of teaching and learning methods to break different learning limits and barriers (Liu, 2000, p.47). These studies have in a way shown the openness and inclusiveness of open learning as well as its complexity in terms of the educational services intended for learners to reach its goal. Further knowledge of the history of its philosophy is still required for an in-depth exploration of open education.

### 2. EVOLUTION OF OPEN EDUCATION

#### 2.1 Naturalism

The idea of open education features a long history in its development. Ancient sages from both east and west such as Confucius, Aristotle and Socrates included in their educational philosophies what is now recognized as constitutes of open education. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, naturalism, put forward by Rousseau, a French philosopher active in the Enlightenment, is widely accepted as the origin of open education in modern history. In his *Emile, or On Education*, Rousseau explains

in detail his naturalistic educational philosophy and provides age-appropriate educational principles, content and methods for different age groups. Rousseau held that people's education comes from nature, things and human, a combination of which would be the only possible way to achieve preset educational goals.<sup>1</sup> He believed that education is to bring about the utmost development of people's endowed talents. In the book, actual cases are presented to prove that education abiding by the law of nature should be adopted at different stages of life. From this perspective, naturalistic education philosophy is one of the theoretical foundations for open education.

## 2.2 Liberalism

Open education, an innovation in education, has seen a long explorative period of practice before it was eventually established. From the 1920s to 1930s, Britain, America and other countries began their practice in open education in kindergartens and primary and middle educational institutions, among which there were Open Plan in the UK and Open Class in the US. The Summerhill School founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill, a British educator championing free self-development in the education of children, is taken as the first attempt to put the idea of open education into practice. Neill is well known for his saying, "Schools should be made to fit the child rather than the other way around."<sup>2</sup> For more than five decades, the Summerhill School has become the ideal place where Neill has put into practice his philosophy of open, liberal and naturalistic education, which is crowned the most human school of happiness. Rather than formulating rules and regulations to limit the development of students in some aspect for the convenience of school management, Summerhill is committed to exploring how they can promote the full development of children's talents and interests. This kind of liberalistic philosophy of education lays the theoretical foundation for Neill's practice in open education, and contributed to the prominence and popularity of the school.

## 2.3 Lifelong Education

Scientific and technological revolution played a pivotal role in World War II. The destruction brought by the war prompted governments around the world to shift their focus to the advance of economy and education in the peaceful post-war era. Lifelong education, therefore, was about to emerge, with democracy, equality and openness driving educational reform and development. According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* approved in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly, "Everyone has the right to education." In 1965, Paul Langrand, French adult education expert, expressed

his idea that education should be made to run through a person's lifetime and connect every aspect of personal and social life so that it could provide necessary knowledge and skills in the best way whenever needed (Zhang, 1980, p.94). Since then, lifelong education has become a new path to adult education reform and a new driving force in individual and social development, and the dramatic advancement of modern information technology has technically underpinned open education. In 1969, the first open university was established in the UK, which is billed as a pioneering program in the history of higher education for its breakthrough in time and space limits that enables a larger group of targeted participants to get involved. On a global scale, in effect, it has pushed open higher education forward.

Among the Chinese scholars who have affirmed the prominent role of open education in the establishment of lifelong education and a learning society are Ge Daokai (2007), Yan Bing (2010), Yang Zhijian (2011), Ye Zhaoxiang (2010), Sun Mingyan (2011), Li Hanjie (2005), You Xuan (2011), Zheng Jianghong (2013), and Zhang Yunxia (2011). Learners-centered, open education has been serving for the lifelong development of individuals with its open, flexible and diverse approaches. It paves the way for lifelong education across the board.

## 2.4 Inclusive Education

Lord Crowther, first Chancellor of the Open University in the UK, emphasized in his inaugural address that as an open university, they were open first as to people, all men and women. This is where the philosophy of inclusive education is embodied. He affirmed, "No formal academic qualifications would be required for registration as a student." When he tried to dig out the reasons for academic failures, he found that "men and women drop out through failures in the system, through disadvantages of their environment, through mistakes of their own judgement, through sheer bad luck." So, he continued, "To them we offer a further opportunity." (Crowther, 1969) And he went further to describe his vision, "We also aim wider and higher. Wherever there is an unprovided need for higher education, supplementing the existing provision, there is our constituency. There are no limits on persons." It is this kind of openness to people from all walks of life, especially to those employed, that comes as the most fundamentally important philosophy of the establishment of an open university. In Summerhill's wider and higher vision, comparable to other higher educational philosophies, quality higher education was also promised to achieve inclusive education aside from its openness to a wider group of learners. Different from the strict admissions and physical examinations that have denied thousands, the Open University has removed all the restrictions of access to further educational pursuit and created an all-inclusive environment for professors and students. As such, it has contributed to the establishment

<sup>1</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Jacques\\_Rousseau#Education\\_and\\_child\\_rearing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Jacques_Rousseau#Education_and_child_rearing), accessed.2018-8-10.

<sup>2</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summerhill\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summerhill_School), accessed.2018-8-10.

of a learning and developing society.

A thorough look at how the philosophies of open education evolved enables us to figure out the fact that it is, in essence, to serve for the lifelong development of individual learners, with a mission to dismantle all barriers to the fullest, most individualized development of every participant. Undertaking a more than easy task to understand what open education truly means with various contributing elements to it, scholars are still on their way to the unknown.

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### 3. EXPLORATION OF CONCEPT OF OPEN EDUCATION

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Open education around the world is most featured in pre-school education and adult education. The main concepts and interpretations from scholars are summarized as below.

#### 3.1 Student-Centered Learning

American educator G. S. Morrison believes that open education is an attitude, a form of freedom, a student-centered kind of education.<sup>3</sup> R. C. King also argues that open education is a combination of student centers, teacher centers and teaching centers, in which learning goals, materials and activities are decided by teachers and students collectively (Liu, 2016). Huang Shimeng, associate professor in Taiwan University, is a champion of the idea that open education should be student-centered with teachers providing assistance when needed. In student-centered learning theory, which encourages humanistic, natural and liberal development, teaching and learning activities are organized in consideration of the talents and needs of individual students. Students are offered more opportunities to make their own choices on their journey to lifelong self-development.

#### 3.2 Natural, Liberal and Independent Development

G. S. Morrison holds that open education encourages active involvement in learning activities and allows independent choices in learning content. As far as he's concerned, educational institutions for this kind of education should allow freedom for self-reliant options and growth. Naturalist educator A. S. Neill put naturalism into practice in his open education project, the Summerhill School, where students have been allowed to develop in a natural, liberal and independent way. Shi Ying, humanistic educator from Taiwan, tries to conclude that in a word, open education is where human intervention subsides. The less human intervention is, the opener education will be. It is true that open education, a breakdown of the conventional pattern, will allow students to give full play to their potential to achieve next-level development. In

reality, Shi Ying applies the philosophy of open education to her practice in one of Taiwan's forest primary schools where students are immersed in holistic learning. For its prominent divergence from traditional education, this humanistic education philosophy was denied at the very beginning before it finally became popular amid the other educational reform projects. Deng Yunlin, an expert in open education from Taiwan, believes that the essence of open education lies in the idea that students are provided the opportunity to make their own decision and undertake the results of the decision they make, which is closely related to the independence of personality.

A consensus drawn from the above ideas is that more freedom is required for independent personality and humanistic development in the practice of open education.

#### 3.3 Individualized Education

Yukitsugu Kato, a Japanese professor of education, argues that open education, in effect, is a kind of individualized education in Japan, or a reformative school education aimed to prepare today's children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He interprets open education from the perspective of individual differences and individualized development, which shows the efforts by the Japanese society to enable every individual to achieve "tailor-made", utmost development in open education. Hirano Tomohisa, another Japanese expert in education, holds that open education is arguably a kind of education that goes beyond conventions, values students with spontaneity and supports them out of respect. These ideas have broken the traditional education pattern where teaching content are well designed and arranged by teachers, and instead provided support and help for students in response to individual differences and various needs.

#### 3.4 Lifelong Education and Social Education

Liang Shirong, previous educator in the Open University of Guangdong, believes that open education is aimed to provide social education and lifelong education (Liang, 1999, pp.8-11). Sun Fuwan, Director of Institute of Modern Distance Education, Open University of China, and Yuan Songhe, research associate from the same institute, both agree that the philosophy of open education is in conformity with those of holistic education and lifelong education (Sun, 2012, pp.1-7). Niu Shaonan, research intern in Xiamen City University, contends that open education is in compliance with professional ethics and the purpose of lifelong education; it helps individuals, families, organizations and communities in want of education to improve learning ability and obtain learning achievements, with professional knowledge, skills and methods as well as community efforts and scientific and technological achievements (Niu, 2013, 13). As society and science and technology advance, school education no longer suffices to satisfy everyday demand in work and life. Continuous learning, naturally, becomes the only

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3 See [//www.zhazhi.com/lunwen/jy/yyjy/18216.html](http://www.zhazhi.com/lunwen/jy/yyjy/18216.html).

way to stay relevant in a learning society, and lifelong education opens up the opportunity for day-to-day progress. With open education providing adults with equal opportunity to access education, though, true education equality requires the establishment of educational programs by schools in response to social demands. That's why open education has been part of the national education strategy adopted by schools that will contribute to familial harmony and social stability.

### 3.5 Distance Education

Liang Jiuyi believes that open education, a form of modern distance education, features modern information technology in teaching, a teaching mode of self-learning and guidance combined, shared resources between different campuses, inter-school academic credits recognition and transfer, and a duet of academic and non-academic education (Liang, 2018, pp.7-8). Distance education and open education are increasingly intertwined as the pervasiveness of information technology in today's teaching has made distance education institutions more accessible and open and meanwhile, information technology and even other distance education methods have been utilized in open education institutions.

The interweave of these two kinds of education can be detected from the naming of distance education institutions, such as correspondence university, correspondence division, extensive college, university of the air, open university, open learning institute, open learning agency, open learning center, tele university, virtual university and virtual campus.

The above naming reveals that open education and distance education are common in their target participants, openness and rising application of information technology. From the perspective of education mode, however, distance education, one of the ideal ways to access open education, technically underpins the practice of open education on a massive scale. Open education, on the other hand, undertakes a responsibility to achieve humanistic, natural, liberal, lifelong and social education. Simply put, distance education features wide-range openness, while open education is achievable through online learning apart from traditional face-to-face tutoring.

### 3.6 Four-Dimension Open Education

Lord Crowther, in his augural address, gave his interpretation to the essence of the Open University, that they are open as to people, places, methods and ideas.<sup>4</sup> World known and widely contentious, it is accepted as the first official interpretation of open education and followed as a basic principle by other open universities all around the world. It is evidenced by Sun Fuwan and Yuan Songhe in their *On Concepts of Education, University and Open*

*University* that the idea of openness to people, places, methods and ideas, the most comprehensive interpretation to the open education, is followed by open universities worldwide as a fundamental philosophy (Sun, 2012, pp.1-7). Yang Xiaotang and Zhang Manyin also illustrate in their joint effort, *40 Years of Distance Higher Education in China*, that the Open University in Britain, a pioneer in the application of radio and television technology in higher education, has set a great example for distance open education worldwide (Yang, 2019, p.36). The innovative idea of openness to people, places, methods and ideas of the Open University in Britain is widely acknowledged as a model of open universities in research results such as *Open Education Glossary* (Liu, 2019, p.30) by Liu Shu, *Open University: Educational Philosophy and Institutional Framework* (Chen, et al, 2015, p.12) by Chen Li, Wan Fangyi and other writers, and *The Rise and Evolution of Open Learning* by Sun Wanfu, Wei Shunping and Jia Yuchao. This philosophy of openness in four dimensions, a breakthrough from the traditional higher education institutions, has facilitated the openness of higher education in an unprecedented level. Despite the differences in accessible resources and dimensions of openness, the four-dimension openness is widely accepted in related practice in China and beyond.

Generally, open education theories have been explored and enriched accordingly in different countries and regions over the past five decades or so. By all these efforts, a multiple-dimension system of open education, with openness to people, places, methods and idea at the core, has finally taken shape amid the various, complicated educational practices.

## 4. ACADEMIC DEBATES ON OPEN EDUCATION

Different arguments arise among scholars in their exploration of the definition and meanings of open education. Some argue that open education represents an education mode for open universities (Quan, 2004, p.38). Among the others, however, Liu Shu contends that the organizations engaged in open education in China's higher education and continuing education include open universities (radio and television universities), online colleges and colleges of continuing education under the jurisdiction of higher education institutions, modern distance education public services, and higher education self-taught examination committees. As far as I'm concerned, open education functions as an education mode for more than just open universities. It also serves for other education institutions like the ones mentioned above.

Some scholars believe that open education is an informal way of learning. In my opinion, open education is both formal and informal in different aspects. With

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.col.org/SiteCollection Documents / Daniel\\_CROWTHER\\_Speech\\_1969.pdf](http://www.col.org/SiteCollection Documents / Daniel_CROWTHER_Speech_1969.pdf), 2019/9/12.

regards to academic education in education institutions involved in open education, it is officially accredited as a kind of formal education.

There are scholars who think open education is an educational activity that does not have admission thresholds, accessible to anyone in want of education. Quan De and Niu Shaonan, who oppose this idea, argue that it has neglected the fact that learning is a subcategory of education and that there are admission thresholds set for open education. In fact, requirement of age and academic performance are both included in admission for open education. First, a candidate must reach the age required by a specific education institution. For instance, the Open University of China accepts applicants aged 17 or above and Open College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China, 18 or above. Second, those with no academic performance requirement are limited to lower levels education, such as tertiary education in open education institutions. Undergraduate education and higher levels all set up standards for admissions, one of which is junior college degree.

In my opinion, these academic debates on the definition of open education on the basis of its practice concerning openness and teaching quality will be conducive to the refinement of its theoretical system.

In essence, open education serves for the lifelong development of every individual learner, enabling their fullest development that matches their own personalities and levels with all the barriers removed.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With a look at the multiple studies of open education, its meanings and characteristics can be summarized as below.

It serves for the lifelong development of every learner;

It enables their fullest development that matches their own personalities and levels;

It should follow the principle of education equality;

It should respect the natural, liberal and independent development of individuals;

It should include diversified and individualized education;

It should serve to improve the quality of human resources and the public in a society;

It works to enhance personal progress, familial harmony and social stability;

Its high-quality teaching staff, management teams and quality assurance system work together to enhance the establishment of a learning society.

In conclusion, open education provides open and diverse teaching activities for those who aim to enrich their knowledge and improve their professional skills and humanistic qualities, in which it respects the natural, liberal and independent development of individuals, sticks to the ideas of lifelong education, education equality and democracy, integrates quality social educational resources

and educational staff and applies highly efficient professional knowledge and methods.

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