



Scoping Open: A Skeptical Look

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The term “open” is used so vaguely and positively that it hides important ways that politics are done.

Who could be against “openness”?



TWO MAJOR THEMES, 1/2

- 1. Vague use of the term “open” obscures important ways that social and political power are exercised, especially online.**

This power is exercised by large public and private institutions, reinforcing the asymmetry of power between small groups and individuals on the one hand and those institutions on the other.



TWO MAJOR THEMES, 2/2

2. The unspecific and unfocused use of the term “open” often hides conflict among important pro-social values, e.g.:

- Open public health registries “vs.” the privacy of health information**
- Open geospatial data “vs.” questions about calibration of instruments, validity of data, and ownership of research results**
- Anonymity online “vs.” national security and civility**
- Learning analytics “vs.” the Federal Educational Records Privacy Act and students’ privacy – I will explore this example briefly.**



LEARNING ANALYTICS, 1/3

While used widely, they are rarely clearly defined.

Purportedly aim to open higher educational institutions, especially public universities, to provide accountability to stakeholders, e.g.:

- **students**
- **parents**
- **legislators**
- **regulators**
- **employers.**



LEARNING ANALYTICS, 2/3

The aim of learning analytics of all kinds, it is claimed, is to closely examine how students learn, what digital tools (educational and otherwise) they use, and how they behave online in order to enhance learning outcomes.

They also aim to help institutions to allocate resources, students to evaluate individual programs and schools, and government to evaluate those programs and schools.



LEARNING ANALYTICS, 3/3

Learning analytics as a body of techniques aim to aggregate, integrate, and analyze students' digital footprints for accounting and predictive purposes, e.g.:

- **Logins to and logouts from course management systems, library resources, financial aid, and student health services as well as social media and other Internet resources**
- **Clickstreams**
- **Text entries.**



SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

**How can goals such as increased
“transparency,” “openness,” “better
institutional resource allocation,” and
“enhanced learning outcomes” be bad?**



BRIEFLY, CONCERNS ARE . . .

- **Should students be made aware of their behavior so widely?**
- **Should their teachers know?**
- **Should the educational institution know?**
- **Should third parties such as employers, governmental actors, and IT vendors know?**
- **Should we collect these data at all?**

Aye, there's the rub . . .



WHAT SHOULD SCHOLARS DO?

Scholars must be part of the “loyal opposition,” exploring “dangerous thoughts” (Mannheim) about “openness” and “transparency” about learning analytics. We must be:

- skeptical about but sympathetic toward policy makers (public and private)**
- independent from governmental and corporate power**



CONCLUSION ABOUT PUBLIC POLICY QUESTIONS

Vague use of the term “open” hides the complexity of policy making, obscures how such conflicts are enduring dilemmas, enduring conundra, with no Archimedean Point:

- **“messes” (Schön, citing Russell Ackoff)**
- **“muddles” (Lindblom)**
- **“wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber).**