

Title

Openness and innovation in online higher education: A historical review of the two discourses

Abstract

This article tackles a critical question of “to what extent can online higher education (HE) be open and innovative at the same time?” To provide a more comprehensive answer to the question, the author takes up a notion of discourse and situates the analysis in a specific online HE setting: Athabasca University (AU). In this article, the author first unpacks how the openness and innovation discourses originally emerged in AU throughout its early years and how the original conceptualization of the two and their relationships have shifted in the more recent years. The results demonstrate that there has been an increasing level of discontinuity between the conceptualization of openness and innovation as independent principles and the operationalization of the two as competing principles in course design practices in AU. Being fully open to diverse student groups and being technologically innovative by integrating a state-of-the-art technology cannot be achieved in a single online course. In addition, being pedagogically innovative by increasing interactivity among students while maintaining the same level of flexibility provided by the independent study model seems very challenging. This article also discusses the institutional conditions that make teaching-oriented innovation more difficult to be achieved.

Keywords

Openness, innovation, online higher education, open university, critical discourse analysis, Foucault

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1. Opening remark: Problem and research context

A starting point of this article is the realisation that our current understanding of online higher education (HE) is restricted by the prevalence of a range of unsupported claims and that the nature of online HE is more complex than those claims would suggest. Over the past two decades, online education has earned a reputation for being open, with a fast-growing rate of uptake in the HE sector (Allen, & Seaman, 2016; Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). In this context, many online educators have concluded that online HE has reached a tipping point in terms of being open to diverse groups of disadvantaged learners (see Contact North, 2012). This article aims to challenge those claims about online HE that promote ideas of openness, and argue that the openness claims are more rhetorical than actual. As the present author's earlier works (Lee, 2017; 2019) demonstrate, there is insufficient evidence to support those claims. While the increasing number of HE institutions offering online courses has been celebrated as evidence of HE becoming more accessible, it is still unclear to what extent online HE has effectively served the underserved, beyond simply enabling them to enter the university in the first place (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Therefore, the general perception about online HE as being open—accessible to “anyone, anytime, anywhere”—will be subject to examination in this article.

Among various possible approaches to exploring the subject, this article chooses to examine, using a theoretical notion of discourse (Gee, 1996; Mills, 2004), the historical development of two popular claims—that online HE is open and that it is innovative—and the dynamic relationships between the two. Discourse refers to certain claims or assumptions that are shared and often taken-for-granted by people in a particular society. By producing and circulating a set of knowledge, rules, and regulations, dominant discourse influences and regulates people's thoughts and behaviours in that society (Foucault, 1972). There are always multiple discourses co-existing in any particular institution at any given historical moment, continuously competing against each other for disciplinary power upon people's practice (Mills, 2004). Therefore, it is possible to check the authenticity of a particular discourse by examining the relationships and the compatibility of two or more discourses in a specific institutional and historical context. By doing so, we can weaken the dominance and disciplinary power of those discourses in society.

This article examines two dominant discourses of online HE, namely openness discourse and innovation discourse, together by asking the simple but important question: “to what extent can online HE be open and innovative at the same time?”. It is particularly meaningful to ask such question, given that there are conflicting observations about the compatibility of openness and innovation in online HE. For example, Garrison and Kanuka (2008) envision online HE as both open and innovative as follows:

There is no longer an issue of having to choose between access and quality. It is now possible for students to learn collaboratively anytime, anywhere. The online communication and conferencing capabilities of computer mediated technologies are providing opportunities to revolutionize higher education. (Garrison & Kanuka, 2008, p. 18)

One the other hand, however, Kanuka and Brooks (2010) argue that three dimensions of effective online learning—flexible access, cost-effectiveness, and interactive learning—can not be achieved at once.

Inspired by Foucault's historical attempt to examine dominant social discourses and weaken their power (see Foucault, 1990; 1995), this article situates the examination in a specific online HE context: Athabasca University (AU) in Canada, in which openness and innovation have been two dominant institutional discourses throughout a long history. Since its establishment in 1970, AU has strived to serve the underserved, inventing a unique operational model and pedagogical approaches in response to the perceived needs of non-traditional students (Kennepohl, Ives, & Stewart, 2012). AU has also played a prominent role in establishing online HE provision across Canada and has led a series of innovative national initiatives in distance education (Davis, 2001). In recent years, however, AU's status as a leader in the sector has been called into question. A recent report (Coater, 2017), reviewing the current status of AU, suggests that AU needs to make significant changes in its operational and pedagogical models if the institution is even to be sustained. The report argues that AU needs to better serve the underserved (with a particular emphasis on new Canadians, Indigenous Peoples and students with disabilities) and that it lacks the innovative technological models and facilities to be a leading online HE provider. The report recommends AU make radical innovations in multiple aspects of its operation to continue working towards its long-held mission of "making HE open to all".

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss AU's operational problems and find solutions to them. Nevertheless, the strong presence of openness and innovation in the current difficulties faced by AU (and some other open universities; see Lee, 2019) and the recommendations made by the report (Coater, 2017) indicates that it is worthwhile to situate this examination in AU. In addition, both openness and innovation are context-dependent notions, which need to be conceptualised and understood within specific contexts of use (see Gaskell, 2010; Kalman, 2016; Weller, 2014). Thus, it is important to unpack how openness and innovation, as institutional discourses, are historically constructed at a particular institution rather than arbitrarily defining their meanings in a decontextualised manner. In that regard, AU is an appropriate historical site in which we can observe the development and operation of openness and innovation as dominant institutional discourses. Therefore, despite the contextual specificity of AU (Lee, 2018), investigating the question of "to what

extent can online HE be open and innovative at the same time?” in AU context may provide useful insights applicable across multiple online HE contexts including those other open universities around the world. Before discussing AU context further, the following section will offer a detailed description of the methodological strategies employed in the study.

2. Methodology: Discourse and text analysis

As mentioned in the previous section, this article utilises a theoretical notion of discourse (Foucault, 1972) and examines the “compatibility” of the openness discourse and the innovation discourse in a specific historical context of AU. It may be worthwhile to stress here that the main focus of this paper is not on reporting actual practices of AU members, but on showing how our current understanding of online HE is restricted by a small number of dominant discourses, which are often rhetorical than actual.

Discourse, however, can be only analysed indirectly—through analysing text, which is always produced and interpreted in a specific social context (i.e., “text in context” in van Dijk, 2009). That is, different forms of text, both written and spoken, serve as empirical data for research projects concerning social discourse. Therefore, in those analytic projects, discourse is often defined as a set of statements legitimatising certain ideas associated with a particular subject (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006). Analysts focus not only on the linguistic meanings that constitute certain statements in the chosen text, but also the social context within which the text was produced and circulated: that is, the historical conditions in which the discourses emerged and developed.

In this project, therefore, AU serves as a historical site where two discourses of openness and innovation emerged and where, for a long time, the two discourses have been verbalised and materialised in different kinds of texts including AU members’ conversations. Through collecting and analysing different sets of textual data (i.e., institutional documents and interview transcripts) from AU, this article explores both the historical development and the current status of the openness and innovation discourses of online HE. This analytic task was performed through two separate, but interlinked, phases of data collection and analysis, which included i) reviewing institutional documents and ii) interviewing AU members.

2.1. Reviewing institutional documents

In this phase, a large number of institutional documents published by AU from 1977 to 2015 was collected. Those documents include Annual Reports, Comprehensive Institutional Plans, Business Plans, Strategic University Plans, University Research Plan, Information Technology Systems Operation Plan, Undergraduate and Graduate Calendar, Policies and Procedures and issues of *Open* magazine. Most documents published from 2002 onwards were accessible via the current university

website. Those documents published earlier than 2002 were collected during my initial site visit in 2013. All strategic documents published from 1977 onwards are archived at the library on the main campus in Athabasca. A total number of 81 documents were collected and this large data set consisted of more than 500 pages.

I next conducted an initial reading of those documents, to familiarise myself with the historical background and the current status of AU. After the initial reading, it became clear that the university's mission statement itself seems to constitute the prevailing discourses in AU: both openness and innovation are listed as institutional principles in the mission statement. All documents, including those published for the public (i.e., in *Open* magazine) strongly promoted those two principles, often with reference to the mission statement. I then conducted a more systematic analysis through coding each document, individually, based around the two notions of openness and innovation.

Firstly, the historical development of the two discourses as to be central operational principles at AU was traced by repeatedly reading those textual data. The coding was done, following the guidelines suggested by Strauss and Corbin (2015) that suggest three steps of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Different parts of the textual data, mentioning and discussing either openness or innovation were highlighted and broken down as a series of meaning units of analysis (i.e., sentences, paragraphs) and those units were carefully coded. The initial codes were identified and named by highlighting meaningful phrases on the printed documents and making notes of potential categories emerging from the highlighted parts on the margins of the documents.

The second round of reading was undertaken to develop the open coding results further and find relevant links and relationships among codes. The codes were more carefully examined and compared with/against each other, and further conceptualised as independent categories. The connections between those categories were thought through focusing on the relationships between openness and innovation and initial categories were thematically grouped and chronologically organised by selecting common ideas emerged across the collected documents. This coding exercise was assisted by using Microsoft Excel.

The final round of reading was undertaken by moving back and forth between the original textual data and the excel sheets. Subsequently, the four themes, presented in the present paper, were drawn and selected from the categories. The author wrote a draft of this article and invited two of her colleagues to act as "critical friends", whose role was to read and provide comprehensive feedback on the claims made by the author, thereby enhancing the "trustworthiness" of the research outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, the final claims were compared with and against other existing claims in the relevant literature to ensure both its trustworthiness and its contribution to the current body of knowledge about online HE.

2.2. Interviewing AU members

In this second phase, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven learning designers working at AU. Interviewees were selected to participate in the study as a consequence of using a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling strategies. I firstly contacted a faculty member that I already knew. He introduced me to a director of *the Centre for Learning Design and Development*, which had eight learning designers as members at the point in 2014 when I conducted the interviews. The director helped me send an email invitation to seven of the learning designers (excluding one who was on sabbatical leave at that time), and all accepted the invitation to participate. I recorded and transcribed the interviews to produce another set of text data.

Among different groups working at AU, I intentionally selected a group of learning designers as subjects of this particular research. Learning designers are perceived as an important group in open universities because they are positioned between instructors and students in online HE (or, distance education) contexts where teaching and learning are largely mediated by course design practices. An important role of learning designers in online HE is to design and develop online courses—often collaboratively with instructors and web-developers. Learning designers are expected to support the course development process to make online courses more open and innovative. Thus, investigating their perceptions on achieving the two principles of openness and innovation at once within their own professional practice can be useful to construct a better understanding of the relationships between the two discourses.

Learning designers are actually perceived as important professionals in AU, which introduces the group on its website as below:

Learning Designers offer professional expertise in all aspects of learning and teaching, project management and educational development. Some are involved in innovative research and development projects, often in collaboration with AU faculty.

All learning designers at AU hold a graduate degree from a field relevant to instructional design, which demonstrates their expertise in course design, and which also suggests that they may be well-positioned in this study as informants who could provide insightful comments on those popular claims about online HE. Learning designer is a relatively recent professional role at AU; it first appeared in AU course development procedures in the mid-2000s, at the point of transition from paper-based distance education to online education. At the time when the interviews were undertaken, the course development procedures at AU consisted of four stages, namely: course proposal; course design; course creation; and course sign-off and launch. Learning designers played an active role in the course design stage.

The interview questionnaire consisted of 15 open-ended questions. Based on my analysis of the institutional documents, I decided to use extracts from the university's mission statement within the interviews to make conversations more personal and grounded in the participants' institutional context. The following excerpt was presented to the learning designers first:

[AU] is dedicated to the removal of *barriers* that restrict access to and *success* in university-level study and to increasing *equality* of educational opportunity for *adult learners* worldwide ... Our approach to post-secondary education is based on four key principles: *excellence, openness, flexibility and innovation* [emphasis added]

The first set of questions asked participants for their opinions about the presented statement. One question posed, for example, was "what do you think about the passage above? How do you understand the meanings of those words highlighted in the passage?" All participants immediately recognized the excerpt and made similar comments to the following:

It's a passage I am very familiar with and I've been using this a lot in presentations [...] one of the reasons why I was intrigued by this university is the notion of openness (Jane).

After unpacking those highlighted words including openness and innovation, the second set of questions was posed to ask about participants' perceptions and experience of course design at AU. For example, the following questions were asked: "Please describe your course design experiences and practices at AU in order?", "what are the criteria for effective online learning? Why do you think so?" and "are you satisfied with your design practices? What are you most and least satisfied with your practices?" Finally, interviewees were invited to comment more specifically on the importance of (and difficulties with) achieving the openness and innovation principles in online HE through their course design practice. The face-to-face interviews, which lasted about 90 minutes each, were conducted in participants' own office space at AU. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The similar coding exercises, performed to analyse institutional documents, were conducted with the interview transcripts as well. However, the analytic focus in this second phase was on checking the authenticity of each discourse of openness and innovation; and the compatibility of the two discourses in the very specific institutional context of online course design at AU. The following three sections will summarise the general findings of this analytic task. The first section offers chronological narratives about the origin of AU, through which the openness and innovation discourses emerged, and discusses how the original conceptualisation of the two and their relationship have shifted throughout its historical development.

3. The emergence of openness and innovation at AU

AU's unique institutional identity as an *open* university immediately suggests a close connection between the establishment of AU as an institution and the origin of *openness* as a concept there. Beginning with the Open University in the UK, established in 1969, 20 open universities were established in more than 10 countries in around a decade with the aim of increasing access to HE (Peters, 2008). The birth of open universities has been seen as a consequence of well-intentioned and carefully-planned democratic efforts by governments to provide educational opportunities to the underserved in the post-war era. The development of AU is often considered as a part of this open learning movement. In reality, however, the evolution of AU as an open university was *rather coincidental*. The original concept of AU was not as an open university but as a campus-based university targeting *traditional* groups of students.

In 1970, the establishment of AU was announced as a new “fourth university¹” in Alberta, a western province of Canada, by the Social Credit government², led by Harry Strom—who strongly believed that it was necessary to expand Alberta’s post-secondary education system to meet a rapidly growing demand for undergraduate-level studies. Strom’s initiatives also included setting up the province’s College system and the 1970-71 province budget specifically included money for the establishment of the fourth university. The original mandate of AU was for “the development of excellence in undergraduate studies”, without any regard for openness (Byrne, 1989, p. 19).

In 1971, an original design for AU was proposed, basically describing a small teaching university based on two major *innovative* instructional approaches: a cluster of small colleges and a pedagogical model based around small group tutorials rather than lectures. One aim was to reduce the size of the instructional setting and so to provide for more intimate relationships between teacher and learner. Although the feasibility of the plan was questioned at the time by some higher educators as too unrealistically innovative, with one commentator criticised the plan as “nothing more than blue skying” (Byrne, 1989, p. 40), the development of the fourth university seemed to be going to plan.

On August 30, 1971, however, the Progressive Conservative Party³, led by Peter Lougheed, won the provincial election. The newly installed Alberta government opposed the development of the

¹ There were three established universities in Alberta in 1970: University of Alberta founded in 1908; University of Calgary in 1966; University of Lethbridge in 1967.

² A political party, founded in Alberta in 1935, which promoted social credit theories of monetary reform—issuing additional money from central banks, subsidising production in a wide range of economic sectors, and increasing purchasing power of consumers. The party remained in power in Alberta until 1971.

³ Alberta experienced a large development of oil industry in the 1970s and 1980s and the oil industry provided the Alberta government with large revenue surpluses. The Progressive Conservative Party won the election for

fourth university, alongside many other educational and social initiatives planned by the previous administration. The construction of AU university was promptly suspended, ostensibly on a temporary basis, for linked political and financial reasons. At the same juncture, university enrolments across the province also declined unexpectedly, for disputed reasons, and this too appeared to threaten the future existence of AU.

As a consequence, in order to demonstrate the necessity of its existence and to secure its own market, AU urgently needed to distinguish the nature of its educational services from those being provided by other pre-existing universities. Thus, a new proposal was rapidly put forward: to build a mini-college with an emphasis on continuing education for *non-traditional* adult learners. The pilot-project proposal included an *open door policy* as a means of securing and increasing student enrolment. However, even at this stage, there was still no intention that AU would be an open university, providing distance education (Byrne, 1989).

The new government accepted the premise of the revised proposal but nonetheless did not approve the funding for the building of any *physical infrastructure* for the pilot-project. It was at this stage that, in order to address the mounting political and financial issues, AU's proponents decided to adopt a pedagogical model of independent correspondence study. As Byrne (1989, p. 50) has noted, "this proposed experiment in [distance education] contained one feature very attractive to government: it would avoid the need for capital expenditure on buildings." Launched in January 1973, the number of enrolments had reached 725 by the time the pilot-project successfully terminated, and in June 1975, the government announced that:

AU should remain an open university, providing undergraduate courses for such special groups as the educationally and socially disadvantaged, and those who, by chance or circumstance, chose not to attend other provincial universities. (Byrne, 1989, p. 74)

In the intervening years, the concept of "open university" had become more common around the world. AU was therefore officially designated as an open university, achieving self-governing status on April 12, 1978. AU finally built a physical campus, consisting of a single office building for staff, in 1984 and set out its first formal mission statement in 1985:

AU is dedicated to the removal of barriers that traditionally restrict access to and success in university-level studies, and to increasing equality of educational opportunity for all adult Canadians regardless of their geographical location and prior academic credentials. (Annual Report 1984-1985, p 10)

the first time in Alberta in 1971—by promoting ideas that Alberta should control its own natural resources (particularly, oil) and increase its political and economic power across Canada.

The concept of openness at AU, therefore referred, in these early years, to a relatively clear notion of creating educational opportunities through open admission policies and distance teaching (Lefranc, 1984). Nevertheless, tracing the early history of AU highlights the accidental nature of AU becoming an open university, a development that occurred as part of a simple struggle to survive as an institution at a particular juncture. Rather than arising from a clear, democratic educational intention, openness in AU originated from a complex and somewhat arbitrary combination of social, political, and economic conditions.

On the other hand, at that point, the idea of being innovative permeated AU and its staff members' practices initially as a consequence of the unplanned sudden adventure into institutional openness, which consistently required them to change and come up with new ideas, plans, and actions to address (and react to) institution-threatening challenges. At a pedagogical level, the original idea of small colleges with small group tutorials was considered innovative, even if it was never realised. Subsequently, during the original pilot project period, 1973-1975, AU created unique models for course production (i.e., course team structures), for course delivery (i.e., self-paced study models), and for student support (i.e., telephone-tutorials), which had never existed in HE contexts before. AU also put significant effort into augmenting the quality of distance teaching by using technological media.

One of the long-term strategies proposed within the AU's first mission statement in 1985 mentions that the mission "will be fulfilled by a commitment to identify elements of programs that may be better delivered and supported by the utilisation of *innovative* pedagogy and appropriate educational technologies" (Annual Report 1984-1985, p. 30). One example is AU's self-paced study model, which allows students to have continuous access to AU courses and to determine their own learning schedules within those courses. That is, students can start their study at any time, at their convenience, by enrolling in one or more courses at the beginning of each calendar month. During the six month period of their registration, students can also submit course assignments at any time, at their convenience, and receive credit. This model was considered very new and innovative when first adopted by AU, and well-aligned with its open admission strategy, which clearly contributed to securing enrolment numbers and increasing the extent of openness.

Both the long-term plans set out in 1985 and the self-paced study model clearly highlight a close, mutually dependent relationship between openness and innovation in the early era at AU. During these early stages, it is clear that the openness and the innovation within the institution had arisen in closely related ways. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two in the current AU context has become far more complex, which will be documented in the next two sections more in detail.

4. The discursive shifts in openness and innovation at AU

Another set of findings suggest that, in more recent years, the focus of openness has shifted away from “serving underserved” towards an emphasis on “making resources available free of charge to all” at AU. In addition, there has been an increasing emphasis on innovation, whose focus has been also diversified, encompassing one meaning oriented toward teaching and the other meaning oriented toward research.

4.1. The expanded openness discourse in the 2010s

The four central principles of AU as they are currently formulated—including excellence, openness, flexibility, and innovation—first appeared in the 2008-2012 Business Plans. Those four principles were claimed to guide the university’s approach to post-secondary education and university members’ practices. Openness is explained on the university website in the following way: “[w]e are committed to our mission of guaranteeing access to post-secondary learning to all who have the ability and desire. If you are 16 or older, you are eligible for admission to undergraduate study.” This description well reflects its open admission policy.

AU’s annual publication, *Open* magazine⁴, is full of positive stories about AU academics being dedicated to open education and their related educational projects. The magazine also documents non-traditional students’ successful experiences at AU, as well as alumni’s well-earned professional successes after their graduation. Professional-looking, middle-aged women and men (often smiling with their family) are the most frequently appearing images in the magazine. The meaning of “being open” in the university’s original mission statement still remains strongly in the openness discourse in AU in 2015. That is, the university is still focused on openness as a way to increase the accessibility of university education to non-traditional learners, although it is clear that the target students may not always necessarily be socially or economically disadvantaged groups.

However, there is certainly another growing connotative meaning of openness, reflecting its meaning within the Internet culture that entails the idea of “being available for free”. For example, one edition of *Open* magazine published in 2013 has a special feature on an *Open Our World*, a fundraising campaign to support and sustain the university’s open education services; it says that AU has raised 86 percent of its \$30-million goal for the campaign, which makes materials available to students online for free. One of the initiatives for which the campaign is raising funds is the open-access course textbook project. One of the first adopters of the university’s open course textbook,

⁴ The AU website introduces *Open* magazine as AU’s “magazine for students, alumni, partners, staff, faculty and friends. If you’re thinking about studying with AU, *Open* is also a great way to get to know us.” The first issue was published in 2008.

Michael Dawson, supports the initiative and argues “anything that can be done to minimize the financial burden for students should be done.” (p. 5).

Another edition of *Open* magazine, from 2014, also has a featured article entitled *Shredding an old idea*. The article includes and highlights the voice of George Siemens, AU academic who received an \$861,655 grant through the *Open Our World* fundraising campaign for his research on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), to emphasize that “openness is part of the DNA of AU”. It continues: “now, 41 years on, AU and other post-secondary institutions are taking the concept of openness further than those original students could have imagined.” In contrast with the first correspondence course, *World Ecology*, developed in 1973, the article argues that MOOCs “are offered free and to unlimited numbers of students. Imagine, for example, a football stadium with bleachers filled by students, and alone professor at the centre of the field.” It vividly conveys a new idea of openness organized around the concept of Open Educational Resources (OER), which are described as “free and accessible learning resources available on the Internet. No matter what they look like or how they’re delivered, they share a common trait: openness.” (pp. 25-27).

4.2. A growing presence of innovation discourse in the 2010s

The original version of the AU principles did not include innovation but accessibility, flexibility, and excellence (Annual Report 1995-96). However, in the early years of AU, the relationship between openness and innovation was clear and straightforward: innovation being a supporting principle for openness. Innovation was later defined as the last principle guiding university members to “continue to adopt and develop new, learner-centred learning models and technology-based alternatives to traditional, classroom-based instructional channels and context” (Open, 2008, p. 4). Being innovative in 2015, according to this description, does not seem very different from the one in the *Annual Report 1984-1985*: meaning to utilise “innovative pedagogy and appropriate educational technologies”—except for the fact that the term “innovation” is now explicitly stated, emphasised, and repeated.

Thus, it can be argued that the original idea of what it meant to innovate (i.e., an emphasis on teaching-oriented innovation) still remains as an important part of the institutional focus at AU. For example, the *2008-2012 Business Plans* mentions the following:

From its beginning in 1972, AU has pioneered new approaches to post-secondary learning: through its open philosophy, through its outreach, through its revolutionary methods of course and program design and delivery and through its acceptance and adoption of technology-based alternatives. (p. 11).

As argued in the introduction, it can be noted that the above statement also posits deterministic expectations that adopting new technologies will bring about more innovative

pedagogical practices at AU. While teaching-oriented innovation is often discussed with openness at AU or indeed as a means to improve it, there seem to be no particular concerns raised, in any of the institutional documents, about the potential conflicts created by putting those “strategies” together in practice: that is, the open philosophy, outreach practices, revolutionary pedagogy, and technology adoption.

On the other hand, in a manner similar to the openness discourse, the meaning of innovation has been multiplied and the focus of innovation has shifted away from teaching-oriented innovation to newly emerged ideas about research-oriented innovation. For example, in the *1996-97 Annual Report*, AU, for the first time, acknowledged how three research projects received important external grants:

Although a small, primarily undergraduate teaching university, AU has fared very well in attracting external research grants as well as in providing internal funding of research and development. (p. 12)

Also, the *1997-98 Annual Report* was the very first document that had a separate space for celebrating individual staff publications. A decade later, the *2008-2012 Business Plans* outlines six strategic goals in line with the four key principles set out in the mission statement. One of those goals is “to foster and expand research and scholarship”. Seven strategic objectives and their corresponding performance measures are put forward in the document. They explicitly promote the value of innovation by way of an aspiration to “increase in number of research projects and publications as well as increase in amount of research funding received” (p. 25).

In the same document, one notable university mission-oriented objective is to “provide the widest possible access to the research created by researchers at AU”. Establishing a University Press, which is “regarded as a leading open access press,” is indicated as one of the expected results. In 2008, AU Press was actually established and released its first open resources:

We are dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge and research through open access digital journals and monographs, as well as through new electronic media [...] In keeping with AU’s mission of overcoming barriers to education, we intend to work with emerging writers and researchers to promote success in scholarly publishing.

In recent years, therefore, innovation has become not a subordinate means to promote openness anymore but rather an independent value positioned in a collaborative relationship to openness. The independence of the research-focused approach to innovation continues to be advanced, as illustrated clearly in another featured article in *Open* magazine 2014, *From Discovery to Market*. This article stresses the importance of converting research outcomes into marketable products in particular by using the voice of an educational technology industry liaison officer:

Transferring research innovations into the marketplace can have transformative societal impacts, improving quality of life as well as enhancing business productivity and job creation [...] Together, these research efforts provide industry partners with a competitive advantage, create job, improve technologies and help ensure future prosperity, while advancing research and improving the health and social welfare of Canadians. (p. 23)

There seem to have been *at least* two significant conditions that have brought the innovation principle to the foreground of the university's mission since the mid-1990s. Firstly, AU faced financial difficulties caused by reduced provincial funding, as clearly illustrated in the *Annual Report 1994-95*:

In the context of a 31 percent reduction (\$5.4 million) to AU's provincially funded operating grant over fiscal years 1994-95, 1995-96, and 1996-97, the university took deliberate action to restructure and reposition itself. All staff members accepted a five percent reduction in salary... faculty teaching loads were significantly increased and tuition fees rose by 8 percent... These changes, together with other cost-saving measures, allowed the university to redirect \$800,000 annually to teaching and innovation. (p. 5)

Secondly, at around the same time, there was a rapid advent of online technologies, which led to another important milestone in AU's history. In September 1994, two of the first "online" graduate degree programs in the world (Master of Distance Education and Master of Business Administration) were launched at AU, which brought about international recognition of AU as a leading online education provider. The success of both graduate programs also brought about a strong aspiration among AU members to revisit their institutional identity, and possibly to move away from being a teaching-intensive university to being a research-intensive university. Thus, the successful adaptation to changing social-economic conditions as well as the rapid adoption of online technologies in its advanced programs introduced the new conceptualisation of innovation, which was oriented toward research practice. Yet, no particular concerns were noted, at this point about the potential conflicts that might be created by pursuing both teaching- and research-oriented innovation at the same time.

As argued already, openness and innovation remain two of the dominant discourses in AU. Although neither idea is new to the university, the current understandings of those discourses have expanded and shifted from the initial discussions of the two concepts. The new understanding of openness emphasizes making educational resources available for free to many people beyond a focus on expanding access to university education. Innovation is now increasingly understood in the context of producing new knowledge and connecting that knowledge to actual profits, not only for the institution but also for broader society. These new approaches to openness and innovation have

resulted in the construction of more dynamic and complex relationships between the two discourses than any previous time in the history of AU.

5. The openness and innovation in online course design at AU

This section presents specific findings from analysing 7 interview transcripts, revealing critical discontinuities between the conceptualisation of openness and innovation as independent principles and their operationalisation as competing principles in course design practices.

5.1 Openness and innovation as independent principles mingled in learning designers' narratives

This section briefly presents what openness and innovation, as central institutional principles, mean to the seven learning designers at AU.

Openness. Although there are slight variations in their expressions and uses of language, the learning designers seem to have a relatively shared and coherent idea about openness—which involves “ensuring access to students of all differences whether they are geographically dispersed, whether they are rich or poor, whether they are having to work full time, so it’s the access on a variety of levels” (Sue). Along with removing other kinds of barriers, most of them also accept and emphasize the new, expanded notion of openness embedded in the recent OER and MOOCs phenomena such as “being available for free and to many”. Both Alex and Helen strongly argue that:

We try to actually apply this [openness] in things like AU press, which is an open press. You don’t have to pay for books, so they try to contribute to this culture of openness in academia because it’s very important because more and more things are being monetized. (Alex)

The cost of education is getting ridiculous. As long as it’s sort of... it’s a way of collectively taking back what made in the first place, many of these things are funded by taxpayers, there is no reason that taxpayers shouldn’t benefit from that [...] we kind of like open-source software so we use Moodle and Alfresco. (Helen)

That is, learning designers’ descriptions on openness as an independent principle closely resembles the ones in the institutional documents, as seen in section 4.1.

Innovation. Regarding the innovation principle, all designers mentioned that being innovative, such as creating something new and better, is a valuable and necessary mission-oriented practice at AU. However, it seemed to be more challenging for them to define innovation in a manner as coherent as the way they did for openness. The earlier analysis of institutional documents (see section 4.2.)

suggests that there are at least two types of innovation, namely: teaching-oriented innovation and research-oriented innovation. Similarly, during the interviews, these two approaches were mentioned separately by the learning designers in two distinct contexts: either in terms of utilising new pedagogies or technologies in courses or programs, or in terms of creating new knowledge based on institutional research activities.

Innovation again, one of those key universal terms, very popular, very trendy, really fuzzy terms that everyone embraces. Innovation here in this context, at the most basic level, it means to move from a print to an online education environment [...] how to use technology to facilitate learning. So in that push for innovation and there has been a lot of experimentations, a lot of pilot projects. (Jane)

Innovation is a tricky term, but really, it means in a very traditional sense of pure research by academics contributing to their field because AU, even though we are mostly distance university, is one of the four research universities in the province. What is behind innovation is really research and it's important that there is some sort of innovation and people are creating things here because of research mandate. Otherwise, if we didn't have this research-based innovation [...] we wouldn't be better than the few other colleges. (Alex)

Nevertheless, when it comes to their own practices, learning designers tend to put the course level of pedagogical and technological innovation before the research-oriented innovation that would generate some institutional level of benefits. As the following quotation illustrates, learning designers are very aware that perspectives probably differ across the institution:

I think learning designers have very different ideas from faculty. Maybe part of our mission is to persuade faculty to buy into our idea of what *learning innovation* is and I am sure administrators have different ideas. I think at this point, with all our funding problems, they are thinking about innovative ways to raise money basically. So we all have to, every group has a different perspective and different motivations in terms of innovation. (Helen)

By employing collective terms such as “our mission” and “our idea”, Helen clearly suggests, in the excerpt above, that although there are different approaches to innovation at AU, learning designers' prior focus is on teaching-oriented innovation. Here, it is indirectly suggested that there are some potential conflicts among the AU members, who might hold different orientations about enacting principles of innovation in their daily practices. Those different orientations will be further highlighted in the following section.

5.2. Openness and innovation as conflicting principles tangled in learning designers' narratives

As demonstrated in the previous section, openness and innovation co-exist somewhat harmoniously as independent principles or discourses at a conceptual level. However, there are significant tensions experienced by learning designers in their everyday practice when it comes to applying those two principles into particular course designs. The two most clearly emerging tensions from the data analysis are:

- i) a conflict between openness and teaching-oriented innovation and
- ii) a conflict between teaching-oriented innovation and research-oriented innovation.

These tensions were either specifically mentioned by the interviewees or implicitly suggested in the interview texts and highlighted at the stage of the data analysis.

Conflict 1: Openness vs. Innovation. As independent principles, the value and importance of both openness and innovation are relatively well-articulated by all designers. However, when asked to consider the two in parallel and to prioritize them, designers expressed a certain level of difficulty. Many parts of the interview texts suggest a continuing tension between the two principles at a course or program level, which does not seem simple to alleviate without giving up one out of the two. Jane says, "It's a trade-off, really a trade-off." Another designer, Sue, explains this tension in greater detail by using an example of "moving correspondent courses online":

One of the challenges, of course, when you are going online is you are opening the doors to many people but you are closing the doors on others. So sometimes the old-fashioned paper technologies are actually more accessible for some people than all the electronics [...] I did, in fact, have a student who is living up out in the North-West territories and she can't always access even a YouTube video. So that's streaming media supposedly everybody around the world can access but that's not entirely true [...] There is the whole marketing and there is the administration where they want to use these buzz words like innovation. To be honest, I don't think most of them are aware of how the technologies function, [and how] the pedagogies underlying the different technologies work. (Sue)

Sue concludes her argument by stressing the necessity of a student-centered approach to learning design. That is because, Sue suggests, "the balance between doing innovation and maintaining openness, to me, it is all about students." However, at the same time, it is repeatedly suggested by interviewees that there is substantial inequality between AU students in terms of their access to different technological media. This makes it even more challenging to clearly define and apply the notion of a student-centered approach in their design practices:

There are times when the computing people asked to develop something that the rest of us were thinking, “that doesn’t make any sense” [...] This desire to innovate while maintaining it open does kind of fall on the shoulders of the learning designers. We don’t introduce the [technological] innovations into day-to-day practices. We don’t use our students as guinea pigs. So we might introduce something in a part of a research project. Sometimes those things are put in place but it’s harder to develop the project and then uptake. The actual adoption of the tool can be very sluggish. (Sue)

In relation to the openness-innovation tension, when the notion of student-centered design is understood as being about meeting students’ needs, it is seen as almost impossible for AU to satisfy those “greedy” students who expect too much:

Even if students don’t necessarily understand and use everything in terms of technology, they do expect to see a range of the use of technology [in their course]. But at the same time, they still want the personal attachment to their tutors and personal guidance through the telephone-tutorials. They still want to have that kind of one-on-one touch with the tutor—sort of all the good elements of traditional and distance education. (Jane)

Another scenario revealing the openness-innovation tension is related to AU’s self-paced study model. As previously discussed, AU offers individualised study courses with year-round enrollment (see Kennepohl, 2012 for more details). This self-paced study model provides AU students with *anytime* access and a high degree of *flexibility* aspects which are strongly valued in the current open education context. At the same time, however, these individualised study courses involve a large number of students in different phases of their learning: some have just started the introductory unit, some are about to submit their final assignments, and others are somewhere in between. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to successfully orchestrate those structured group communication opportunities or collaborative learning projects that are commonly perceived as innovative and advanced pedagogical approaches to online HE than individualised, in comparison to the individualised models of learning offered at AU.

Going back to the point about how participants emphasized the conception of “what our students want,” it is worth noticing that raising issues of doing pedagogical innovation—such as changing course structures and introducing collaborative learning activities—often brings forth sceptical questions like “innovating for whom?” in the accounts of learning designers:

We have a self-paced model at the undergraduate level... [some students] just want to go through their course and not necessarily have any interactions whereas some pedagogical principles now are all about constructivism, social learning, peer-to-peer

exchange. So there is a big push for that and yet the reality is we do have large student populations who are resisting to it. They just want to be a lone learner. (Jane)

A range of instructional issues caused by this type of course structure is discussed elsewhere (Author, 2018). In sum, although the two discourses of openness and innovation co-exist at the conceptual or ideological level, as if they were two independent but potentially collaborative principles, in fact, it has been challenging for learning designers to operationalise both principles in their instructional design practices.

Conflict 2: Teaching-oriented innovation and research-oriented innovation

The second tension related to openness and innovation is mostly represented as a conflict between teaching and research at AU. Much of the author's conversations with learning designers ended up with the designers pondering the question of whether AU is (or should be) a teaching university or a research university. As discussed in the previous section, research-oriented innovation, a more recently constructed idea than teaching-oriented innovation, has recently gained much more significant institutional recognition:

AU has strived to increase its research agenda because it was perceived mostly as being just a teaching university and *teaching in higher education has never been historically valued*. It is now all about what you research and publish, and that is a part of the trend I've seen in the last 10 years at AU... pushing, going beyond being perceived just as a teaching university and increasing, raising the profile of the researchers and their research agenda beyond just doing distance education. (Jane)

There has been always innovation—pure innovation. But there is more and more pressure to make innovation more applicable to business and so there is a lot of pressure right now. You have researchers, academics, even professionals [who] are doing research here, already but there is more demand, push from the government to make that research economically profitable in some ways. (Alex)

All seven learning designers in this study noted, during their interviews, the importance for the university of increasing and maintaining research activities and how a great deal of research-related pressure is being put upon academics in the contemporary HE contexts. They continued to express their concern about the rapidly growing emphasis on research activities in AU and among its faculty members. The following two excerpts vividly illustrate how that concern is expressed from learning designers' perspective:

The research component is fairly recent as I understand it, that they are trying to upgrade themselves as more of a research institution, but I think basically, teaching was

the reason they came into existence in the first place [...] The problem is like it's not just research. Computer sciences, they are just like everyone is an entrepreneur, too. They've all got their own *business on the side*. It's like everybody is so busy with their research and their... whatever else, they are doing on the side. Some of them actually resigned taking time to develop the course and even if they have the help and support of our department [the Centre for Learning Design and Development], they just don't want to be bothered spending more than the minimum of time for [teaching] which really should be central to their role. (Helen)

As we went through a period of growth, we went through a sort of move to make ourselves look more like a conventional research university. I was always a little concerned when I heard people talking about how we want to look more like a conventional university because we are not. So do we want to be a number five in a line of the conventional universities? We used to call ourselves Canada's open university. Have we given up that dream, that role? Is it too hard to *sell* because people don't understand especially—funders don't understand that concept? Our job is *teaching*. That's our core competence. (Angela)

When the learning designers initially talked about the notion of innovation, they had much more positive attitudes towards it, even when discussing the idea of research-oriented innovation. Most of them regarded innovation as an imperative mission of all HE institutions, including open universities. However, when discussing questions about choices between teaching and research, the complexity and the multiplicity of the conceptual understandings of innovation were more obviously highlighted even within the same designers' narratives. It was particularly clear that there were conflicting attitudes towards research-oriented innovation among different professional groups within this single university. Those conflicts seem to be most salient between faculty, who mainly focus on disciplinary research (and further business), and learning designers, who are mostly concerned with online course design and development (and student needs).

The conflicts created by this research-teaching tension—which may, too, exist in all other HE contexts—seem to be perceived as more threatening and problematic in the AU context: perhaps due to it being “open”. The unique identity of AU as an open university has continuously required AU, from its birth to the present, to be open to the underserved and in many cases to be innovative to serve them better. At the same time—in an ironic parallel with the way the institution became open as an innovative means to survive—recent financial burdens on AU, caused by the shortage of public funds, has pushed it to enter the highly competitive HE market in which many campus-based, or research-intensive, universities have long competed for funding. In other words, AU—which used to operate largely based on provincial funding and aimed to address educational inequities in Alberta—

increasingly needs to seek other sources of funding, including from student tuition fees and research income. In this context, it has become critical for AU to improve its research profile and its university ranking in various leagues tables, which is seen as directly related to issues of the student (and staff) recruitment and retention.

Consequently, there have been increasing tensions of openness-innovation experienced by learning designers, whose everyday practices are strongly grounded in the idea of openness and whose orientation towards innovation also remains exclusively focused on teaching practice. However, despite the conflicts discussed above, in the final analysis, it seems like that the innovation principle is relatively more emphasized than openness at AU. The last excerpt is from the interview text with Alex (who, earlier, stated, “AU, even though we are mostly a distance university, is one of the four research universities in the province”):

There is a lot more competition. It's a *business*. It's really, really getting tough and to survive, you have to move faster, way faster than we do here. Now I do believe we need academic excellence here and I understand when academics stress that. I totally agree but from my perspective as a learning designer and having to work with technology, if we are slow, we just kind of lose. Doesn't matter how good our academic standards are.
(Alex)

In this age of uncertainty, however, I argue that it is even more urgent and important to understand and discuss the openness-innovation tensions rather than being swamped by the rhetoric of “business” or “technology” and normative statements regarding “academic excellence.” Such normative approaches based on conceptualising university as a “business” will not automatically bring us success in our educational practices as online HE providers. It is worth highlighting, in that context, focusing on defining (and refining) the notions of openness and innovation, as separate entities existing in the vacuum of scholarly discourse, may be inadequate. It is necessary to understand that it is not the incomprehensibility of each at a conceptual level that is problematic but the incompatibility between them at an operational level within particular institutional settings. On that note, the article will move to its closing remark.

6. Closing remark

In this paper, I have sought to illustrate that online HE is a social practice bounded by the specific institutional conditions in which it is situated and operates. Thus, I argue, it is unproductive to conceptualise online HE as a singular entity, or to define the nature of online HE using some pre-determined characteristics. Instead, online HE needs to be conceptualised as a heterogeneous collection of institutional practices with numerous variations in particular locales, each with their own pedagogical historicity and contextual specificity (see Lee, 2018). With that in mind, this article has

attempted to challenge the popular understanding of online HE as being open—by asking the simple but important question of “to what extent can online HE be open and innovative at the same time in AU at the moment?” This inquiry has also been conceptualised and guided by using a theoretical notion of discourse (Foucault, 1972).

The attempt to simultaneously and contrastingly analyse the openness and innovation discourses reveals multiple points of discontinuity between our common understandings of (or expectations towards) online HE and their actual realisations in the specific AU setting. Despite the discrepancy between the rhetorical account of the origin of AU as an open university and the actual political conditions that pushed the institutional choice of adopting the open university identity, the openness discourse has long dominated its practices throughout the history of AU. In more recent years, however, the expanded notion of openness, based around an increased social aspiration for open educational resources and a growing institutional emphasis on technology- and research-oriented innovation has made AU’s open educational practices less focused and more rhetorical.

In the current AU context, in which the innovation discourse has gained dominance (with no less power on AU members’ practices than its counterpart’s), a wider discrepancy exists between learning designers’ conceptualisation of openness and innovation and their operationalisation of the two in course design practice. That is, openness and innovation as independent principles are harmoniously articulated in designers’ narratives; however, when they are contextualised in real-life course design situations, the two instantly turn into conflicting design principles. For example, being fully open to diverse student groups and being technologically innovative by integrating state-of-the-art technology cannot be achieved at once. Being pedagogically innovative by increasing learner-to-learner interactions and collaboration, while maintaining the same level of flexibility provided by the independent study model, also turns out to be impossible.

Nevertheless, in the wider institutional context, achieving teaching-oriented innovation—requiring collective effort to address a range of pedagogical and technological challenges—may not be perceived as an institutional priority. Especially when achieving research-oriented innovation is much more valued by other AU members (than improving their pedagogical practice), making online HE both open and innovative, by resolving the aforementioned conflicts between the two principles, seems much more challenging to the designers. This comprehensive understanding of the AU situation provides us with important insights about the complex and challenging nature of online HE when it strives to be open and innovative at the same time. The narratives in this paper also urge us, as online HE scholars and practitioners, to become more critical about our own perceptions and taken-for-granted understandings of online HE, and to create a more collective and contextualised effort to increase both openness and innovation across online HE contexts.

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