

THE DOORS OF LEARNING SHALL BE OPEN TO ALL

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A time and place significant for South Africans but not only for South Africans. At Kliptown on that date, the Congress of the People agreed on the Freedom Charter. The Charter inspired many in the decades-long struggle against apartheid.

Like the Declaration of Independence which heralded the founding of the United States, the Charter is significant not only in the political history of one country but also as a universal source of inspiration, because it presents a vision of freedom forged in the darkest days of oppression.

The Charter declares: "The doors of Learning and Culture shall be opened!" and "All the cultural treasures of mankind shall be open to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands."

The drafters of the Charter understood that a free culture is necessary for a free society; that freedoms of belief, speech and meaning-making take place in a

context; that context is culture. Learning is not all of culture. There are many meaning-making activities in culture besides learning. But learning is important. Learning is important because it allows entrance into economic activity; it enables participation in many spheres of life.

Opening the doors of learning is also important so that learning can be debated, contested, transformed.

What has all this got to do with iCommons licences? Not much if you think that the Creative Commons is simply a set of licences which enables a supply-side solution to a resource problem. That begs the question: is the Commons only a cheap alternative to overpriced, all-rights-reserved content?

It is true that the cultural Commons is a more economically efficient means of producing and distributing important educational content, but that is not all it is. To open the doors to learning is not just to make information available more freely; it is to change what learning means so that it becomes a more democratic process, a conversation, where learners learn from one another, where they learn from themselves

Since the beginnings of Modernism, production of most formal educational content has taken place through an Industrial Revolution-type process. A prototype is produced by an "expert", and this is then fixed: there is no arguing with, no debating, no re-working of the content. Instead, multiple copies are made in a fixed format, whether it is a book, a sound recording (a CD) or video. This system is a product of technology, and the economic model of production is intended to ensure that cultural products, such as books, can be commoditised in the same way as cans of baked beans

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– multiple copies of the same product. Commons-based peer production provides an alternative model, one that is attractive because of its economic efficiencies but also because of the value to democracies of free culture. The monetary cost of learning materials is important, especially to the many millions in the developing world who cannot afford even the cheapest. However, the accompanying semiotic democracy is equally important. Commons-based peer production requires people to express themselves, to become the kinds of people who can negotiate, who can debate, who can reason and persuade and be persuaded, all critical skills for emerging democracies. As the global economy is transformed by information and communications technologies, the abilities to contextualise, to debate, to refine and to engage with content are becoming the necessary skills required by the global economy.

Open education is what takes place when the doors of learning are opened. Open education is far more than open

access repositories, although open access repositories are important. It is more than open access journals, although open access journals are important. It is more than licensing content under Creative Commons licences. Open education is a value-laden process, a practise of the community production of knowledge. Open education represents what some (the best) educators have always tried to do: to inspire people to be their best, share their knowledge, learn from each other, discover their own talents and abilities and knowledge – to become creators of knowledge. One way in which open education can be realised is through the policies and practices which result in the licensing of content under Creative Commons – and where appropriate other open licences – and the remixing of that content in education.

The use of Commons works in learning has a number of advantages. The first is that it is more economically efficient; the second is that it is more appropriate for education for a democracy; and the third is that it enables better teaching and learning.

The economic efficiency is evident in cost-effectiveness, reduction of risk, and indirect effect. There is no such thing as a free lunch. It is true that generally someone has to pay for the creation of educational content. In the formal education sector, someone already pays for the production and distribution of content. Educational content is usually paid for either directly by an institution such as an education department, or by consumers, whose choice of that work over another has often been constrained

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by an educational institution in its prescribing of a specific text book. What makes the most sense, from the point of view of those paying, the teachers and learners? The cost effectiveness comes from the fact that Creative Commons works are often available at no cost (though sometimes the no-cost rule applies only to non-commercial uses of the work).

Creative Commons content is a better risk proposition for users, including educational users and institutions. The holder of rights in works which are managed by all-rights-reserved rights may cease to provide copies, or updates to a work, because to do so may no longer be commercially viable in a conventional publishing model or because the publisher may itself become moribund. By contrast, where a work such as a textbook is under a Creative Commons licence, the licencees themselves – depending on the specific licence – may, at the very least, make copies of, and often even update, the work themselves.

All-rights-reserved works are a

particular problem for educational institutions which, because of the difficulties of changing curricula in an environment where they lack control of educational materials content, become reliant on particular works.

However, when Commons-based peer production takes place, the economic cost necessary for creation of content is partially met by innumerable small charitable contributions which cumulatively through Commons-based peer production can constitute works that rival conventionally-produced works. As a result, the systemic risk (and the cost of a work) is borne in a large part not by the publisher but by the institution or its captive consumers. It therefore makes sense for the institutional purchaser of educational content to acquire the copyright itself and release the work under an open licence, or at least to ensure that the work is available under an open licence.

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including private citizens, government and corporations – made for a variety of motivations ranging from altruism to profit – in a single Commons of works which is not reliant on any one actor for its continued existence, thus increasing the robustness and richness of the works while ensuring the contributions will continue even if any one contributor does not.

When work is licensed under a Creative Commons licence, the licence allows for a great deal of engagement with the work. Most Creative Commons licences permit not only reproduction but modification of the initial work. This enables learners to engage with works as co-producers rather than just as passive consumers. Commons-based peer production processes involve a great degree of interaction among co-authors, and in most such processes compromises must be negotiated, and works are created which are not the product of any one single person's views. Such collaborations thus necessitate a concern for social processes in which participants must negotiate with and support one another – essentially democratic processes.

The level of engagement with Creative Commons works provides for a better teaching environment, since specific up-front permission (with the exception of CC No-Derivatives works) is given to learners to engage with the work, and learners are free not only to imitate the work but also argue with it, build on it and synthesise it with other works.

It is not just attractive, but essential, that learners should be able to engage with content – in order for these learners to acquire the skills necessary for an Information Society in which manipulation of information is paramount. ❁