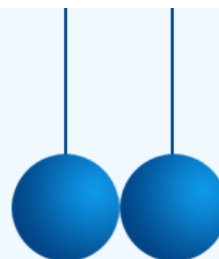


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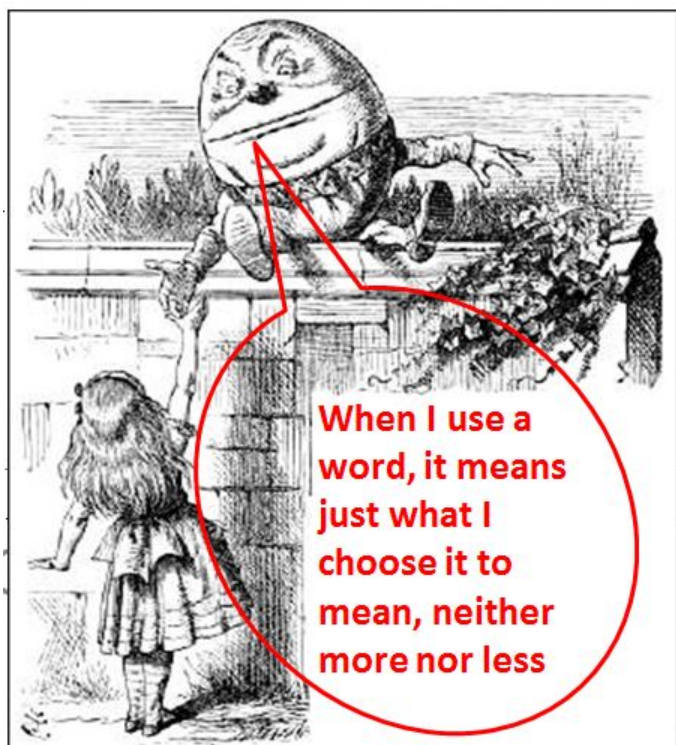
Understandings of open access

Blog post by Laura Czerniewicz
13 May 2014

How do people outside the university who work in education understand open access? As my daily experiences are skewed towards the open access and open education communities and towards those academics interested in finding out about open access, I was interested to get a broader sense of what educational professionals understand open access to be. When I was asked to give a talk recently to about 30 working professionals, I asked them to each write down what they thought open access is. About two thirds of the group did so, and I read some of their definitions and comments aloud before the talk.

What did they say? Certainly open access is associated with content being free, as the majority (but not all) mentioned the word "free" in their definitions. "Access is about being free" to view and free to see, and access is about "not having to pay".

What is it that is free? For most this is free "information", although three narrowed this specifically to free access to journal articles. Interestingly one person said the opposite – that "free" extended research content beyond the journal: "Open access means research is no longer confined to journal publications". One person said that open access is about free software (and then commented that this is very useful), and one included data in the list. Another wide-ranging definition said that open access is "Access to education, the internet and libraries", thus extending access from content to education itself.



Lewis Carroll, 1871, Alice Through The Looking Glass
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Humpty_Dumpty_Tenniel.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Humpty_Dumpty_Tenniel.jpg

The issue of easy availability even filtering, was another thread, for example: "Every person can get information they need without any problem", and "availability of information to someone searching for it". The definition "When information is gathered together and is easy to access" suggests that open access might be filtered to be suitable to the user.

One person suggested that open access gives users a "license to access documents that are not available to everyone". Those in the open licensing world will be interested to hear that licenses, selected by authors, are here understood to be owned by readers.

Only two people made the distinction between access and use: "Open access means access to resources without having to pay, may be able to use depending on copyright". Another said the opposite, that there are "no copyright restrictions" - that person also coined the delightful term of "universal usage". Other than these comments there was little mention of copyright, and none specifying open licenses or Creative Commons by name. One covered all bases by describing open access as "Free distribution of intellectual property".

A particularly pertinent comment was one that stated that open access is "information that is publically available and should also be understandable". This is an especially valuable comment pointing to issues of [epistemological access](#) as critical to engagement and success in education.

Other definitions ? One person conflated open access with wikis- "Open access is a database that allows for works to be edited by others". Another associated it with

networks: "It is access to information across networks globally". And interestingly, one person took a more ideological approach and focused on the movement "Open access is a movement...it is great because knowledge should not be at a cost"

Why does this matter? Because as open access **enters the mainstream** of research and scholarly communication globally, it is important to bear in mind what is understood by the term, what assumptions are made and what discourses are implied. While open access is on the one hand an immensely simple concept, on the other it is confusing and difficult. Unlike Humpty Dumpty in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* there is a lot to be said for a shared language and shared understandings of the concept "open access".

(Image from Wikipedia, in the Public Domain http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Humpty_Dumpty_Tenniel.jpg)

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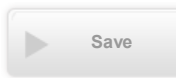
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