Balancing privacy and openness, using a lens of contextual integrity

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Abstract

This paper describes a qualitative, empirical research study which explored the use of open educational practices (OEP) by academic staff in higher education, focusing particularly on the findings in relation to balancing privacy and openness. The study explored meaning-making and decision-making by university educators regarding whether, why, and how they used OEP. Open educational practices have been defined as "practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning paths" (Ehlers, 2011, p. 4). The purpose of this study was to understand how university educators conceive of, make sense of, and make use of OEP, and to try to learn more about, and from, the practices and values of educators from across a broad continuum of 'closed' to open practices. The study was conducted at one Irish university using constructivist grounded theory methodology; semi-structured interviews were carried out with educators across multiple disciplines. Balancing privacy and openness emerged as a key concern of academic staff in relation to their digital and networked practices. This balancing act was described by participants, overwhelmingly, as an individual decision and an ongoing challenge: "you're negotiating all the time." A model was developed to illustrate how individuals seek to balance privacy and openness at four levels: *macro* (global level), *meso* (community/network level), *micro* (individual level), and *nano* (interaction level). The main finding of the study was that openness is always complex, personal, contextual, and continually negotiated. These empirical results reinforce the utility of Nissenbaum's (2004, 2010) framework of contextual integrity in constructing a full understanding of meaning-making and decision-making with regard to open practices, and thus can contribute to effective support of academic staff in relation to open education and networked learning.

Keywords

OEP, open educational practices, privacy, contextual integrity, networked learning

Introduction

In an increasingly open and networked society, where data is more persistent, replicable, searchable and scalable than ever (boyd, 2010), privacy is a subject of enormous individual, institutional, and societal importance. The concept of privacy lies at the nexus of multiple disciplines and domains: ethics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, law, economics, information studies, computer science and information technology. A precise definition of privacy is elusive. As networked, participatory culture has evolved, so too has our concept of privacy. Definitions of privacy have relied traditionally on spatial distinctions (public/private) and on limiting access to and control of information. However, more recent and complex understandings of privacy have shifted the focus to *context*. Central among this work is Helen Nissenbaum's *framework of contextual integrity* (2004, 2010). According to Nissenbaum, social activity, occurring in specific contexts, is governed by context-specific norms; among these are informational norms regarding the appropriate flow of information between parties. Contextual integrity is preserved when informational norms are upheld and violated when they are contravened. Nissenbaum's framework of contextual integrity has been adopted and built upon by many other researchers (boyd, 2012; Lange, 2007; Vaidhyanathan, 2015) and policy makers (e.g. National Science and Technology Council, 2016). Patricia Lange (2007), for example, used Nissenbaum's framework to explore variation *within* a particular context, i.e. video sharing on YouTube. Lange proposed the concepts of *publicly private* (revealing one's identity but limiting access to content) and *privately public* (sharing content but limiting access to one's identity) to describe individuals' nuanced behaviours in relation to privacy. And in her empirical study of teens'

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use of social media, danah boyd coined the term *social steganography* to describe a further variation of privacy behaviour: sharing identity and content, but limiting access to meaning: "only those who are in the know have the necessary information to look for and interpret the information provided" (boyd, 2012, p. 349). As platform capitalism and surveillance extend ever further into our personal and professional lives, Nissenbaum, boyd and others contend that individuals will continue to find and create ways to manipulate systems in order to carve out privacy according to their own needs and contexts.

Research study description

This research study took place at one higher education institution in Ireland: a medium-sized, research-focused, campus-based university offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Participants were members of academic staff across a broad range of disciplines. Rather than exploring the practices of open educators only, the study explored the practices of educators along a continuum of 'closed' to open practices. The study addressed three main research questions: how do academic staff use OEP for teaching?; why do/don't individual members of academic staff use OEP for teaching?; and what practices, values and/or strategies are shared by academic staff who use OEP for teaching, if any? The research study used constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Qualitative research methods, and constructivist grounded theory in particular, enable researchers to describe participants' activities and experiences as well as the meanings they attach to them. Participants were selected using open sampling and then theoretical sampling in order to saturate emerging categories and concepts (Charmaz, 2014; Hallberg, 2006). The total number of participants is not predetermined in a grounded theory study; rather it is determined by theoretical saturation of the emerging theory. A total of 19 academic staff were interviewed in the study. Using the constant comparative method, data analysis was undertaken concurrently with data gathering; results of early interviews enabled refinement of the interview schedule for subsequent interviews; and new codes were added as they emerged, until the point of data saturation was reached. In constructivist grounded theory, data and analysis are seen as social constructions reflecting both the participant and the researcher (Hallberg, 2006). Participants reviewed key stages of the research as it progressed and all suggested additions and changes were incorporated.

Cronin (2017) summarises the preliminary findings of the study in relation to all three research questions. This short paper explores the key finding related to research question #2, i.e. the main concern of academic staff in relation to open practices was how to *balance privacy and openness*.

Privacy and openness

Interview participants spoke about privacy and openness – their interpretations of these and the relationship between them – more than any other aspect of their digital, networked practice. Overall, privacy was highly valued by academic staff participants. None said they did *not* value privacy, although they defined privacy in various ways. Across all participants, both using and not using OEP, there was recognition that negotiating a balance between privacy and openness is an individual decision and an ongoing challenge, both as networked individuals and as educators. In the words of one participant: "you're negotiating all the time." A few participants had a strong, even fierce, attachment to privacy, opting out of using social media altogether, or using it for personal use only. Most academic staff participants, however, described striving for a balance between preserving privacy (their own and their students') and engaging in open practice, at least to some degree. This was typically accomplished through intentional use of digital spaces/tools and boundary-keeping.

Personal-professional boundary

Interaction in open online spaces tends to blur the boundaries between different identities and roles – personal and professional, formal and informal (Miller, 2013; Stewart, 2015). Despite this blurring, most participants expressed a preference for maintaining some semblance of a boundary between their personal and professional online identities and activities. Participants described boundary-keeping in terms of a desire to avoid mixing streams of conversations about work with other conversations about family life, social activities, sports, politics, etc. This mixing of life streams, defined as *context collapse* by Marwick and boyd (2010), is described as "the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients" (Vitak, 2012, p. 451). Some participants accepted a degree of context collapse or porosity across the personal-professional boundary. Others, however, were more circumspect. For many, personal-professional boundary-keeping involved considerable thought and maintenance work, for example creating rules about how to handle friend requests ("In Facebook I definitely

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don't accept friend requests from people I don't know.") and what to post ("I tend to not post anything personal on Twitter about my personal life.").

One challenge, described vividly by some, was managing interactions along the personal-professional boundary, i.e. the continuously evolving liminal space between the personal and the professional. Many participants described managing interactions across this boundary as an ongoing dilemma, speaking in terms of "slippage" and "creep" when their boundary-keeping efforts were unsuccessful. Academic staff manage personal-professional boundaries with a keen awareness of context, i.e. potential audiences that may include colleagues, students, family, etc. (Sugimoto, Hank, Bowman, & Pomerantz, 2015; Veletsianos, 2013; Veletsianos & Shaw, 2017; Veletsianos & Stewart, 2016). Personal-professional boundary-keeping practices by participants in this study included the use of privacy settings, maintaining different Facebook profiles (personal and professional), and/or using different tools for different purposes. In general, participants described this work as a process of creating and negotiating a personal set of norms and/or "rules".

Staff-student boundary

While all participants spoke of the importance of communicating with and supporting students, most expressed a desire to maintain a professional distance in the form of a staff-student boundary, online as well as offline. Many of the same practices used to maintain a personal-professional boundary also were used to maintain a staff-student boundary. Each participant described their own personal policy or rules for making these decisions. Some participants were very clear: they only interact with students on approved university systems, i.e. the VLE and email. In considering whether to connect with students in open spaces beyond the VLE or email, participants noted the potential for context collapse, for themselves and for students. All participants who were Facebook users said they had a personal policy of not 'friending' undergraduate students. But while there was little or no anxiety expressed about boundary-keeping decisions with respect to undergraduates, there was some anxiety at the border area, e.g. with PhD students. Some participants said they would friend their PhD students; others that they would only friend PhD students whom they were *not* supervising.

Balancing privacy and openness

In analysing how participants sought to balance privacy and openness when networking in open online spaces, four levels of negotiation were identified: macro (global level), meso (community/network level), micro (individual level), and nano (interaction level). Differentiating between these levels proved helpful in understanding academic staff negotiation and decision-making (see Figure 1).

MACRO	Will I share openly?
MESO	Whom will I share *with*?
MICRO	Who will I share *as*?
NANO	Will I share *this*?
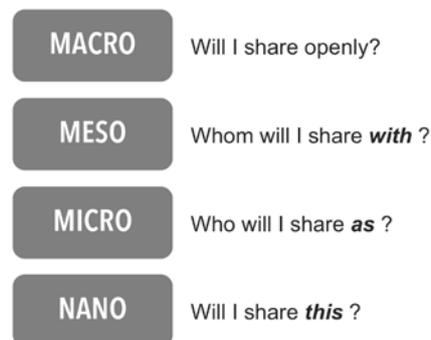
Figure 1. Four levels of balancing privacy and openness

At the **macro** level, individuals make decisions about whether to engage in open networking and sharing. Individuals with a strong attachment to privacy may opt out at this level. All who consider engaging in open practices must consider questions at three further levels. At the **meso** level, individuals consider whom they would like share *with* (e.g. family, friends, professional colleagues, students, the wider public) as well as those with whom they do not want to share. At the **micro** level, individuals make decisions about whom they will share *as*. Such decisions relate to an individual's digital identity and their sense of agency in managing that identity. Digital identity issues raised in this study concur with findings from previous studies by Veletsianos (2013, p. 44) and others noting "an increasing tension between personal and professional identity, the spectrum

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of sharing that lies between the two, and the perception of what a scholar is and what she/he does." Finally, at the **nano** level, individuals make decisions about individual open transactions: "Will I like, follow, friend, post, tweet, tag, or share *this*?" Formal and informal professional development initiatives often focus at the top or macro level, describing the benefits of sharing and supporting staff in learning how to use various tools. But the complex and ongoing work of open practice happens beneath this level—at the meso, micro, and nano levels— where issues around context collapse and digital identity are negotiated.

Discussion and conclusion

For most academic staff participants in this study, open practice was experienced as a process of continual reflection and negotiation. Interestingly, this was the case for educators across the openness continuum, whether novice or experienced users of open practices. Other empirical studies of academics' social media practices have found that scholars use social media for both personal and professional reasons (Bowman, 2015; Stewart, 2015; Veletsianos & Stewart, 2016). In their study of open educators, Veletsianos & Stewart (2016) concluded that "scholars' personal lives are often an integral part of online participation and as such mediate emergent forms of scholarship" (Veletsianos & Stewart, 2016, p. 8). However, according to participants in this study, including those using open practices, personal-professional boundary-keeping work is both continual and challenging. Open practice may offer benefits, but it does not inoculate open, networked scholars from the ongoing work of negotiating boundaries and balancing privacy and openness. Contextual understandings of privacy add much to our understanding of open practices and networked learning. As Nissenbaum (2010) notes: the notion of contextual integrity helps to capture what individuals care about when they consider privacy and openness, i.e. not necessarily secrecy and control, but rather appropriate flow of personal information in particular contexts. Openness is not a one-time decision and it is not universally experienced; it is always complex, personal, contextual, and continually negotiated.

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