

# Culture Vultures: How Open is Open?

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National  
Lottery

DCU

# Openness in distance education

- A diffuse, often-inscrutable concept (Weller, 2014).
- Generally accepted as a positive, but also used in many different ways (Cronin, 2017: 12).
- This lack of an accepted definition reflects both the versatility of the concept and also the fragmentation of the field.



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# MOOCs and Openness

- It's right there in the word, but what is the relationship of 'Openness' as a concept, and MOOC provision?
- Many tensions inherent in providing scaled courses, such as copyright and course access.
- A rather particular 'definition-in-use'...

## “Open” or “Free”?

*“The second prominent meaning with MOOCs was the uniformly expressed characteristic of being ‘free’ (n=107). This oft-repeated term was clearly being used in a monetary rather than an emancipatory sense (i.e., ‘free beer’ rather than ‘free spirit’).”*

- Bulfin, Pangrazio and Selwyn (2014: 296)

# An alternative openness – cultural learning?



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*“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, **global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.**”*

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goal – Target 4.7



ONLINE COURSE

# Irish 101: An Introduction to Irish Language and Culture

Get an introduction to Ireland's culture by learning the basics of the Irish language.

[Go to course](#)[Overview](#)[Topics](#)[Start dates](#)[Requirements](#)[Educators](#)



# Fáilte ar Líne

- Project teaching the Irish language and Irish culture to ab-initio learners around the world.
- Launched on the FutureLearn platform in January, 2018.
- Over 50,000 registered learners, and high levels of engagement visible across the series.

# Research Questions

- What elements of openness were visible in learner responses on the course?
- What aspects of learning appeared congruent, and in tension with the concept of openness?
- What can we learn about the learning experience through using such a frame?

# Methodology

- A corpus of approximately **24,000** learner comments were analysed.
- A qualitative, interpretive frame was adopted to analysis.
- Results were thematically-coded, yielding three core themes.

# 1. Learning for cultural purposes

- Learners appeared interested not only in learning the language, but also in Irish culture more generally:

*All of my great grandparents were from Ireland. They were proud of their Irish heritage and passed down stories and traditions. I am fascinated and intrigued with Irish history and culture. I hope someday to visit Ireland and the counties and towns from which they came. – Extract 1.*

- Goals rarely related to a specific aim, but rather to ‘experience’ Irish culture.

## 2. Intrinsic learning

— Most learners expressed a strong love of learning:

*I love learning languages and thought it would be fun to add Irish to the list of languages I've studied. – Extract 2.*

- Intrinsic learning is difficult to 'create' (Deci and Ryan, 2008: 71), but possible to promote or nourish.
- 'Good learner' as an identity for many learners.

### 3. Cultural Empathy and Openness

— Most-surprisingly, learners reflected upon culture in a meta-aware sense:

*It's up to you to find a way to preserve your culture. In the 1970's Hawaiian was dying. Hawaiian Educators started the ball rolling by opening up Hawaiian speaking preschools. Now, there are dual language immersion schools all over the islands. – Extract 3.*

*It is so lovely to see all the people around the world with or without Irish roots wanting to learn our language. I know the meaning of a lot of words but am very poor at constructing sentences, and would also like to converse better (without feeling like a wally haha). – Extract 4.*

# Discussion

- Vibrant ‘micro culture’ visible on the MOOC, and high levels of social interaction.
- Openness generally conceived of not merely as access to resources, but also as a cultural property (something one *is* and *does*).
- The value of this learning is subjective, and relates to experience, rather than achievement alone.

# Tensions and broader lessons

- These forms of openness and learning are generally ‘invisible’: What types of concrete evidence can capture them?
- Strong emphasis within MOOC provision on financial sustainability (Lapworth, 2018: 17) is premised upon the generation of significant revenue.
- Anxiety over completion, continuance and quantification of learning in clear tension with cultural openness.

# Conclusion

- Cultural openness exists, and appeared important to learners on Irish 101.
- New learning pathways generate new opportunities, but also new challenges.
- Capturing the learner voice is critical, and expanding horizons requires emphasising a broad range of perspectives.

# References

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