

Book Review: Unlocking the Gates: How and Why Leading Universities are Opening Access to Their Courses

Rachel Dearlove reviews Taylor Walsh's guide to open courseware in higher education across America and the UK, which points towards a new model of more sustainable mass higher education.

Unlocking the Ages: How and Why Leading Universities are Opening Access to Their Courses.
Taylor Walsh. [Princeton University Press](#). 2011

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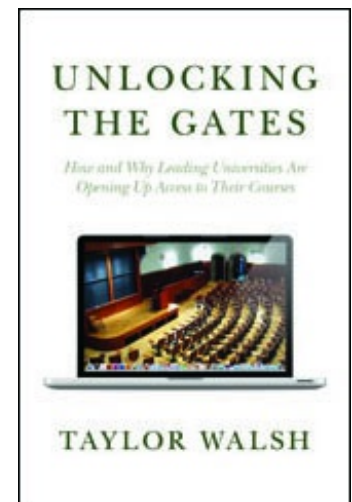
The phenomenon of 'open courseware' may seem to be a niche policy area for most readers, but for anyone looking for an insight into some of the issues lying underneath western higher education, they would do well to pick up a copy of *Unlocking the Gates*. [Taylor Walsh](#)'s work may only focus on one particular phenomenon but it acts as a lens through which to examine some key challenges facing institutions: how to have a global impact whilst also serving your local students, how to do more with less in times of reducing budgets and endowments, and how higher education can and should change to become fit for the 21st century.

Walsh writes on behalf of [Ithaka S+R](#), the strategic consulting and research arm of the not for profit organisation ITHAKA, based in New York, an organisation with some similarities to the UK's [JISC](#). Walsh presents seven case studies profiling a range of open courseware initiatives. Her analyses of the projects are based on a detailed reading of publicly available sources, internal project documents, and interviews with key players. This allows insight into the thinking behind each project and the on-going challenge to find a route to long term sustainability.

Walsh first describes how early systems, such as Columbia University's *Fathom* and the joint not-for-profit venture between Oxford, Princeton, Yale and Stanford, *AllLearn*, were not immune to the dotcom madness. The author's description of their development is akin to watching a car crash in slow motion – you know it can only end badly. Both were caught up in the contagious buzz of the seemingly unlimited money making potential of the internet around at the turn of the 21st century. Both were also motivated by a fear of being left behind and so rushing in, sought to sell a product without a clear market – high cost educational content, without any accompanying qualifications or opportunities for credit. Columbia University burned through \$25 million dollars in the three years of operating *Fathom*, after the limited and scattered content provided by its ten institution consortium failed to bring in any significant income. *AllLearn* was based on a slightly more manageable four institution consortium, but it [suffered from many of the same problems](#) as *Fathom*, an absence of any clear vision for the project except to 'get in the game' and lack of faculty buy in.

The next three case studies focus on three very different ventures into open courseware by elite universities, but Walsh demonstrates that each was seeking a way to bring their unique educational environments to a wider audience. The most well-known of all the project's covered by Walsh is [MIT's OpenCourseware](#) (OCW). This was an attempt to put a version of every one of MIT's 2000 or so courses online and make them accessible to all. Content ranges from a course outline and reading list to full video lecture series. [Open Yale Courses](#) (OYC) took the opposite approach to MIT, focusing on getting a small number of courses online with complete high production value video lecture series. The courses captured focused primarily on Yale's 'star professors', and Walsh identifies its benefits to primarily have been in public relations rather than educational impact. [Carnegie Mellon's Open Learning Initiative](#) (OLI) stands out among all the case studies Walsh profiles as the most pedagogically innovative, as it is the only project profiled which let the change in medium to online act as an opportunity to rethink course delivery. OLI delivers courses as complete learning experiences with automatic 'cognitive tutors' guiding students through the learning process – this is a far cry from OCW's syllabus and reading list approach. But Walsh identifies the key disadvantage to this level of innovation, the tremendous amount of work required to convert 'traditional' courses to the OLI method.

Walsh identifies the key commonalities between these three projects. They are all primarily top-down initiatives that received significant amounts of external funding from charitable foundations. This has generated a common problem: the need to find a way to finance the activities on an ongoing basis and



maintain buy in when the key players at the top move on. They are a 'nice to have' rather than necessary for the institutions' operations and have yet to find ways to adequately capture and demonstrate their impact.

The case study of [webcast.berkeley](#) provides a counterpoint to the projects undertaken by the elite private universities profiled. It grew organically from one professor's hobby project and is primarily designed to serve the needs of Berkeley's own student population and immediate community. Webcast.berkeley is based on the low-cost automated video and audio capture of a wide range of core course lectures. It has neither sought the high production values of OYC or the comprehensiveness of OCW – but to provide added value to enrolled students. As such, Walsh identifies it as the most integrated into its home institution and most likely to have a lasting impact.

A notable weakness of Walsh's work is its lack of geographic diversity, as the author sought only one case study from outside of the USA – with the final chapter focusing on India's [National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning](#). The project has more in common with some of the US case studies than one might imagine. It is another centrally funded, top down project run by a group of seven of India's most elite universities – the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). Walsh demonstrates that the project has failed to capture the imagination of its intended audience, the 2000 or so engineering colleges which had been identified as needing support to upgrade the quality of their teaching. And so whilst a great deal of high quality educational content has been created, usage remains low.

In her epilogue Walsh hints at a conclusion, which might have been drawn out more clearly elsewhere in the work, pointing out the universality of, particularly introductory, courses in higher education all over the world, and the potential for open courseware initiatives such as these to expand access to higher education (or help maintain access in times of rising costs) by introducing an element of Fordised mass delivery. Both in the USA and in the UK the cost of higher education seem to be growing almost exponentially. Walsh's work provides evidence and insight into different ways of 'doing' higher education. Most of the projects may have originally started as 'nice to have' experiments, but they may in actually be pointing towards a new model of more sustainable mass higher education.

Rachel Dearlove is a university manager with a special interest in international education.