Intersections and Productive Tensions Between Posthumanism and Open Education Philosophies Toward Facilitating Embodied ODeL Pedagogies

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Abstract:

Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) frameworks aim to promote greater social justice and the democratisation of knowledge. However, much of the field remains grounded in mind-body dualism (Cartesian), a legacy of humanist philosophy. This division is particularly problematic for ODeL in South Africa, since the concept of *anthropos* (human) has historically excluded certain bodies, reinforcing inequality. Posthumanist philosophy challenges anthropocentrism by decentring the 'human' and promoting an ethics of entanglement. While some critique decentring the human as a failure to address social justice, posthumanism offers becoming-minoritarian—reclaiming the individual from the exclusionary humanist norms.

This paper examines how posthumanism can reshape current ODeL pedagogies; recognising the body-mind and multisensory learning as integral to 'openness'. Through posthumanist-informed openness (i.e. post-dual and post-anthropos), ODeL institutions in South Africa can reconceptualise Ubuntu in ways that more effectively address social injustice, knowledge de/colonisation and Eurocentric pedagogies. This paper is fully conceptual and theoretical, highlighting the enabling macro-level nature of ODeL pedagogy, advocating for inclusive and sustainable approaches to open education. This paper also proposes possibilities for further, empirical research on posthuman-informed, Ubuntu-aligned pedagogies for ODeL institutions in South Africa.

Keywords:

Posthumanism, Open Education, Embodied Learning, ODeL, Ubuntu, Social Justice, Eco-Justice

1. Introduction

The evolution of Open Distance eLearning has promoted and facilitated greater social justice in various ways, including through the multifaceted concept of openness, increased access, and lower cost to learning, and removing barriers of time and geography (Akintolu & Letseka, 2024; Farrow, 2017). Openness is often associated with liberalist ideology and the principles articulated by John Dewey, aimed at enhancing participation and equality, embracing pluralism, and promoting student autonomy (Sakkoula & Lionarakis, 2024). However, when viewed through a philosophical, existential, critical posthumanist lens, current ODeL practice appear to operate on humanist assumptions that are fundamentally contradictory to the aims of open education philosophies.

Humanist philosophy and Cartesian dualism remain implicit in current open education practices in several ways:

First, current ODeL approaches maintain the assumption of a disembodied, autonomous learner, influenced by Descartes' mind/body dualism that separates the mind from the physical body (Zhang, 2022). This dualism is implicit in further distinctions between subject/object, self/other, human/technology, treating the learner as disembodied and rational, i.e. a learner disconnected from their material and discursive contexts (Bayne, 2016; Gourlay, 2021; Zhang, 2022). Second, ODeL tends to privilege the cognitive capacity of the human learner as the knowing subject, separate from an external, knowable world (Gourlay, 2021; Knox, 2015). Third, ODeL platforms, like MOOCs, tend to assume a universal human subject and human condition, which creates conditions for inequality and lead to the need for decolonising education (Knox, 2015). Fourth, a humanist view situates technology as subservient, as a tool separate from the human subject (Knox, 2015). Posthumanism challenges this.

Following Barad (2007), posthumanism holds that human and more-than-human (including technology, algorithm, non-human animal, organic matter) are deeply entangled and intra-relational:

> To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.

The need to integrate posthumanist perspectives lies in its questioning of the very mechanisms of social ordering that create exclusion (Postma, 2016). Therefore, we argue that inequalities will continue to exist and reproduce as long as educational systems and practices build on humanist assumptions of the rational, autonomous, neoliberal subject (Knox, 2015). Posthumanism offers becoming-minoritarian—to move beyond predefined identity categories that regurgitate a dominant social order, to find new assemblages of being, and to oppose a sameness that can be normalised and controlled under regimes of power (Postma, 2016). To become minoritarian is to be part of multiple connections, to be entangled (Postma, 2016), and to reclaim space for marginalised or non-normative subjectivities. We elaborate on the implications of entanglement later in this paper.

This preparatory paper presents a background and rationale for a scoping review, with which we aim to map the current research, if any, at the intersection of ODeL, posthumanist education, and embodied learning principles. The aim of the trajectory on this topic is to identify productive ways of rethinking openness in ways that align with a posthumanist-informed *Ubuntu* philosophy to contribute to research on openness and equity in a South African ODeL context. The three primary concepts framing this enquiry are posthumanism in education, open education philosophies, and embodied learning.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Posthumanism

Posthumanism has been criticised for decentring the human when so many are still fighting for the right to be considered human (Gourlay, 2021). However, this sentiment misconstrues the aim of posthumanism. Decentring the human is not in contest with social justice. It does not mean doing away with the classification of human, but rather human exceptionalism and the ideal human subject. Had the human (*anthropos*), traditionally a white, heteronormative, European (wealthy), male body (Rennolds, 2022) been considered the centre of the universe, it could not have established itself as superior to 'other', and therefore, could not establish/envisage inequalities and discriminations.

As such, without displacing the idea of 'human' from its central role, education limits the search for openness and equity to a responsive act that reiterates and reproduces its opposition's inherent structure of exclusion and inequity. In this sense, our paper understands posthumanism not as doing away with the ego of the species, but rather, doing away with the ego of the ideal specimen, and by extension, the ideal student.

Posthumanism is a complex set of ideas, an ontological position with key principles, some of which include rejecting dualisms (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017), questioning and disturbing human exceptionalism and centricity (Bayne, 2016; Dhungana, 2023), emphasising entanglement and relationality (Barad, 2007; Bayne & Jandrić, 2017), a view of agency as distributed and more-than-human (Gourlay, 2021), understanding knowledge as co-constituted between the knower and the known (Bayne, 2016; Knox, 2015), a focus on 'becoming' or the continual change of 'human' through intra-actions (Ferrando, 2023; Postma, 2016), recognizing the agency of all matter (Gourlay, 2021; Knox, 2015), recognizing the ethical responsibility of our species in the greater symbiosis of our more-than-human world (Ferrando, 2023; Peppler et al., 2020), and challenging normative standards (Kouppanou, 2022).

The relevance of these principles to current education, specifically Open and Distance eLearning higher education, is manifold. Some of the more pertinent opportunities, in our view, are re-imagining pedagogies for digital learning environments (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017; Dhungana, 2023), expanding the scope of social justice (Kouppanou, 2022; Peppler et al., 2020), and decolonising education by disrupting and irritating humanist underpinnings in prominent educational theories (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017). The re-imagining of ODeL pedagogies from a posthumanist perspective then requires a re-imagining of openness—a fluid concept that has no universally accepted definition to date (Sakkoula & Lionarakis, 2024).

2.2 Open Education Philosophies

Open education strives for principles of access, democratization, and empowerment, yet continues to conceive of the learner and agency in ways that do not consider the increasingly entangled world. To address this tension, a posthumanist lens provides alternative ways of conceiving of the student, technology, and the very meaning of 'openness' in ODeL that is cognizant of our species' entanglement in a more-than-human ecosystem, where education is a necessarily entangled process that should be *transversal* (from the work of Félix Guattari) (Cole & Bradley, 2018). That is, education should not be confined to vertical hierarchies but should (be allowed to) emerge through relationships, environments, and material ecologies.

From a posthumanist perspective, transversality responds to the relationality between human and more-than-human elements, understanding learning as continuous encounters between diverse species and existents (Dhungana, 2023; Kouppanou, 2022). As such, 'openness' may be re-defined in a way that acknowledges the entanglement of learning with environmental, social, and material ecologies (Cole & Bradley, 2018).

Openness in the South African context is mainly conceived from an ODL stance (in opposition to full-time contact institutions). From this perspective, 'openness' is understood as (Akintolu & Letseka, 2024):

- addressing historical exclusion,
- providing access/removing barriers to education,
- providing flexibility,
- being student-centred,
- affordable higher education,
- rooted in a philosophy of transformation and social change,
- promoting inclusive and collaborative learning, and
- being open to learners from diverse backgrounds.

Because the concept of 'openness' in education is heavily influenced by context, it becomes volatile, making it difficult to define precisely (Akintolu & Letseka, 2024). Importantly, the digital divide in the South African context hinders the move to e-learning and highlights the need for a focus beyond mere access (Letseka, 2015a).

What if access isn't enough? And what if our conceptions of success (as graduation and employability) are part of the reason why most ODL institutions' throughput rates are abysmal? Despite our best intentions and efforts toward equity, the problem lies in *promising liberation through 'opennes' and flexibility but demanding conformity*. We argue that a posthuman, embodied lens might help uncover solutions that are not restricted by the current logic of employability.

Posthumanist thought and its overlaps with open education principles allows us to ask how ODeL institutions in the Global South can move past instrumentalist education (learning as a means to an economic end) and make space for slow scholarship and ontological inclusion (different ways of knowing, being, learning, succeeding). Perhaps posthumanism and embodied learning principles could shift open education institutions' treatment of students as units to be processed (from an "excluded" to an "employable" subject) toward treatment of learners as bodies entangled in learning and living.

Posthumanist and open educational philosophies already converge in their critiques of traditional, exclusionary, and standardised models of learning. However, there are some tensions that hold promise for expanding the concept of 'openness' in terms of what success and throughput look like for South African ODeL institutions. The following tensions are salient:

- Open education's assumptions of a universal, self-directed learner engaging education to become a labour force unit for human ends (Knox, 2015) **vs.** Posthumanism's move beyond the anthropocentric subject toward an entangled and embodied learner engaging education toward ethical relationality, shared responsibility, and the possibility of living otherwise (Ferrando, 2023; Postma, 2016).
- Large scale open education models (e.g. MOOCs) may lead to standardisation and uniformity **vs.** Difference and multiplicity utilised as productive forces in posthuman approaches (Knox, 2015).
- Alignment with neoliberal agendas and commercialisation (data colonialism) that prioritises economic benefits **vs.** Ethical implications of human-technology entanglement in educational emancipation (Knox, 2015; Sakkoula & Lionarakis, 2024).
- Technology as a neutral tool to achieve educational goals **vs.** Technology and materiality as agential in shaping practices and spaces in educational contexts (Knox, 2015).

One way in which ODeL in South Africa can move toward more posthuman, entangled forms of learning, is to overcome the mind-body dualism underlying our traditional understanding of the learner (Stolz, 2015). To be (post)human is to exist in a *bodymind*. That is, the mind and body are not separate entities with separate functions, but rather multifaceted parts of what constitutes a holistic being (Munro, 2018; Stolz, 2015). Understanding the principles of embodied learning may open discourse into what counts as learning in South African ODeL, and serve to address the problems posed by the drive toward scaling success.

2.3 Embodied Learning

Munro (2018) explains that embodied learning is "the deliberate use and recognition of multimodal bodymind activities and strategies to facilitate shifts in perspectives, perceptions, paradigms, behaviour and actions". The nine principles of embodied learning put forward by Munro (2018) hold possibilities for rethinking success, equity, and 'openness' in posthumanist-informed ODeL institutions.

1. **Holistic integration:** the learner is treated as a whole being that is interrelated and multimodal, i.e. a cognitive, affective, sensory, relational, contextual, and discursive being.

2. **Organic congruencies:** while acknowledging the complexities of each individual, there are shared similarities between all beings of our species—anatomical, physiological, psychological. Knowledge of these congruencies assists both the learner and facilitator in finding ease and efficiency in context, which translates into well-being.

3. **Personal uniqueness:** "each human being has a unique and non-replicable identity on a multitude of levels due to phenomenological experiences", meaning each individual will experience and respond to learning processes differently. In practice, it "begs flexibility, acceptance, inclusion and transactional engagements, affording the learner an opportunity to question or engage with her own filters and processes in order to accept or reject the shifts".

4. **Sensory awareness:** the ability of human bodies to sense and feel the inner and outer environment through interoception, proprioception, the subjective experience of the monist self and identity in relation to the environment.

5. **Inner and outer:** acknowledging and inviting an interweaving of the inner environment/self and the outer environment during learning processes.

6. **Continuous change:** the continuous processes of movement that are definitive of 'life', both at an objective level (breath, body plasticity, blood flow, brain plasticity) and a subjective level (cultural patterns, responses to environmental stimuli).

7. **Habitual patterns:** interactions between the inner and outer environments that are repeated over time and become conditioned or survival responses. These patterns, when not mindfully engaged with and negotiated, pose obstacles to learning in that they eventually manifest as pain, disease, and malfunction. On the other hand, patterns that are helpful to learning can intentionally and mindfully be habituated.

8. **Re-patterning:** functional and expressive behaviour can be deliberately altered and habituated, which is made possible by neuroplasticity and body plasticity. Re-patterning does not only contribute to ease and efficiency, but also to well-being and self-teaching.

9. **Self-teaching:** drawing on self-reflection and the cultivation of bodymind awareness, the learner taps into the 'teacher within' to find shifts and patterns that are optimal and responsive to their continuously changing bodymind.

A traditional humanist view renders the complex entangled student invisible and disembodied (without a bodymind), which allows for the reproduction of hierarchy and discrimination against students who do not conform to the neoliberal, rational subject. Since a posthumanist approach to open and distance e-learning decentres the 'human' (a particular neoliberal subject), the complex student and their entanglements can be re-embodied and made visible (Gourlay 2024:55). To focus on student behaviours as 'active' or 'passive' is problematic for ODeL, since it disregards the multitude of ways that learning can happen between the student, digital environment, coursework, culture, and varying levels and modes of interaction (Knox, 2015), which cannot easily be tracked as clean data. Furthermore, "[e]ducational spaces and objects, in this view, are not considered to be merely backdrops to learning activities, or tools with which to improve educational performance. Rather they are the emergent results of enmeshed social and material enactments" (Knox, 2015). As such, embodied learning in ODeL is not simply a mental process that occurs in a digital space; it is a sociomaterial enactment produced through relational practices between humans (multimodal beings) and their more-than-human environment.

To review, open education is aimed at increasing access and democratising learning (Farrow, 2017), and by introducing principles of embodied learning into ODeL contexts, informed by posthumanist thought, these aims can possibly be expanded and better implemented. In ODeL contexts, learning is a complex, holistic, sociomaterial process that involves the entangled bodyminds of learners with digital and physical environments (Bayne, 2004;

Knox, 2015; Munro, 2018). We propose that these perspectives are essential for not only deeper understanding of what Open Distance e-Learning means, but also for designing digital pedagogies and research methods that are more effective and critically informed (Bayne, 2016).

3. Intersections, Tensions, and Implications for ODeL in the Global South

At the intersection of posthumanism, open education, and embodied learning lies an invitation to rethink what counts as success in ODeL. Open education is focused on expanding access and addressing exclusion but assumes a universal learner and defines success in terms of throughput and employability. Posthumanism's decentring of the human subject unsettles this assumption and emphasises how learning is shaped by human entanglement with a more-than-human world of existents and agents. Principles of embodied learning bolsters this stance by foregrounding the ODeL student as a bodymind—affective, sensory, relational being—that engages in learning as a lived and material process.

A redefinition of success should consider that completion of modules and attainment of credentials are not appropriate measures of success. Success may very well lie in the capacity to remain in-learning, i.e. to be transformed, to relate differently, to engage ethically throughout life. Should the definition of success shift in this way, we are called to develop pedagogical approaches that value difference over standardisation, relationality over autonomy, and becoming over outcomes.

For an embodied ODeL pedagogy that is posthumanist-informed, the intersection of the three approaches in this paper would suggest that content should not be designed for delivery, but designed from learning ecologies that are open-ended, responsive, and ethically attuned. ODeL spaces should be designed to encounter learners as co-constructive agents in learning, rather than units of productivity. To action such a shift will cause discomfort, especially with current success metrics. However, it pleads the willingness to ask: *What does it mean to succeed in a system that recognises the learner as entangled, embodied, and in continual transformation?*

4. Implications for ODeL in the Global South

In the context of South Africa, education is entangled with histories of exclusion, hopes for redress, and socio-material inequities that are still ongoing. The intersections between posthumanism, open education, and embodied learning carry deep implications for ODeL in South Africa and the Global South. The first implication of this intersection is in rethinking the purpose of education if we value open space for learning not only as productive, but also as relational, transformative, and ethically situated. Secondly, if the concept of the 'ideal learner' is challenged or replaced by the learner as entangled bodymind, we will require new pedagogies that support the diverse modes of learning and being beyond those modes already rewarded. A third implication is that pedagogies need to be reimagined as relational practices, i.e. educators in the Global South need to design learning environments that do not simply deliver content but also cultivate relational learning and co-becoming.

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* is grounded in relationality encapsulated by the maxim "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"*, which translates to "a person is a person through other persons" (Letseka, 2016b). As such, *Ubuntu* is often understood as "I am because we are", understanding the human through communal interdependence and interconnectedness (Letseka, 2016; Seroto, 2016). *Ubuntu* is already in contrast with Western ideals of the isolated and autonomous individual, yet it is traditionally centred on human-to-human relationships (LenkaBula, 2008), which reflects humanist sentiments. However, *Ubuntu* (Nguni languages) or *Botho* (Sotho languages) can be extended beyond the human to include the more-than-human world. The implications for extending the philosophy of *Ubuntu* to ecological ethics has already been theorised by LenkaBula (2008), who criticises the anthropocentric interpretations of the maxim in favour of a broader "web of interactions of life". While LenkaBula writes from the perspective of theological ethics, the sentiment aligns with posthumanist ethics of entanglement. Posthumanism posits that the interconnection between all worldly existents (that LenkaBula terms 'creation' in the theological context), includes non-organic agents, technological agents, artificial intelligences, and inorganic materialities, to name a few.

As such, an *Ubuntu*-informed, posthumanist embodied approach to ODeL would continue to foster values such as care, reciprocity, responsibility, patience, togetherness, and being "profoundly concerned about mutuality" (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2016) but extend these values beyond the human and the organic environment, toward the more-than-human world of existents. The interconnectedness of human life in ecological systems demand that we include eco-justice in our aims for sustainable educational praxis. We contend that it is particularly the guidance of a posthumanist variation of *Ubuntu* that would have profound impact on the sustainability (ethically, ontologically, and ecologically) of ODeL in the Global South.

5. Link to Forthcoming Scoping Review

The conceptual paper we present here is the foundation of a scoping review, which we intend to present at the 2025 International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) conference. The intended scoping review will map existing scholarship at the intersection of posthumanism, open education philosophies, and embodied learning within ODeL contexts. While the initial scoping review will consider research from global perspectives, the aim is to develop this research beyond the scoping review into macro-level, philosophical, and pedagogical implications specific to a South African ODeL context. The scoping review will build on the theoretical positioning and concepts introduced here with the aim of identifying trends, gaps, and opportunities for further research and praxis.

With the review, we hope to offer a clearer sense of the current scholarly landscape and identify generative paths forward for contextually rooted and ethically attuned ODeL pedagogies.

6. Conclusion

This paper posits that meaningful transformation in ODeL requires a redefinition of 'openness', possibly one informed by posthumanism and the principles of embodied learning, to further its aim of equitable access. By agitating the dualisms and instrumentalist views underlying current ODeL pedagogy, we open possibilities that are more concerned with entanglement, care, and co-becoming, rather than standardisation and output.

While this paper is fully conceptual, it is not just a collection of philosophical abstractions. Rather, it offers urgent and practical provocations for more contextually relevant, ecologically aware, and inclusive pedagogies for ODeL in the Global South.

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