



Open scholars: Putting their heads above the parapet or transitioning from Grimms' Rapunzel to Disney's Tangled

Chrissi Nerantzi¹, Yasmin Kader¹ and Margaret Korosec¹

Abstract

This paper is a collective exploration into the terms 'scholarship of teaching and learning' and 'open scholarship' and the implications to academic engagement, identity and practice. The authors are using the metaphors of Rapunzel from Grimms' fairytale and the Disney adaptation Tangled to uncover parallels and insights that seem to be of relevance to how open scholarship and open scholars are perceived, and the relationship to scholarship of teaching and learning and pedagogical research. They explore open scholars' journeys from a voiceless, socially isolated existence to one that is emancipated and empowered-to-share through collaboration making a difference to others, communities and society. The inquiry surfaces thoughts, dilemmas and contradictions that question the term 'scholarship of teaching and learning'. It explores how open scholarship and open scholars wish to be valued, recognised and celebrated for their commitment and contributions to the enhancement and transformation in higher education. This exploration is applicable to higher education more generally through academic experience and practice, curriculum and learning design, and scholarship that enables pedagogic experimentations and innovations to flow freely across sectors.

Keywords

scholarship, open scholarship, learning, teaching, education, open education

¹ University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Corresponding Author:

Chrissi Nerantzi, School of Education, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK
Email: c.nerantzi@leeds.ac.uk

Introductory words

Recent conversations around the value of open scholarship reminded us of the GO-GN picture book “Together” (Nerantzi, et al., 2021) and the work we did as co-authors and open co-creators. We reached out to open scholars around the globe, to gain insights into how they saw themselves, their perceived strengths and vulnerabilities. What was particularly fascinating was that “curiosity”, “generosity” and “boldness” featured under strengths and vulnerabilities at the same time, with more individuals recognising these as vulnerabilities than as strengths (Roberts et al., 2020). How can open scholars’ commitment to others, with their selflessness and caring nature, make them vulnerable? Cotton et al. (2018) used Cinderella to inquire into the positioning of pedagogic research within universities by equating this form of research as subpar to subject-based research. We reached out to Grimms’ Rapunzel and Disney’s Tangled to make sense of what open scholars may experience using two fairy tales with distinct characters across centuries, cultures, and stages of life with one in childhood and the other in young adulthood.

Is all scholarship open or is scholarship actually a thing?

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) remains a hot topic in universities. Academics on teaching and scholarship and those on teaching and research contracts are treated in distinct ways that creates tensions and frictions, and unequitable opportunities also in relation to career progression (Smith & Walker, 2021). Godbold et al. (2023) question the usefulness of these contractual categorisations and others question SoTL as a term and concept (Canning & Masika, 2020). But what do we mean by it?

Over 30 years ago, Boyer (1990, p. 16) stated that “the time has come to move beyond the tired old ‘teaching versus research’ debate and give the familiar and honourable term ‘scholarship’ a broader, more capacious meaning, one that brings legitimacy to the full scope of academic work.” This is how it all started.

Over 20 years ago, Shulman (2000, p. 13) reminded us that “Our institutions have a special role in a free and open society to extend understanding and to change understanding from private property to community property. This special role is scholarship because it has three characteristics: (1) it's not private, but public, (2) it's not only available but critically reviewed by peers, and (3) it can be built upon by others. It's generative. It can be exchanged.” These three characteristics echo some of the conversations we are having today. It is noted that SoTL is increasingly more explicit in including public and open features such as sharing of practices, ideas, perspectives, resources beyond traditional academic outputs using open licencing (Fanghanel et al., 2016). These changes illustrate that what we understand by SoTL today has evolved and broadened over the years.

As SoTL has evolved over the years, so has the technology available to scholars. Scholarship is shared through exchanges and connected practices that are even more possible than ever before thanks also to networked digital technologies. Over ten years ago, Weller (2011, p. 4) explored the breadth of scholarship suggesting it had the “flexibility to accommodate new forms of practice.” These new forms of scholarly practice include the use and ubiquity of technology that serves as a conduit for the principles of scholarship. The boundaries within an institution are less defined within the digital publication ecosystem.

Some years ago, Canning and Masika (2020, pp. 1094-1095) questioned this broadening of what we understand by SoTL and claim that “SoTL has become a millstone round the neck

of teaching and learning research and has become too inclusive to be useful [...] and needs to be thrown on the ash heap of educational history.” Instead, the authors suggest focusing on “research into teaching and learning” (p. 1094).

While SoTL has evolved, open SoTL is not as widely used as the term open scholarship. Open scholarship as defined by Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012, p. 168) provides valuable insights as they state that open in scholarship refers to: “(1) open access and open publishing, (2) open education, including open educational resources and open teaching, and (3) networked participation.” Parsons et al. (2022, p. 312) recognise that “Open scholarship has transformed research” and go on to state that “open scholarship is an umbrella term that refers to the endeavour to improve openness, integrity, social justice, diversity, equity, inclusivity and accessibility in all areas of scholarly activities. Open scholarship extends the more widely used terms open science and open research to include academic fields beyond the sciences and activities beyond academic research.” It seems that these two definitions of open scholarship provide a lens to conceptualise scholarship as the ‘how’ we engage in research and ‘why’ to generate and disseminate new knowledge that is shared and benefits society more widely based on principles of equality, equity, collaboration and social practice where open is designed in. Would such a reframing be valuable to better understand what we mean by scholarship more generally, boost engagement and recognition perhaps or is this proposition too radical?

What roles do “what is in there for me” and “what is in there for us” play in all this (Nerantzi, 2024)? Could Ashwin & Trigwell (2004, p. 122) provide some insights perhaps as they remind us of the personal and the more public dimension of scholarship? The authors distinguish between three levels of scholarship illustrating the connections between purpose, process and outcomes progressively leading towards more expansive and wider transformative scholarship or from micro, meso to macro level of engagement: “Level 1: personal, verified by self, personal knowledge, Level 2: inform group within a shared context, local knowledge; Level 3: inform a wider audience, verified by those outside that context, public knowledge”. Are open scholars more concerned with “what is in there for us” and find fulfilment in collaborating with others and making a positive contribution therefore aiming to operate more in the public sphere?

Two fairy tale heroines, Rapunzel and Tangled, will help us explore some of our thoughts around open scholarship through looking at voice or lack of it, isolation and empowerment.

Voiceless

Grimm’s Rapunzel, a young girl, was imprisoned in a tower by Gothel to protect her beauty who exercised power over her for her personal interest and privilege pretending it was good for the girl. Rapunzel was voiceless and seems passively waiting for something to happen, somebody to free her (Dattagupta, 2018).

Open scholars in their institutions can resemble at times Grimm’s Rapunzel, locked up, feeling despair and unable to act. Voiceless. Powerless. There is something about power asymmetries open scholars experience intensely. They may not recognise (yet) the power they have as they are often not the ones “in power” and operate at practitioner level. They may feel helpless to use their voice, fearing rejection, exclusion and punishment or retaliation. They therefore may work quietly, experiment quietly and locally on their own open projects with their students as partners feeling stuck in what Ashwin and Trigwell

(2004) defined as level 1 personal scholarship practice, wanting to open their wings but not daring to (yet) at this stage. Staw's (1995, p. 165) words come to mind who wrote "Those in power set the agenda; they reward those who fall in line politically, who are willing to support the existing order. Power also begets power. Those who have power get the resources to maintain their positions, while others must struggle to survive."

Research suggests that open scholars, also referred to as digital scholars (Weller, 2011), feel isolated in their institutions as they do not seem to align themselves with the status quo but go against it since their values are driven by their commitment to the democratisation of knowledge (Bozkurt et al., 2023; Costa, 2013; Costa, 2014; Costa, 2015; Costa, 2016). Similarities are observed among creative scholars too (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019; Nerantzi et al., 2023; Nygaard et al., 2010). Weller (2014, p. 4) talks about "openness as activism". Is this what causes them this struggle? As their vision and commitment to social action and social justice may not seem to be understood as valuable or relevant and therefore, they may be 'locked up', 'hidden' and 'excluded', given 'stuff to do that keeps them busy' to silence the noise they are making and to minimise the disturbance and turbulence they may be causing to those in power? Is daring to think and act differently bad for us? Could it be that open scholars who are newer to openness and the open movement may feel more vulnerable and voiceless than those who have been open scholars for a while and have developed more confidence to speak up, to suggest alternatives, to dare to express a different view and direction of travel?

Open scholars have a voice and want to use it. They do not want to remain silence(d) and voiceless like Rapunzel! They feel excited about learning and recognise the transformative power openness can have. What are the institutional benefits when enabling, fostering and nurturing this to happen?

Though institutional cultures encouraging community and collaboration can help, the most powerful driver for open education often comes from within. That is to say, voice may be nurtured further through conscious raising, critical thinking and self-reflection. The state of one's heart and mind, namely one's personal principles, ideals and ethics, sense of self and sense of the collective, one's perceptions and world view and one's lived experiences – these are all important in establishing an inner sense of legitimacy in using one's own voice. This internal set of personal beliefs, attitudes and values can be a powerful source of self-confidence and identity and can catalyse personal agency. Such mindsets can also help maintain resilience in the face of isolation, constant setbacks and counter any sense of victimhood. Open scholars appreciate that whatever role or position we hold within an institution or a community we can still be influential: leadership is not about position – it's a psyche and involves purposeful collaborative action, however small. Identity can also shift from the isolation within an institution to one of belonging as part of a global, open network that is enabled through digital scholarship (Weller, 2011). To ensure open education is meaningful, to embed it and optimise impact, open scholars understand, embrace, own and often lead open education themselves supported by professional services. Afterall, open education involves an inclusive, boundary crossing collaboration and co-creation, where all actors recognise its significance and have the opportunity to contribute.

Socially isolated

Grimm's Rapunzel was locked up, isolated from others in the tower, and is portrayed as weak and fragile in the fairy tale (Schaad, 2024). She experiences oppression and

loneliness. It is her imprisonment and social isolation that preserves the status quo as defined, imagined and imposed by the powerful, in this case Gothel (Menéndez Díaz, 2024). Are there parallels to some of the experiences of open scholars?

Even when open scholars transition from a state of voicelessness to a state where they begin using their voice, it does not mean automatically that they are heard by others. It is not dissimilar with what happens to other creative practitioners and innovators, whose ideas are often ignored and laughed at (Kessels, 2016; Nelson, 2018; Nygaard et al., 2010). Mezirow (1997, p. 5) says characteristically “We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labelling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken.” Open scholars realise that the power of voice lies in the collective. Voices, diverse voices! The enrichment these bring! Though open scholars engage in a personal search for meaning, this quest is universal. It takes self-awareness, determination, humility, curiosity and a certain taste for risk to venture into strange worlds, explore new perspectives and new vocabularies. Therefore, open scholars seek out others; like - and other-minded individuals they have shared values with and a commitment to equality, social justice and democratisation of education (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012). Open scholars feel a desire to connect, to share, to collaborate and contribute to the wider good (Czerniewicz, & Cronin, 2023). The idea of sharing implies engaging with others, but it also acts to promote equality – namely it recognises the perspectives and truths of others and facilitates spaces of intersection where we can meet on equal terms. Being blocked to engage with others, excluded and unable to socialise their thoughts and ideas and forced to remain in social isolation makes their hearts sink. Rapunzel’s too. Open scholars may feel oppressed and experience loneliness within institutions. As their voice is developing and their need to break free from social isolation, they are inventive in their approaches and quickly turn to others outside their own institution where it seems easier to connect. Is it because of the distance and the fading of internal politics, egos, tribes and cliques, territorialism and competition? Or is the desire and drive for collaboration just stronger in the liminal spaces that transcends known boundaries?

Open scholars are advocates, bridge makers and committed collaborators. They want to contribute to the institution they are affiliated with and to the wider social good. They cannot do the work they are called to do if they are socially isolated like Rapunzel. So, what needs to happen to transition from social isolation to social harmonisation within an institution?

Emancipated and empowered

Disney’s Tangled, no longer a child but a young lady, has undergone a transformation. She is not just a beautiful girl with long hair, passive like Rapunzel, a gender stereotype representation of the time the Brothers Grimm published their fairy tale collection (Smith, 2015). Tangled, in contrast to Rapunzel, is depicted as rebellious, curious about the world, has self-determination, is true to herself and not afraid to show it to the world. Menéndez Díaz (2024, p. 24) says characteristically “She is given the agency she lacked in the tale and she shows that she is resourceful, courageous, strong, adventurer and witty”.

In many ways Tangled reflects Ashwin and Trigwell’s (2004) descriptors and levels of transformative scholarship. Namely, she demonstrates integrity, critical thinking, creativity, self-reflection and love – characteristics that reflect agency (Level 1 ‘Personal’ descriptor). She also reflects Level 2 descriptors (regarding local groups within shared

contexts) since she has a close friend (Pascal the chameleon) who is clearly from a very different background and she connects with external actors (namely Flynn, the 'peasant-thief') and Maximus (the police horse). Despite their differences they all share the same ideals, develop a common purpose and are not only supportive of one another but care for one another too. They collaborate to break free from the tower, overcome multiple difficulties throughout their quest, and eventually find freedom, self-expression and justice externally. The empowered Tangled reflects Level 3 descriptors, too (impacting a wider audience) in her life-giving love for Flynn, the demise of the oppressive Mother Gothel, her breaking of established norms (i.e., princess marrying a 'peasant') and in her establishing greater social justice and freedom.

Tangled's courageous nature reminds us of open scholars that have a voice and use it and are socially connected. They feel free, emancipated and empowered through the connections they have. Despite their vulnerabilities, they remain committed to their work and use their strengths to help others and make a positive contribution to the world. For them it is much more than their personal or local practice. They are working across Ashwin and Trigwell's (2004) three levels; the personal, local and global outside their own context to make a wider contribution. They have a 'can do' attitude. They are action people, doers and makers! They do not shy away from sharing work-in-progress, engaging in open peer review and taking dissemination into their own hands (Weller, 2014). They do not sit back and wait for things to happen. Like Tangled perhaps? She is active, seeks freedom, and has agency (Menéndez Díaz, 2024)? There are similarities.

Open scholars make open scholarship happen. They organise events, they blog, create games, flashcards, they self-publish scholarly outputs such as papers, journals, books, magazines, data also in non-traditional formats (such as picture books for example) in ways that are easy to be discovered, accessed and used more widely and not locked up behind paywalls and firewalls. They regularly use the Creative Commons open licences to allow their work to travel further through pre-approval of re-use based on specific licence agreements. They create what we call Open Educational Resources (materials) as well as Open Education Practices (courses and events) for wider use. Open scholars are serial collaborators, they mentor routinely (Atenas et al., 2023) and participate and thrive in networks and communities. Such connections with others seem to be vital for innovators, including open innovators, as these can unblock barriers and spread innovations (Nerantzi & Thomas, 2019; Farrow et al., 2025). They bring people and ideas together, help them develop, evolve and grow. They engage proactively in complementary practices and dissemination activities that extend the reach and impact beyond more conventional outlets. They defend free flowing knowledge across boundaries. In such ways, open scholars may be said to disrupt traditional relationships in learning communities, to a point where new knowledge, grounded in the collective experience of teaching, learning and research, is produced through meaningful dialogue, sharing and co-creation to address context specific challenges. They are passionate about equity. Hence, issues relating to inclusion, accessibility, student experience and/or closing the progress and achievement gaps that separate students, and staff representation are all very significant. They appreciate that by looking through the very different and unique set of lenses offered by our multiplicity of identities and perspectives, we can include diverse ways of thinking and of knowing and provide alternative, co-created solutions to problems.

Open scholars can go further in seeking to nurture and help satisfy higher needs that humans have (Maslow, 1943), namely, by engaging the whole person more holistically and

authentically and so align personal values and ethics with professional standards. Open scholars believe “power is generative” involving sharing or becoming something (Guinier & Torres, 2002, p. 141). Hence, they encourage the redistribution of power, empowering others, opening opportunities, sharing responsibilities and benefits, thus enhancing motivation, creativity and capacity. In so doing, open scholars find ways to call on people to connect with something larger than themselves. However, their efforts and activities are often not seen as valuable or recognised by their institutions. This creates tensions and frustrations.

Cronin (2020) makes the point that open scholars are often criticised for being idealistic and utopian – and perhaps this may be said of Tangled too. But many open scholars adhere to UNESCO’s view that education is a fundamental human right and a basis for human dignity, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and peace (UNESCO, 2016). Therefore, despite the challenges, they passionately strive towards this quest.

It is equally important to explore why institutions may be reluctant to embrace open scholarship. We know that currently, for example, the higher education sector is itself facing serious challenges, with many universities reducing their portfolio of courses, embarking on redundancy programmes and some even closing completely. Further problems are expected in the future (Foster et al., 2023; Universities UK, 2024). Given this context, have we as open scholars made a convincing and compelling case for open scholarship within the sector? Could we do more to articulate its benefits and value to our institutions, our staff, students and communities and better demonstrate how it aligns with and accelerates progress of institutional priorities? As open scholars it is important that we engage in such efforts, e.g. the emerging imperative for collaboration between institutions provides an excellent opportunity for open scholarship to shine. By exploring potential institutional benefits, open scholars are ideally positioned to consider what needs to happen to transition from social isolation to social harmonisation within an institution.

If there is indeed value in what open scholars bring to the institution and society more widely, what then could change to embrace and recognise their efforts respectfully?

Final words

We explored digital scholarship as interchangeable with open scholarship, noting the “intersection of three elements: digital, networked and open” (Weller, 2014, p. 136). While technology is not driving open academic practice, it is a conduit for open scholars to disseminate their work and create their own identity and presence within and beyond their institution.

Scholarship is about daring, sharing and making a difference. Open scholars put their heads above the parapet. They are catalysts of change through their own advocacy and agency. As they gain confidence, thanks to their inquiries and the connections they are making, they transition from voiceless and socially isolated to a state of emancipation and empowerment through social practice. We could also see it as a transformation from Rapunzel to Tangled, committed to making a difference to the wider educational community and transformative practices beyond their own or immediate sphere of influence or practice. While these communities play a vital role, institutional and wider support is essential to unlock innovation that can snowball and be more widely impactful (Nerantzi & Thomas, 2019; Farrow et al., 2025). Scholarship is also about transformation. It

is important to remember that scholarship and open scholarship should not be reduced to activities that will help individuals get promoted. The motivation should come from within to contribute towards equitable, transformative practice and making a positive contribution. Hutchings and Shulman's (1999, p. 14) words are a powerful reminder: "The scholarship of teaching is the mechanism through which the profession of teaching itself advances".

How about "scholarship" instead of SoTL? Is the problem in the term, the practices or the interwoven meaning of it? What could happen to transform the way we think and consider scholarship as research and recognise openness as a vital dimension of it to break-free from our imaginary imprisonment in Rapunzel's tower and maximise our connections to the world and its people? Could open scholarship be a means to reimagine and transform higher education and co-create a better world for all?

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