Nicole: Welcome back to into the open. This week's episode is titled open for whom and features Dr. Catherine Cronin. Dr. Cronin is a strategic education developer at the national forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in Higher Education in Ireland. She also happens to be an academic researcher who has inspired and motivated me to continue down my path into the open. Today I got a chance to chat [00:00:30] with her about her perspective on equity and accessibility in open education. So let's head to the shores of Ireland and check in with Dr. Catherine Cronin. I'm a bit of a fan. So, when I started doing my research for my capstone project, I had a really hard time finding a definition for open education that included [00:01:00] OEP. And so your definition is the one I stumbled upon and I leaned into it and probably cited it too much.

Nicole: You are too kind...

Nicole: To start with. I want to actually [00:01:30] hear how you ended up in open education. What sparked this?

Catherine: Oh, that's a great question. Well, my background is in engineering and IT, and I also did an MA in Women's Studies. I worked in the IT industry for a really short time and then I did a variety of work. I worked with the Open University, teaching [00:02:00] for the OU in Scotland; I taught and did a big research project in the area of gender and technology. And I worked as a community educator in Scotland and also back here in Ireland, where I live now – mostly with women in marginalized communities. I was deeply steeped, academically, and also practically, in critical and feminist pedagogies. And then I moved into working full-time in higher education in the early 2000s. I brought all that with [00:02:30] me, as you do. I guess I was someone who questioned and possibly transgressed some boundaries around things like collaboration and assessment. I joined Twitter in 2009 and found other people who were questioning and doing different things; social media was quite young at that time. I began to connect with other educators who were interested in doing some of those things. I was aware of MIT's [00:03:00] Open CourseWare but I wasn't really engaged in the OER movement as such. It was really what I would call now open educational practices. About 10 years ago, 2011-2012, I joined with a group of other educators in Ireland, UK, New Zealand, Spain, and Germany; we were connecting our students. Our students were sharing things openly, creating different kinds of digital media. We were inviting them to share openly and interact with each other, to build and adapt each other's work. That was really exciting. And [00:03:30] then I began speaking with people and extolling the whole notion of working in the open this way, the open web. I was speaking about other people's work and my students' work, and I realized that there was, at my institution and many institutions, not a grounding for this kind of open educational practice. There was nothing that would keep it going after I or other individual educators [00:04:00] would stop teaching in that way. I started my PhD [in open educational practices] in 2013, finished in 2018. I just thought, well, if I do a substantive piece of research in this area, maybe I can be part of the move to embed this, strategically, in policy, and so on – so that it can work. Many of us collectively working to change the culture of higher education, at least in some small ways...

Nicole: No, I connect with that completely because I [00:04:30] came into it as a student. So I, and I've never seen that done before. I think that was what was so exciting is I've never had a project or an assignment quite like that where I actually could contribute to knowledge building. I felt really empowered by it, but I agree with you. The sustainability of it concerns me because I had amazing instructors. I had Dr. Roberts and Dr. Brown who are into that and really pushing for open. But for example, this year they've changed [00:05:00] instructors and they're not, they're not doing the press book anymore. They're not creating an OER. So it's like we had this amazing thing go for two years. That was really empowering as a student. And as I continued on into my research, but now it's gone. So I worried about, but about the sustainability of it. So fingers crossed, we can push some policy. And I think that's why we do so many presentations. We were just at OEGlobal. And I think it's just to be like, this works. I promise, give it a try, [00:05:30] jump into it. So that's exciting that you've worked a lot with students and in creating, I think that's,

Catherine: That's how it started. It was very grounded in open practice. And then [I] just began to see what some of the gaps were in terms of sustainability. You know, what is the impact of this? Where's the impact? [00:06:00] Are we reaching the people who really need what open enables and can facilitate?… asking some of those difficult questions. I work with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education now, in Ireland. It's been a wonderful opportunity to collaborate with people across all the higher education institutions in Ireland. Open is growing, and being in a position to be able to learn and connect some of the [00:06:30] dots and develop what the sector really needs – to support what we call "building open capabilities" and also further equity.

Nicole: It's a good transition into the next one. That's also, I wanted to chat is the idea of equity. I feel there's this overlap. I know people will strain out equity and accessibility, but particularly in Canada where I live, we're quite remote and I see how much impact and just how certain communities could [00:07:00] contribute, but I just feel they don't have access to half of this. So I get really stuck with open. Cause I think this is great. We have all these resources where they're getting created, but I kind of see this whole disconnect with equity and accessibility. So I wondered if we could chat a little bit about that overlap and what you see maybe on your side of the pond and what policies are in place to help with this

Catherine: I admire that, even just that you're questioning. Because that's where this work [00:07:30] starts, is asking those kinds of difficult questions, isn't it? Who's this working for and who is it not working for it, and why not? And how can we change that? That's an essential first step. A piece of work that has inspired me a great deal is the ROER4D project, which you're probably familiar with. It's 'Research in Open Educational Resources for Development', coordinated from the University of Cape Town, but it took place in 18 [00:08:00] or 19 countries in the Global South. The whole aim was to understand the uptake and impact of OER in education in the Global South –

[coordinated by] Cheryl Hodgkinson-Williams, Patricia Arinto, and a whole host of people. That work was published in 2017.

Catherine: In the last four years, since that's been published, many, many more people engaged in open education are asking questions around equity and access and inclusion – and that [ROER4D] work addressed those questions, particularly [00:08:30] from a Global South perspective. It was meaningful and important for me, watching it as it was going on. I think the salience has even increased since it was published. It's a model of how OER and OEP relate to social inclusion and social justice. There's a model which I share quite often in the conclusion of that report, around the levels of social inclusion mapped to OER use, identifying three [00:09:00] levels of social inclusion: access participation, and empowerment. We must look at where we are; I can never answer a question like you asked without understanding the context. The [ROER4D] researchers really tease out a lot of those issues. You must have access first; that enables participation; and from there, we can talk about empowerment. I think that's an exemplary piece of work that just keeps on giving.

Nicole: It'll be interesting to, I, I had a chance to connect with a few people from the global south. So from South Africa and then even Uraguay is the next one because I lived there. So at least to have those connections in Brazil has always been really inspiring. So I'm curious to see if that, and that study how that would transition to like an Indigenous way of thinking. If it could be used as kind of a framework [00:10:00] or a structure to get, get that going. I agree with you, access is the first thing we don't have great internet access in Canada. My access in South America was far beyond and better than what I have here. So I think that's a first step, but once they do have access and some communities do it's, then how do you bring it in and make sure it is suitable? And it works with them like it's coming from them. It's not just, here's a bunch of resources. And I saw a really great presentation that had been adapted for, I do believe [00:10:30] the resources were designed in the States, but then moved into Uganda and they hit that roadblock where they didn't have things translated. And the students were actually doing some of the translations for them, or so that's a big focus and I'm not really sure how you move forward, especially I automatically think because I'm based in Canada, those communities up north, how do you get it? So that it's, I don't feel like I could just take a bunch of resources up there and be like, all right, let's learn. It's more like, how do you get them reading? So it's meaningful [00:11:00] and it works for that community.

Catherine: It's such a great question. We often say that open is not a binary, right? There are shades and ways; it's continually negotiated in different circumstances. Access isn't binary either. That's what you're pointing at. Even if something is originally shared online, it doesn't mean that all [00:11:30] participants who might use that need to be online. At some point, those online resources can be shared with an educator in a setting who then can create offline resources that can then be shared. It's all very context specific. What you're talking about, I think, gets back to a lot of the work that's been done in the last few years around what's called a social justice framework for open education. Cheryl Hodgkinson-Williams and Henry Trotter developed a social justice framework [00:12:00] for OER and OEP. Sarah Lambert developed a social justice aligned definition of open

education. They both draw from Nancy Fraser's work around three different types of justice: distributive, recognitive and representational. I think many, many more people now are finding that as a useful framework. Adding more resources and creating open textbooks doesn't solve those kinds of issues if, for example, (a) they don't reach [00:12:30] the people who need them, and (b) those people are not represented and don't have their “fingers on the clay” of making those open textbooks. Representational justice is about the people who are marginalized having a voice in those resources.

Nicole: That's practices. I do remember Dr. Roberts, she gave us that framework, Sarah Lambert's framework really [00:13:00] early on in their course. And none of us could really, we weren't there yet. I think it's, it takes some time.

Catherine: That's a really great point. Even amongst those of us who are working in open, there are layers of understanding. I'm learning all the time! You may not want to share with someone a really sophisticated framework if they're just being introduced to open, but you can ask questions. [00:13:30] Who has access to this? Who is represented? Even though you might not share the academic papers initially, you being aware of that work means you can ask important questions so that the work can be directed appropriately. It can inform our practice as people who are contributing to change. It's a mindset, an attitude to one's work and how you are in the world. I think it affects everything you do, doesn't it? The orientation towards equity and social justice is probably the most important thing. When I talk [with someone] about open education, I don't usually start with open licensing. I talk about their work, what they're doing, inclusion in the context of their work, and what open can possibly enable. So really starting [00:14:30] from a values perspective.

Nicole: I just found with our project that we were doing at the university, they almost had to Dr. Roberts almost had to start with an OER because they understood the concept of a textbook. So that was, I always joke and kind of say for her, it was the gateway drug. It was like, I can convince you of a textbook. That makes sense. And then from there, she was able to kind of weave in other values, I would say of, of open weave in open educational [00:15:00] practices. But it's interesting that that you'd approach it differently. Cause I've found she had to, she almost had to like put that out there, cause it was something tangible that than anyone even outside of open and the institution could understand.

Catherine: That's a great example because context matters. And you know, if that's the way to open the door and start the conversations, then that's a great starting point.

Nicole: [00:15:30] The other one, I was curious and wanted to get your perspective on, I've been grappling a bit with the idea of reciprocity. And so with open to see it as something that's sustainable, I've got to the stage now. I think when we first started, it was like, okay, I can take, I have access to these resources, but I think you hit a certain point where you're like, oh, I should probably give something back or I need to contribute to this. It's not just all take, take, take. I need to be able to give back, but I struggle [00:16:00] a little bit and in the position, cause I can see other teachers like myself, like

for example, after COVID, I've been, I was unemployed. And so for me to create resources and just freely give was like, Ooh, I kind of feel like sharing is a bit of a privilege.

Nicole: And so I grapple a bit with, I want to be able to give back and I think it's important to be able to give back and remix for the sustainability of it. But I also get a bit worried about the whole equity involved there because I don't [00:16:30] think it's, it's always feasible to be able to share like when it's a fine line, I think between when you were capable and able to give freely. So I'd love your perspective and thoughts on just the idea of it being more of a circle and giving back and, and how that can be sustainable.

Catherine: You're really lifting a lid on a lot of the complexities around open. It's a great question. One of the places that my mind goes when [00:17:00] you mentioned that is thinking about an individual perspective and then a more systemic or structural perspective. From an individual perspective, yes, if you're using a lot of open resources, you want to be able to give back in some way. But given the realities and complexities of academic labor, and the way some of us work or don't work, that can be difficult in a larger sense. [00:17:30] The notion of 'the commons' is, I remember, how the penny dropped for me. I was learning and seeing lots of possibilities about how I could teach openly. And I thought, my goodness, I'm learning so much because other people are sharing – not just their resources but their thought processes, their teaching practices. I should do that as well. That's when I started blogging all those years ago, that was that notion of reciprocity. But the structural argument is really interesting. You can take the opposite tack if you [00:18:00] look structurally at the fact that elite universities in the Global North produce so much. Using the narrative about "educating the world" is problematic – and a source of epistemic inequality and injustice. I remember getting inquiries from people thinking about getting into open education and putting their case together using words like "branding". That's not [00:18:30] the value set of open that I ascribe to. What about learning from other perspectives, particularly perspectives that aren't privileged perspectives, and having that be two-way, as you say? So again, it's down to context. Individual is one conversation, but structurally we want to think about enabling – particularly people and communities that are marginalized – to adapt and share and create. How can we do that? [00:19:00] How can we do that through our work so that we're not always the ones who are populating and giving – and reinforcing the values and priorities of privileged institutions or the Global North?

Nicole: It's almost in some ways I could look into giving back by enabling others to do so.

Catherine: Looking at the UNESCO recommendation on OER, the first one is about building capacity. We've interpreted that in the National Forum as 'building capabilities', borrowing from [00:19:30] Sen's work on the capabilities approach, as well as Martha Nussbaum. You might be familiar with 'digital capabilities' as a term; Helen Beetham borrowed from the capabilities approach when she started using the term digital capabilities rather than digital literacies. At the National Forum we're using that [concept] with open as well, because capabilities are a person's abilities *in their context*, in their social political, economic educational context. It isn't just about what [00:20:00] a person can do, but

what they're enabled to do in their particular context. We want to build open capabilities. That means that some people, some contexts, some institutions, some geographic regions need different kinds or more support than others. I think it enables us to take a little more nuanced view.

Nicole: Okay. So if someone was just starting out, I'm just getting into open. What are some steps I could take? [00:20:30] I mean, we've talked a little bit about the questions, having those questions in the back of my mind, as far as social justice is concerned, but what are some little steps you could recommend or I could take so that I'm making sure I'm approaching this from a social justice standpoint or from an inclusion point.

Catherine: Questions, I think, are probably the first place to start. It might sound like a trite answer, but what might some of those questions be? Are students or learners involved? How are they involved? Are a [00:21:00] diversity of learners represented? Are they able to participate? Are a diversity of staff consulted, included, able to participate? Who's excluded, both in what we're doing now and what we're proposing we might do? That's probably one of the most useful questions because quite often we think, “Oh, this would be great. We could open XYZ in some way”. In that initiative, who would be included and who might be excluded? It's [00:21:30] an important thinking exercise. Sarah Ahmed has a great quote about this, where she says questions can be a cause of discomfort, and that we have a duty to notice who turns up and who doesn't – it's actually our responsibility to notice those things. And then, like you were talking about, there’s the labor that's involved in open. There's a care aspect often. I would ask questions about that as well. Is the care we as an organization [00:22:00] or institution are extending, is that work being done by just a few people who are bearing the burden of the care work? Why is that? How do we equalize that? Another good question is: are all students and staff able to exercise agency around openness? Sometimes simplistic assumptions are made like, “oh, we'll get everyone to share”. That can expose and put some people at risk. So let’s ask those kinds of questions for any [00:22:30] proposed open initiative.

Catherine: I think those are good questions to engage in with people that are working with learners and teachers. And then for anyone, there’s the Open at the Margins collection, published last year. The aim was to curate and center marginal voices and non-dominant stances. It's not peer-reviewed work. It's openly published work over the last 10 years or so in the area of open education [00:23:00] … people asking questions about all the kinds of things we've been talking about. There are 43 authors. I was in a wonderful team of five people that co-edited the collection, but the authors are the stars, they're from all over the world. It's very accessible, not just in terms of being open, but some are videos, some are short pieces, some are a little bit longer. I know a lot of people have responded to it because of how accessible it is in terms of language and approach. It can get [00:23:30] you thinking about what open can be, so I think that's a place to start. In various ways, people question the power relations around open in those pieces.

Nicole: A lot of the people I work with right now, professors particularly are just starting to figure this whole open there. They're still quite hesitant. So is there anything you would

say to someone that might encourage them or might kind of ease their concern with open

Catherine: That's a great question also. I have actually [00:24:00] had some of the most interesting and fruitful discussions around open in the last year and a half, during the time of the pandemic, because, as many people have written, in one fell swoop all teachers became online teachers, and all learners became online learners. Many more people entered the conversation about digital, online and open than had been engaged in [00:24:30] those conversations before. I think one of the ways into the conversation, in my experience, is acknowledging that we are living in a time of not just change, but crisis, right? The climate crisis, the pandemic, rising and intersecting inequalities, globally but also locally, rising authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism. This affects teaching, learning, assessment and living. [00:25:00] In some cases, people may be experiencing trauma in connection with all of these.

Catherine: In other cases, there's just a constant level of stress. Those of us involved in education, perhaps we were teaching face-to-face. We went to teaching online, now we're back. It's a very tension filled space. What are we doing? When will it change? How will I adapt? And so on. Because open education begins and is grounded in the values of accessibility [00:25:30] and equity, there's longstanding work – discussions and examples of work in open education around all of these issues… authentic assessment, equity in assessment, equity in classrooms, inclusion, epistemic inequality – mature discussions and strands of work, including publications that people can draw on. So it isn't just a new challenge. There's a body of work where people can go to find people [00:26:00] and community and examples of work that deals with the challenges we're facing today. I think that's probably one of the most convincing arguments for me, for people to engage with open. And again, that's not starting with open licensing or open textbooks, although those are immensely valuable; it's really about recognizing, acknowledging and dealing with the challenges that we're all facing today. That's most important.

Nicole: I would agree for me starting out. It's been that community. [00:26:30] I haven't in academics seeing a community, quite like the open community. Like if people are willing to connect and share their ideas and really want to push you and support you in growing and that to me, and you're right, it comes back to the basic values, but that is what I kind of communicate to anyone who's like, oh, I'm not sure about this whole sharing thing. I don't really like what I see, but the community and that sense of belonging [00:27:00] touches something a bit deeper than, than just that surface level to sell a course or, or pay your tuition. It, it goes deeper into what I think learning is actually about. Yeah.

Catherine: Yes. And for any individual person I might engage with about this, it's just really seeking to understand what problem are they trying to solve? What are the challenges they're facing – they, [00:27:30] their students, or learners that they're working with. Increasingly, I can point to work in the open education space that addresses many of those challenges. And as you say, by and large, people working in open education are quite clear-eyed about the challenges we all face, but also hopeful and generally committed [00:28:00] to the notion of continually learning. This continual move towards

a more critical orientation has been part of the open movement of the last number of years.

Catherine: It's continually evolving, and I think that's a positive thing. When I give a presentation about open education or open educational practices, I usually include lots of examples because I try and give people a toehold – here's an example of how this has been done, here's another great example, from all over the world. I always end by saying [00:28:30] please feel free to contact any of the people whose work I've cited, because I can guarantee you that they'll be happy to know that you're interested in the work they've shared openly and will most likely be happy to engage in conversation with you about what it means to you, or what it could mean. I love the idea of this podcast and the interesting questions you've posed. Are you talking to educators [00:29:00] and learners? Are you talking to people in different communities and different parts of the world? What's your intention for the podcast?

Nicole: The podcast started out with was I still had a lot of questions and was really just confused about how, how this could be sustainable, how open could be sustainable and how it could function and work and thrive or succeed in different areas of the world. And so I wanted to reach out with the people that I've read their work, or that might have more insight [00:29:30] in specific areas that could help me understand that. And I thought, well, if I do it through a podcast, then others can understand alongside with me or can formulate their own opinions, can contribute to that conversation. So I saw the power in podcasting when I was in the middle east and COVID hit, I was, I'd never been into thought podcasts before nothing. And I got invited to speak with a group of educators out of Asia. And so they had shut down about a month [00:30:00] before us.

Nicole: And so I learned a whole, we were just shutting down. So I was able to kind of twist and shift my practice based on their recommendations on what had worked for them and what hadn't. And then south America shut down a month later. And so I was able to send them all of my stuff that had been kind of remixed, I guess you could say from Asia and I sent it there and I thought this is through one podcast. Like I was able to connect and, and share. I thought there's [00:30:30] power in that. And it's, it is accessible. Like people all over the world can listen or not listen. And so I kind of was like, this there's something to podcasting. I don't know what it is yet, but I thought, oh, let's give it a try. And Verena was willing to do so.

Catherine: That's really lovely. You're modeling openly learning and then sharing that. And presumably the conversations will evolve …

Nicole: So hopefully as I learned, I'm able to [00:31:00] contribute more to the conversations. So hopefully I can get involved in and connect with people that you normally wouldn't. I wouldn't necessarily hear because again, when I started, it was hard to even find your definition and to, and dig that out and kind of go over the pond. We say, and look at, what's been going on in England, connects a bit more with, with my viewpoints.

Catherine: Well, I'm happy to be a voice from Ireland. I'm originally from New York City, so I always carry my New York City [00:31:30] with me as well! I'll just look forward to seeing how your conversations continue and evolve.

Nicole: Thank you. I really appreciate your time. I know you're busy, busy, and you've got a lot going on, but your work is very inspiring.

Catherine: You're so welcome – best of luck with the project. I really enjoyed it.

Nicole: Thanks so much for joining us for this week's episode of, into the open, into the open could not [00:32:00] be produced without the wonderful support of the #GO-GN network. If you're new to Open education or really deeply involved, this is a great place to connect and network with like-minded people into the open is created and produced by Dr. Verena Roberts, Heather Van Streun and myself, Nicole Neutzling- until next time.