

Open Courseware, Open Content, Open Practices, Open Learning: Where are the limits?



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Open Courseware, Open Content, Open Practices, Open Learning: Where are the limits?

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Abstract

The first part of the paper reports on the outcomes of a joint UNESCO-COL project *Taking OERs beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity*. Its purpose was to expand understanding of the potential of OERs among university leaders and quality assurance officials in Africa and Asia, who have low awareness of this phenomenon. The project concluded with an intergovernmental policy forum where participants enjoined UNESCO to lead a global campaign to encourage governments and institutions to foster the development and use of OER and, more widely, to make documents of educational value created with public funds available under open licenses.

The second part of the paper draws on the experience of creating and using OERs to explore how far open educational practices can take us towards more cost-effective higher education systems. The authors argue that openness has to be balanced against the requirements of certification, accreditation and quality assurance. An important function of OER is to provide a route for potential students and teachers to move from the informal cloud of learning to a more formal engagement with education and training.

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be at this OpenCourseware Consortium Global 2011 Conference and to speak on behalf of my co-authors, my COL colleague and Vice-President, Professor Asha Kanwar, and my former UNESCO colleague, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, who heads UNESCO's activities in higher education.

Our title is *Open Courseware, Open Content, Open Practices, Open Learning: Where are the limits?* Our presentation is in two parts.

First, we shall report on a joint Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO project aimed at increasing awareness of open educational resources among government officials, institutional leaders in higher education and quality assurance agencies. It may be difficult for open courseware aficionados to appreciate this, but ignorance about open educational resources is still widespread.

The project that we shall describe was aimed primarily at developing countries, but I realized how limited knowledge of OERs was, right here in the US, when I gave the Ernest L. Boyer Lecture at SUNY's Empire State College in March. Even an audience of academics thoroughly involved in distance learning seemed to have little awareness of the open courseware movement. We have work to do!

The second part of our paper is about using open educational resources to cut the cost of higher education in order to open it up to more people.

Our focus there will be on a combination of three novel ideas: *The University Open* developed by Paul Stacey of Canada's BC Campus; the notion of *Open Educational Practices* developed in Europe by Germany's Ulf-Daniel Ehlers and the UK's Grainne Conole; and the proposal for an *Open Educational Resources University* that was the topic of a meeting in New Zealand in February.

We confess that when we submitted the proposal for this paper to the conference we were skeptical about the coherent implementation of these concepts, but the discussions at the New Zealand meeting have reassured us. We shall explain why.

Taking OERs Beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity

So, we begin with a COL-UNESCO project called *Taking OERs beyond the OER Community: Policy and Capacity* that was funded mainly by our two organizations but also with a contribution of \$50,000 from the US Government through its delegation to UNESCO.

The objectives of this initiative are to:

- Ensure greater support for the use, repurposing and reuse of OER in both developing and developed countries by educational decision makers (governmental and institutional), and to
- Enhance the capacity of educational practitioners in developing countries to create, repurpose and use OER.

These objectives grew out of UNESCO's 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, which was organised by a co-author of this paper, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić.

The conference identified greatly increased demand for higher education as the key contemporary trend and called for a diversification of methods to expand access to quality learning at low cost.

In the first phase of the project we prepared an OER dossier that was used as background last year for four one-day workshops on OERs held respectively in:

- Cape Town, South Africa at a conference of presidents of Commonwealth universities;
- Windhoek, Namibia for quality assurance officials gathered at the annual conference of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE);
- Bamako, Mali for decision makers from French-speaking countries; and
- Kochi, India in conjunction with COL's Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.

We held these workshops in developing countries so as to encourage them to engage with the OER movement.

Some see OER as a neo-colonialist plot, just one more opportunity for the rich world to ram its products down the throats of the poor world. This was the subject of a vigorous debate at the UNESCO World Conference between two South Africans, Brenda Gourley, then president of the UK Open University and Barney Pityana, then president of UNISA, the University of South Africa.

For this reason we were delighted when the workshops turned up evidence of OER from Kenya and Malawi being used at the University of Michigan to give just one example.

During the same period three online workshops were held with 350 people taking part.

All these workshops were followed by a policy forum at UNESCO headquarters last December that brought together officials and university leaders from many of UNESCO's member states. The decision to convene a policy forum reflected the conclusions of the workshop activity, namely that governments and higher education institutions need to:

- determine new policies to support the development and re-use of OER and by so doing to maximize the returns on their investments in higher education;
- develop policy tools to support increased access to quality materials and the enhancement of capacity;
- develop capacity in OER; and
- support the improvement of national ICT infrastructures.

These issues can be grouped into four categories: economic, licensing, social and technical.

The key economic issues are to reduce the costs of good learning materials, to reward faculty for working in this area, and to embed the collaborative creation of OER into the business models of institutions so that their development and adaptation is sustainable.

If the purpose is transforming the economy of higher education, re-using OER is more important than producing them. Yet if you analyze our conference programme and classify the papers as 'OER producer driven', 'OER user driven' or 'Other', you find almost twice as many papers about production as about usage. We shall not be able to claim victory for the OER movement until the proportions are the other way around.

We shall not talk about licensing issues since it is well traveled territory and we consider that the project itself has addressed the key social issues, which are to foster the development and use of OER in a collaborative spirit and to pay close attention to the quality of what is produced.

As regards the technical issues we observe that the so-called digital divide is narrowing by the day, with the proviso that in developing countries the digital device of choice is the mobile phone rather than the laptop. This challenges all the players in this space to develop mobile-friendly OER.

As a result of the policy forum, COL and UNESCO are now developing guidelines for the use of OERs, somewhat along the lines of the Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Higher Education jointly produced five years ago by UNESCO and the OECD.

This goes back to our earlier point about neo-colonialism. Trying to ram your own American guidelines and policies on OER down the throats of the rest of the world will increase resistance rather than acceptance of the phenomenon. The developing world must feel ownership of OER too and UNESCO is their vehicle of choice for this kind of process.

So I hope that you will all work with this international process. We shall start a new round of consultation workshops on a draft of these guidelines shortly.

The Open Educational Resource University

We now move to the second part of our paper. Here we address the question of how OERs might be used both to open up higher education in radical ways and to reduce its costs dramatically.

We are already seeing institutional policies that aim at using OERs to avoid having each teacher re-invent the wheel in each of their courses.

For example, once colleagues at the Asia eUniversity in Malaysia have agreed on course curriculum outlines they do not develop any original learning materials because they find that good quality OER for all the topics they require is already on the web – they simply adapt them to their precise needs.

Likewise, Athabasca University will not approve development of a course until the proposing department has shown that it has done a thorough search for relevant open material that can be used as a starting point.

But some want to go much further. Paul Stacey, of Canada's BC Campus, has outlined the concept of *The University Open*. He points out that the combination of open source software, open access publishing, open educational resources, and the general trend to open government creates the potential for a new paradigm in higher education.

Similar ideas often occur simultaneously in several places at once and in Europe we have seen the development, under the leadership Germany's Ulf-Daniel Ehlers and the UK's Grainne Conole, of the notion of *Open Educational Practices* built around the use of open educational resources.

We confess that until recently we were skeptical of the open educational practices movement for two reasons. First, we should remember the injunction of Lord Walter Perry, who conceived the radical innovation of the UK Open University 40 years ago, that if you innovate in too many ways at once you will scare off students.

Second, we believe that radical innovations in higher education must be accompanied by particularly robust frameworks of accreditation and credentialing in order to reassure students and attract a broad public.

UNESCO has invested much effort in the last ten years in helping students to feel secure about the accreditation status of institutions where they plan to study. We refer to the regional conventions on degree recognition; the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines on Quality Assurance in Cross-Border Higher Education; the UNESCO portal of recognized institutions, and joint work by UNESCO and CHEA on the problem of degree mills.

However, recent developments – in particular the discussions at a meeting that was convened in New Zealand last month by Wayne Mackintosh of the Open Education Resource Foundation – have made us take this set of ideas more seriously. The meeting was called to operationalize what they called the *Open Educational Resource University*, a concept developed from Paul Stacey's *The University Open*.

The idea, and this slide comes from Jim Taylor of the University of Southern Queensland who is one of the thinkers in the movement and an academic leader with a very credible track record of innovation, is to have students find their own content as OERs; get tutoring from a global network of volunteers; be assessed, for a fee, by a participating institution; and earn a credible credential.

Such a system would reduce the cost of higher education dramatically and clearly has echoes of the University of London External system that innovated radically 150 years ago when it declared that all that mattered was performance in examinations, not how knowledge was acquired. That programme has produced five Nobel Laureates, so no one can call it a Mickey Mouse system.

As regards the first step in this ladder, open educational resources are unquestionably being used. Literally millions of informal learners and students are using the open educational resources put out by MIT, the UK Open University, and others to find better and clearer teaching than they are getting in the universities where they are registered.

The 32 small states of the Commonwealth are working together within a network called the *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth* to develop open educational resources that they can all adapt and use.

The interest is considerable. The UKOU's OpenLearn site has 11 million users and hundreds of courses can be downloaded as interactive eBooks. Furthermore, with 300,000 downloads per week, the UKOU alone accounts for 10% of all downloads from iTunesU. And we must not forget the worldwide viewing audience of hundreds of millions for OU/BBC TV programs.

Martin Bean, the Australian-American who left Microsoft HQ to become vice-chancellor of the UK Open University last year, argues that the task of universities today is to provide paths or steps from this informal cloud of learning towards formal study for those who wish to take them.

Good paths will provide continuity of technology because millions of people around the world first encounter higher education institutions such as the Open University through iTunesU, YouTube, TV broadcasts or the resources on various university websites. The thousands who then elect to enroll as students in these institutions will find themselves studying in similar digital environments.

Where does all this take us? In particular, what are the implications for public-sector institutions? We suppose that the institutions best equipped to make a success of the Open Education Resource University are institutions in the public sector that already operate successfully in parts of this space and award reputable credentials.

While this choice may seem obvious, we quote in our support former Princeton President Harold Shapiro. He expressed the inadvisability of conventional universities launching into new distance learning ventures in these words: ‘But you have to ask yourself, where do we have the talent? You can’t just turn around tomorrow and say ‘maybe we should start doing something different’ – you have to accumulate the talent first’.

We would add that you must also have the right mindset. It would be difficult for a university that has put scarcity at the centre of its business model suddenly to embrace openness.

As examples of two public institutions that both opened their doors forty years ago and operate successfully in this space we cite the UK Open University and SUNY’s Empire State College. Both are credible performers offering solid credentials.

For example, the last time comparative assessments of teaching quality were published in the UK, the Open University placed above Oxford. Moreover, in national surveys of student satisfaction the Open University is always one of the top three UK universities. In surveys across SUNY, Empire State College consistently ranks number one for student satisfaction.

Let us take you back to Martin Bean’s remark about leading learners step by step from the informal cloud of learning to formal study and juxtapose that with Jim Taylor’s representation of the steps in the Open Educational Resource University.

The first step, namely access to open educational resource learning materials, is increasingly solid. The pool of OER is growing fast and it is easier and easier to find and retrieve them.

We have suggested that the solidity of the top step, credible credentials, depends on the involvement of existing, reputable institutions with longstanding accreditation that resonate with this approach. Empire State College and the UKOU are just two examples on either side of the Atlantic.

What about the three intermediate steps? For the first, student support, such institutions already have the skills necessary. Both manage extensive networks of tutors or mentors. Empire State College has unique skills for this task given that students will often not be working with material created by the institution but OER they have discovered for themselves. Its unusual mentoring model is well suited to this.

Jim Taylor envisages the emergence of a body rather like *Médecins sans Frontières* or *Engineers without Borders*, which he calls Academic Volunteers International. That may work in some places, but having students buy support on a pay-as-you-go basis would also work and might make for a more sustainable model.

Furthermore, social software is greatly enriching the possibilities for student support and interaction. For example, the UKOU's OpenLearn website is not just a repository of OER but a hive of activity involving many groups of learners. Digital technology is breathing new life into the notion of a community of scholars and social software gives students the opportunity to create academic communities that take us well beyond the rather behaviorist forms of online learning that give eLearning a bad name. Some of this social learning activity involves various forms of informal assessment that can be most helpful in preparing students for the formal kind.

When we come to step three, assessment, it seems to us that payment is essential. However, this is well travelled territory. It takes us back 150 years to the University of London External model with the difference, again, that some assessments would have to be designed for curricula developed by the student, not the institution. With credible assessment by reputable institutions the next step, the granting and transfer of credit, is straightforward and leads to the top step of credentials.

Implicit in our own vision for the Open Educational Resource University is that it is not a new stand-alone accredited institution, but rather an umbrella organization for a network of participating institutions with longstanding reputations and accreditation.

No established institution is likely to adopt the Open Educational Resource University model for its core operations in the foreseeable future since the revenues – as well, of course, as the costs – would be much lower than we are used to.

Only two weeks ago, when finalizing this presentation, we wrote that no one in US universities today wants to admit that the times call for much less expensive university study. However, since then the University of Texas has announced a complete Bachelor's degree for \$10,000. The times they are a changing!

The meeting on the Open Educational Resource University in New Zealand last month generated this headline in *The Australian* newspaper: "University of Southern Queensland plan for free online university". Naturally, Jim Taylor faced some questions from his president at the University of Southern Queensland when he got home! However, USQ has a long and strong track record in open, distance and blended learning and intends to test the waters by offering studies on this model initially as part of its community service function.

That seems a sensible approach that some of you might like to adopt. After all, universities like MIT, and particularly the UK Open University, took a big gamble when they put their course materials online. But their bold moves did not end civilization as we know it and it is now time to be audacious again and take the next steps.

We wish you the best of luck in so doing.

Thank you.