

Course Development in Distance Education: Whose is the Content?



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*"New Challenges Of Distance Education In Ibero-America And
Quality Assurance"*

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Abstract

As well as speeding up communication between institution and student and making the preparation and distribution of media-rich course material much easier, the World-Wide Web will change distance education in more fundamental ways. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is a unique laboratory for examining these trends, which pose fundamental challenges to the role of institutions in approving the content of courses and certifying student learning. How will distance education take advantage of the effervescent creation of open educational resources? Is there a trade-off between openness and usefulness when we create OERs? Are educational Wikis more than an electronic vanity press: can they produce usable teaching material at scale? More fundamentally still, who will determine course content in the Web 2.0 world, the institution or the student? Constructivist approaches to education are now fashionable and the interactive Web makes it possible for students to design their own curriculum and find the necessary learning resources. Where does that leave institutions?

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to bring the greetings of the Commonwealth of Learning to this CREAD congress and Virtual EDUCA Summit. I am thrilled to be in Ecuador for the first time. I had hoped to achieve my lifelong dream of visiting the Galapagos Islands whilst I am here; but there was not time so I shall have to come back to this wonderful country.

May I begin by congratulating our host, Rector Luis Miguel Romero, on his election as President of the Inter-American Association for Higher Education? This is a wonderful tribute to his international status.

I feel a personal link to the Association because I was working at the Université du Québec in Quebec City when President Gilles Boulet took the initiative of creating this Inter-American Association for Higher Education. Two of the colleagues with whom I worked closely during my time at the Télé-université, Pierre Van der Donckt and Pierre Cazalis, played an important role in the Association in its early days.

I bring you the good wishes of the Commonwealth of Learning, which everyone calls COL. I note another link there because COL was a founding member of CREAD in 1993. Today, although COL is based in Canada our involvement with the Americas is almost exclusively with the Commonwealth Caribbean states, so I particularly appreciate the opportunity to speak to this wider audience from North and South America. I hope that we may renew the link between COL and CREAD that existed in the early days.

It is also a special treat to share this session with my UNESCO colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić. We worked together on higher education at UNESCO and that collaboration continues through a joint UNESCO-COL work plan that she coordinates. It includes the issues we are discussing today.

Our focus will be on the lessons that the Commonwealth of Learning is learning from working in the online world. To do this we shall say a little about what COL is before focusing on a unique programme that we are facilitating for Ministers of Education: the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

This programme, which involves the development of courseware through online collaboration by people located in 30 countries, has made us engage deeply with the movement called Open Educational Resources or OERs. It is too early for any firm conclusions about where the OER movement is heading, or what it will actually achieve in expanding access to education, but we would like to share our initial experience.

We've entitled this address *Course Development in Distance Education: Whose is the Content?* I have prepared it with the help of two of my COL colleagues, Paul West, who coordinates the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, and Amy Monaghan from our Information Resources Centre.

Our first question about OERs is 'who owns the content'. We shall discuss issues around the use of Creative Commons licenses. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the freedom culture which, in its

extreme manifestation, holds that all learning materials should be available for anyone to use, misuse, adapt and re-sell in any way they like?

Today it is risky to ask 'whose is the content', because having asked the question we must make a tentative foray into the deeper waters of Web 2.0, which is nerd jargon for the current generation of the World-Wide Web. The early Web was essentially a display technology with limited opportunities to answer back, but Web 2.0 allows anyone to contribute and interact.

What are the implications of this transformation of the Web for the creation of courses? Students use the Web for their blogs and social networking. Should they not also contribute to the design of their courses with our institutions? Constructivist theories of education are in vogue so shouldn't we stand back and let students construct their own study programmes?

The Commonwealth of Learning

Where you stand on an issue depends on where you sit, so we must briefly describe the Commonwealth of Learning, because most of you will not know of COL. COL is an international intergovernmental agency of the 53-member voluntary association of countries called the Commonwealth. 20 years ago the Commonwealth Heads of Government created COL because they thought that information and communications technology could help countries increase the scope, scale and impact of their education, training and learning generally.

Our role is to help the developing countries of the Commonwealth master and use those technologies. In recent years we have linked this very closely to the international development agenda.

Our slogan is Learning for Development and our philosophical stance on development is that of Amartya Sen: we consider "Development as Freedom".

To root this commitment in practical reality we work to a development agenda that combines three sets of objectives: the Millennium Development Goals; the six goals of Education for All from the Dakar World Forum of 2000; and the Commonwealth values of peace, democracy, equality and good governance.

We offer our support to countries through three sectors: Education, which means strengthening formal education at all levels; Learning for Livelihoods, which is about increasing the prosperity of individuals and communities directly; and Human Environment, where more learning can improve health, governance and the natural environment.

COL is not a teaching institution. We aim to help countries do things for themselves, so we target one or more of four outcomes. First, technology promotes learning more effectively if you start with a framework of policy; which might be a national policy for rolling out broadband or an institutional policy for introducing eLearning.

Second, much of our work helps countries improve their learning systems, whether through better quality assurance or through training in eLearning - two areas where we work with UNESCO.

Third, whenever we develop an effective approach for using technology in learning we try to distil it into a model. This is especially important when you want to transfer a successful approach from one country to another. You need to understand why the approach was successful and whether those conditions are present in the new country. Teasing out models has been very important for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which we shall come to in a moment.

Finally, although we do not develop learning materials ourselves we help others to do so. Once the materials exist we encourage their use around the Commonwealth. For example, Commonwealth Executive MBA and MPA programmes that were developed by the four open universities of south Asia, in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, are now being used in Guyana, Jamaica, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea.

If you ask 'whose is the content' about these CEMBA/CEMPA distance education programmes, our response is that any institution wanting to offer them has to get a license from COL. We developed this programme before the movement to OERs gathered momentum, so we did not consider making it freely available in that way.

We are now revising these materials and could, in principle, make them freely available. However, some of the partner institutions that are offering the CEMBA/CEMPA programmes have asked us not to do this because these courses now contribute to their competitive advantage.

The institutions offering the programmes work together as a consortium to manage the updating of the materials, so they want any new institution that offers the programmes to join the consortium and help with this work.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

However, we now want to focus on the question of freedom of use in connection with another, much broader, course development project called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Again, we start with a little background.

A particular feature of the Commonwealth is that two-thirds of its 53 members are small states with populations of fewer than 1.5 million - often much fewer. These states, which include a number of Caribbean countries, are challenged by the eWorld because they lack the critical mass of people, equipment and bandwidth to advance confidently into the era of online education.

In the year 2000 their education ministers decided that they would try to create the critical mass for eLearning by having their countries work together as small states, rather than always remaining dependent on bigger countries. They called this collaborative venture the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth; but we emphasise that it is not a new university but a collaborative network that will expand and strengthen the programmes of their existing tertiary institutions. It will not compete with them.

The Ministers asked COL to coordinate the project and said that they wanted it to develop courses in employment-related topics like Tourism, Hospitality, Small Business Management, Professional

development for Teachers, Life Skills, Disaster Management, Fisheries, Construction, and so on. They also asked that the materials be developed in eLearning mode, even though they might sometimes have to be delivered in older formats.

So what did we do? We did not think it would be feasible to launch the collaborative development of materials simply by having people log on to a common space from their separate countries. Many of the subject experts did not have the required IT skills and we also needed to create a sense of belonging and generate some collective momentum.

So when we tackle each new subject we bring the experts from the participating states together in one of the countries for a three-week workshop. This slide shows the first workshop that we held, in Mauritius in 2006. Since then we have held four more such workshops in different countries.

The most recent, on Fisheries, took place in Seychelles last month. At each workshop participants are given training in the techniques for collaborating online and they start to develop course content. This process continues when they get home so that a full programme on the topic is gradually built up.

What we shall focus on today, in order to address our topic 'whose is the content', is the format in which we capture the content that is developed. Our practice has evolved with experience and we like to share your experience.

We started from the principle that we wanted the VUSSC eMaterials to be freely available - not just to institutions in the participating states but to anyone, including all of you. So we decided that the participants would create their eMaterials on WikiEducator. This is a Wiki that COL created two years ago. It works just like Wikipedia: anyone can contribute to the evolving content and it is now a very active site.

However, because the aim of WikiEducator is to make content freely available, COL set stringent requirements for putting material onto it. The most restrictive condition on re-use that you can apply to material you put on WikiEducator is the Creative Commons BY - SA license. BY means that if you take the material and use it you must acknowledge who it is by: for example that it comes from the VUSSC Life Skills group. SA means Share-Alike: if you adapt the material you must put your new version back into the system for others to use.

Over time, however, we have discovered several reasons why these very stringent requirements actually work against the success of the VUSSC programme.

First, the experience of the VUSSC suggests that when a group develops courseware collaboratively online it likes to limit access to the working drafts to the group members, at least until they feel they have a presentable product. It is, of course, possible to limit access to a Wiki although this is somewhat contrary to its 'anyone-can-contribute' philosophy.

More fundamentally, use of WikiEducator for course development also precludes the incorporation of much useful material from elsewhere. A topical example is the large volume of OER material available through projects such as MIT's OpenCourseware and the UK Open University's OpenLearn. Much of this

material carries the Non-Commercial or No-Derivatives restrictions in the Creative Commons license, which preclude its use on WikiEducator even though this material is in fact freely available for re-use for the vast majority educational situations.

Similarly, VUSSC teams often find that they would like to adopt good teaching material that is already in the public domain, for instance material on Fisheries from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). However, this would not satisfy the stringent conditions imposed by WikiEducator because the FAO retains some rights on the use of the material.

Another aspect of this problem is the use of tools that are currently held on proprietary software, which is precluded by WikiEducator. Specifically, VUSSC teams want to use the Commonwealth of Learning's highly successful Instructional Design Template (COL, 2006) to structure their material for teaching, but this is presently available only on proprietary software. The template provides an easy tool for educators who use word processors. They quickly learn how to apply heading styles and suchlike in the materials. The macros in the template help to replicate headings and other information quickly, so reducing the time necessary make the course material look good.

To get around these challenges, COL has evolved two approaches to the course development process:

1. Search for good source materials (frequently CC-BY-NC) for the topic and create a draft of new materials with the necessary customisations, using any word processor;
2. Apply the instructional design template to it;
3. Share the result in Basecamp.

BaseCamp is an online project-management service that supports team discussions and accepts multiple formats of documents, which carry any copyright. It is used by a million companies world wide to manage teamwork.

The second way of developing content can be used if much of the source material carries a CC-BY-SA copyright license:

1. Develop course material collaboratively on the Wiki;
2. Once a good draft is achieved, remove it from the Wiki;
3. Add any course elements that have more restrictive licenses than CC-BY-SA noting the nature of the licenses for the information of end users;
4. Apply the instructional design template to it, and
5. Share the result in Basecamp, a project-management software that accepts multiple formats.

In both cases, we then make the materials available freely available on COL's website.

Learning4Content

Let us mention a project that is using WikiEducator in a more full-blooded way. With the support of the Hewlett Foundation COL is giving teachers around the world the skills for developing content on a Wiki. Workshops will be offered online and in each Commonwealth country. There is no charge for taking this mini-course, except that each participant must agree to create a short lesson and contribute it to the Wiki.

This project has just started, so it is too early to assess either the extent to which teachers collaborate to improve each other's work or make use of the end products in their teaching. These lessons, being short, can all be done *ab initio* and so the CC-BY-SA license does not pose a problem.

By contrast, since the VUSSC is developing full programmes that often make use of existing material, it cannot always find materials that do not at least carry a "non-profit" restriction. In the Fisheries programme, for example, it would have been fastidious to have to re-write and paraphrase existing public domain material from, for example, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation simply in order to get it under a CC-BY-SA license.

We believe in approaching issues of licenses for learning materials in a pragmatic way. We call this stance 'horses for courses' or 'what counts is what works!' Although COL holds out the ideal of making materials as open and free to use as possible, trade-offs between openness and effectiveness sometimes have to be made.

Web 2.0

In the last part of these remarks we shall broaden our scope further and ask briefly about the implications of Web 2.0. Today's Web is a thoroughly interactive affair, very different from the one-way display system of its early days. Colleagues, friends and communities of practice now use Web 2.0 applications as common means of communication.

These applications have a variety of purposes: there are sites for social book-marking; for custom searching (such as COL's Knowledge Finder); for organising micro-content; for social networking; for blogging; for podcasts; for videocasting and webcasting; for collaborative writing; and for project management such as Basecamp.

These sites all attract a heavy volume of traffic, especially from young people even though only a tiny fraction of world's population in the age range from 15 to 25 is yet online. The evolution of these platforms and services is mostly happening outside schools and academe.

Although some individual teachers are exploring and using the technology, educational management is responding, if at all, in a very *ad hoc* and uncertain manner. How should institutions respond when students want to incorporate use of these applications into their university studies?

Today we preach constructivist theories of learning and, when asked to list the capabilities that we want our students to have, we cite communications skills, critical thinking, problem solving, ICT skills, initiative, flexibility and a blend of independence with the ability to function in a team.

Yet much of our teaching, both in classrooms and at a distance, is still done in the objectivist style. We act as if knowledge is defined by experts. It is there to be learned and understood by students and then reproduced in examinations. There are right answers and proper ways of thinking. University teachers strive to be correct and authoritative, speaking with the clarity that comes from well-structured knowledge.

However, if we truly believe our declared aspirations for students' capabilities we should be putting the onus on them to construct knowledge. This means giving greater space for reflection, discussion, questioning and argument and for adopting greater equality between teacher and student. The Web 2.0 applications are a powerful expression of this equality for they discourage any sense of hierarchy.

eLearning is not a constructivist approach to learning in and of itself; but it can facilitate such an approach if used well. Incorporating some of the Web 2.0 applications that we have mentioned gives students the possibility of creating and adapting content and finding valuable information from sources that may be unknown to the teacher. However, two caveats are in order.

First, experience shows that the sophisticated use of Web 2.0 applications, as in some of the higher level courses (e.g. in Environmental Policy) at the UK Open University, requires more work from both students and tutors than more objectivist approaches - although at the UKOU both groups deem the extra effort worth it.

Second, it is ironic that Web-based degree mills might claim to be the ultimate expression of the constructivist approach to university study. The student submits a CV, pays a fee and gets the degree certificate their choice by return mail. My UNESCO colleague Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić just gave you some breathtaking examples of the audacity of degree mills. These spurious operations will continue to flourish until governments get serious about protecting the integrity of their legitimate universities and employers make it a rule systematically to check the authenticity of credentials presented to them.

Degree mills are a special threat to eLearning because some jurisdictions, in an attempt to choke off the bogus web-based operations, have put an outright ban on the recognition of qualifications gained online.

Conclusion

There is much more to be said about how new approaches to course development are changing the concept of ownership of course content and we hope to explore this further in discussion. In this presentation we have made two simple points.

First, we should not be absolutist about the openness of an Open Educational Resource. What counts is what works. Paradoxically we may sometimes do more to extend access by placing restrictions on the openness of the learning material.

Second, Web 2.0 applications allow students to be more equal partners in the teaching/learning process. However, this will not mean less work for teachers and we must be alert to more sinister role of the Web as a safe haven for spurious educational offerings.

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