

Respect, Understanding and Open Educational Resources



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Commonwealth of Learning*

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth comprises 53 countries, of which 32 are small states (those with less than 4.5 million population), all of which now participate in Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

COL works with Ministries and national institutions to establish policy and build skills in open and distance learning (ODL) and technology mediated learning. The focus was initially on radio and TV and has now moved to include computers and the Internet without losing the recognition of the value of radio and TV. Print is still the most universally usable technology that has the ability to reach the most people.

Open Educational Resources (OERs)

OERs have huge potential in working with the 32 small and island states. The concept of sharing content along with developing the skills needed to develop learning content was introduced along with the establishment of the Virtual University for the small States of the Commonwealth. Although it carries the name "virtual" much emphasis is placed on print and digital as well as eLearning. It also has started creating a "Transnational Qualifications Framework" to help small countries gain credibility for the programmes offered in their countries. We want qualifications in small countries to be as recognised as those from big countries.

In developing sustainability models for OERs, please include the possibility that learning content being developed in faraway parts of the world may be of use to you as well. It is also adaptable and may be integrated and localised "here" - in industrialised countries or wherever "here" may be. Remember that Barcelona is on the far side of the world to people in the Pacific; materials developed anywhere need contextualisation, so if you bring in materials from other places, you also need to adapt just as others have to adapt when they download your materials.

It is good to see models that combine 'All rights reserved' and Creative Commons licenses to satisfy both the print world and eWorld. Here is one suggestion for the Opening up Education eBook. The present ND (No Derivatives) restriction limits people from copying multiple chapters. It allows users to copy the whole book or a section under the fair use principle. Can we add a sentence to the digital version of the book to allow users to copy any number of extracts of any length? Each extracted piece can then be attributed to the book and the particular chapter. A note with the license should suffice to inform potential users.

The unfortunate side of OERs is that people have to jump over various hurdles to use them. Barriers are being erected as fast as people become interested. No sooner does a particular group of people become interested, but it starts laying down requirements that suit its members but not necessarily everyone else. We all represent minorities in the world and any rules we try to impose do not necessarily suit the rest of the world's population.

The world is diverse and appears to be becoming more diverse. Globalisation does not just mean exporting some cultural norms from major countries to others, it also means keeping and sharing our cultures and norms, even those from the smallest countries of the world. We need to accept and enjoy diversity. COL is working on "respect and understanding" and OERs need also, to respect other people's choices.

The copyright hurdle

I have spoken with about a dozen lawyers from as many countries and I get a consistent message. I also listen to people who are not lawyers and I get all sorts of messages, often ones that conflict with what the legal experts tell me. Here are a few examples of fallacies I've heard:

- If materials carry an NC (Non-Commercial)restriction, then Money may not change hands - FALSE.
- For-profit enterprises or entrepreneurs may not use NC materials - FALSE - even a listed company can use NC materials.
- ND materials cannot be used for education if they cannot be adapted - FALSE.
- Materials with different licenses cannot be mixed - FALSE.

COL has guideline documents on Creative Commons licenses and copyright flexibilities that countries can use (see www.col.org/copyright).

So OERs have great value if they are not hobbled by lists of restrictions. OERs remind me of a friend who said: "Be reasonable, do it my way!" Here are a few examples of being impractical and unreasonable: "There must be":

- 1 copyright license;
- 1 computer format;
- 1 style of instructional design; and
- 1 language (and no dialects please!)

As unreasonable as it is to expect everyone around the world to only share OERs in English (or any other single language), so is it impractical to expect that everyone should give up their particular computer format, or way of working, because of a single standard being imposed that they do not currently use.

Whatever image an individual has of OERs, it will be just that - one individual's perception or perspective. But if we take account of diversity, we can see that there will always be other perspectives on what the term embraces. The term cannot be limited by ideology, favourite computer formats, an individual's, mother tongue or anything else. Limitations do not make for OPEN educational resources.

Issues to consider

1. The use of OERs will continue to be limited if charges for bandwidth are not improved. How can an internet line that costs \$30 a month in one country cost thousands of dollars in another?
2. Access to equipment; people frequently have access to computers at work but not at home when they can study. Low cost, real computers are now available. Real computers now cost from \$400 up. This might be one of the greatest advances in facilitating the spread of OERs.

In closing, what is really needed for OERs to succeed is a good dose of respect and understanding toward others: let us not deny what others see as normal; let us not try to push others into our own box.