

Open Education Resources: Lessons from the COL Experience



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Experience*

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Transcript

Good day to all of you. I bring to you greetings from our President Sir John Daniel and all my colleagues here at the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver. It is an honour to be invited to OER Africa and I am very grateful to both Jenny Glennie, who is also a leading and respected member of our international Board of Governors and Catherine Ngugi for giving me this opportunity.

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As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental organisation, established by Commonwealth Heads of Government. Our slogan is 'learning for development'.

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Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and Information and Communication technologies for expanding access to education and training.

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My topic today is 'OER: Lessons from the COL Experience'. I will first look at the broader context and then give you 3 examples of OER development that COL and will finally raise some questions about how to take this movement to the next level.

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Let us first look at the context

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This Slide gives you an indication of the digital divide across the world. While in North America, there are over 80 computer and internet users per 100 persons, in Africa, the number of computer and internet users is less than 10 per 100 persons. So if we look at OER as 'technology' we certainly start with a very major disadvantage. Can we shift the discussion to the social domain? The present debates in OER are *too focused on technology* and there is rarely any discussion on issues such as stakeholder engagement and the politics of power.

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As Manuel Castells (2009:50) put it:

....there is a fundamental form of exercising power that is common to all networks; exclusion from the network....However, because the key, strategic networks are global, there is one form of exclusion—thus, of power—that is pervasive...: to include everything valuable in the global while excluding the devalued local. Because space in the network society is configured around the opposition between the (global) and the (local), the spatial structure of our society is a major source of the structuration of power relationships.

Castells (2009) explains that the *network-making power* operates on the basis of two mechanisms: i) the ability to constitute, program and reprogram networks and ii) the ability to connect and ensure cooperation. Many important stakeholders of education in Africa, South Asia and Latin America may be far beyond this network-making power due to regional, gender, class and ethnic factors. They are therefore excluded from these networks. Is it perhaps because of these inequalities that institutions and individuals from the global south have had a limited role in OER creation and dissemination?

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If this issue of power relations has to be addressed, then we need to redefine OER, by placing the emphasis on the stakeholder rather than on technology and on process rather than product.

It is in this context that my colleagues and I have attempted this definition:

The phenomenon of OER is an empowerment process, facilitated by technology in which various types of stakeholders are able to interact, collaborate, create and use materials and processes, that are freely available, for enhancing access, reducing costs and improving the quality of education at all levels.

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What is a process-oriented approach for OER? Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley's (1992) domestication process is helpful here. They argue that technology defines as well as is defined by communities that adopt or challenge it. The following table visualizes such a process:

Appropriation refers to the ability of every stakeholder to have access to technology tools and infrastructure irrespective of class gender ethnicity

Localisation refers to the importance of embedding OER in the values of the community

Incorporation takes us to the next step when OER are used to strengthen the educational goals of the community

Conversion is the stage when the stakeholder develops a sense of agency and is empowered to not only connect with and influence developments in the global community.

This domestication process is critical in getting stakeholders involved so that OER becomes a mass movement.

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Let us now turn to the COL experience. The lessons learned will suggest the possible approaches that could contribute to optimising the potential and minimising the risks involved in creating, using and re-using OERs.

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COL supported the development of the STAMP 2000+ materials in the late nineties, long before the term OER had entered the educational lexicon. 140 course writers from eight Southern African countries, namely, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, wrote 46 modules of materials for training upper primary and junior secondary school teachers.

The modules focussed on four subjects: Science, Technology, Mathematics and General Education. Yet, an external evaluation revealed that there was very little attempt to adopt and use the modules by teacher education institutions in Africa (Spaven, 2006)

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Why were there no takers? Some of the reasons for this could be i) the fact that no teacher training institutions in these eight countries had committed to using the resources; ii) it was simply assumed that once the OERs were developed, teacher training institutions would AUTOMATICALLY use them. There was no clear strategy for implementation by the participating countries; iii) there was a general apprehension about using materials 'not-made-here'; iv) the materials were considered too generic to be integrated into courses already on offer; and v) lack of awareness about the programme and its benefits.

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The key lesson from this experience is not only to develop capacity and content but to ensure a buy-in from local partners and to have a clear implementation strategy. The involvement of the relevant stakeholders is critical.

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The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a consortium of 32 small states of the Commonwealth which have come together to develop capacity in online course development, develop courses that are freely available and offer these courses through existing tertiary-level institutions

in the participating countries. Several need-based courses on “Disaster Management”, “Tourism’ ‘Entrepreneurship development’ “Linux for IT Managers” have been completed and are available on COL’s website .

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The key lesson from this initiative is that if we adopt a participatory approach, then we need to make an allowance for longer timeframes.

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The third COL initiative is a six-country partnership to develop 20 sets of course materials in print and online formats, based on the secondary curricula of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Seychelles, Trinidad & Tobago and Zambia. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, came forward to support this work that combines the professional development of teachers with the development of OER. It is expected that providing high-quality course materials will contribute to improving, the quality of secondary education in both open and conventional schools in the participating countries.

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The Lesson from this experience is that a continued investment of time and resources is needed to develop both the local ownership and leadership required to make the project sustainable.

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What makes the COL approach particularly important is that it focuses not only on collaborative content development, but also on capacity building, and especially on creating communities of practice.

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What then are some of the questions that need to be addressed?

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Who are we developing the OER for? The fundamental players are the teachers and the students. How can we reach them in remote and marginalized communities? It is these communities that need most help to improve the quality of education. Many of them have not heard of OERs. How can we make them partners in this movement? Many educational institutions have traditional governance structures and teacher-centred pedagogic models. The OER initiative requires a learner-centred and decentralised approach. There is then a basic contradiction between the centralised and decentralised institutional models. Will the centralised structures allow a decentralised approach? What kind of advocacy strategies will be needed to reach these constituencies?

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Most of the available literature on OER focuses on production. How do we move to the next level and promote actual use and re-use? How will this help us achieve development outcomes?

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Finally, many strong players in OER have emerged in the different regions of the world. There are many international regional and national initiatives in OER. We have OER Africa, COL is working with UNESCO on policy advocacy, IDRC is working with Wawasan Open University on OER capacity building in Asia. How can these different groups come together as a network of stakeholders to enhance our collective impact?

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Let me conclude on that note and wish you well in your deliberations. Thank you for your attention.