

Positioning for use of OERs in Online Course Development – Best Practice and Quality Assurance

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ABSTRACT

Enhancement of quality in online learning is driven by key factors, among them course development strategies, course structure and technology integration. OERs provide an opportunity for improving the pace of course development and at the same time provide quality materials. Adaptation of narratives or technology mediation in content areas of interest, that are guided by curriculum development specialists and instructional designers can potentially work as a least cost strategy to reach a wide student group with diverse learning styles and needs. This paper argues that the extent to which quality standards are observed with OER use and adaptation depends on institutional policy, protocols, and staff development to ensure that course design and materials production reflect a consistent approach, there is use of appropriate resources for the course level and the learning activities are tied to the course objectives. How do OERs fit in? How difficult is it for OERs to be effectively incorporated in online course development, despite their original design for a different audience? Can quality be assured across diverse content areas? This critical analysis explores the course design and structure of two online courses in the areas of accounting and change management for educational leadership, offered to adult learners enrolled in two online undergraduate programmes. It examines the methodologies used for incorporation of OERs, the types of resources used and the learning activities that were developed to assess their effectiveness.

This paper attempts to demonstrate how different types of OERs can be creatively used to enhance the quality of online courses and provide a context for specific types of learning activities that assist adult learners with development and enhancement of their critical thinking skills and application of their learning to practice in Caribbean work environments.

INTRODUCTION – SETTING THE CONTEXT

This paper attempts to demonstrate best practice in the use of specific types of OERs to enhance the quality of two online courses. By placing emphasis on learning activities that assist adult learners with development and enhancement of their critical thinking skills the paper demonstrates the use of OERs for application of learning to practice in Caribbean work environments.

The Courses

Two online courses provide the framework for a demonstration of the effective incorporation of OERs in course content and the structuring of learning activities. The courses cover content in two diverse areas as follows: Course 1: Accounting and Finance; Course 2: Change Management and Organizational Development. Both courses are targeted at final year adult learners enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes. Course 1 has been offered once and has benefitted from student and facilitator evaluation. Course 2 has been developed but at the time of writing is yet to be delivered, however it has benefitted from an academic peer review process. The programme objectives common to both courses include the integration of work based learning and experience with theory; development of reflective practitioner skills; and learner ability to interact as an active member of a learning community. Learner profiles indicate working adults – largely females with family responsibilities, who are seeking professional development, academic qualifications for promotional opportunities, or for change of career. The course

design therefore focused on learner centered activities and facilitation of learner mastery of the content in a community of inquiry.

Key elements pertinent to the instructional design of the courses are the availability of curriculum development specialists to guide content selection and adaptation, institutional knowledge of learner profiles and factors likely to impact learning outcomes such as the content, availability of background materials at minimal cost, teaching and learning methodologies, and the use of learner focused strategies to facilitate the application of content and learning to authentic work environments.

The Institution

The institution at which the courses are offered is in its fifth year of operations, arising from the outreach arm of a sixty (60) year old regional University with over 42 physical sites in 16 countries across the English speaking Caribbean. The institution offers online, blended and face to face programmes. Its operations are largely self-financing from student fee income generated during a period of strain on the region's economies. The institution is structured along divisional lines, with an academic programming and delivery division mainly responsible for planning, development and delivery of online programmes and courses. Course development is guided by trained curriculum development staff and is driven by contracted content experts for production of text based materials and scripting supporting content for multimedia elements. The division is using and repurposing OER content on a limited basis, largely for development of some specialist online courses and for blended and/or face to face delivery to supplement and/or replace textbooks. The use of OERs is intended to widen the applicability of course offerings and reduce costs associated with copyright permissions, and the dollar cost of education for learners in the region.

OER Policy

The use of OER content is not an intrinsic part of the business model of the institution but it is recognized as a potential for gaining flexibility and meeting a demand for innovation in course design, development and delivery at least cost. The ultimate goal of the functional department responsible for course development is to use OERs to enhance the content of courses offered, and contribute to the pool of OERs available for use internally and for institutional sharing among partners, collaborators and the wider online learning community.

What were the considerations driving the use of OERs in these courses?

From an instructional design perspective, course content must be well structured, relevant and accessible to learners. In addition, learners must be able to apply their learning in real world, authentic settings as well as see parallels to practice and everyday life.

In the context of the Caribbean region, the resource base required to achieve these expectations demand the availability of paid content experts and institutional curriculum staff to guide the development of specific learning resources that are rooted in the cultural reality of the Caribbean.

However, the time, human resource and financial constraints surrounding course development at the institution do not allow for the quality and quantity of the resource base that would facilitate development and integration of a variety of content/learning objects that can be related to, or critically assessed, in the context of the lived experience of Caribbean reality

Why OER content? In the context of Course 1, one of the distinguishing factors of currencies in the Caribbean is their lack of demand internationally and usability for purposes of international trade. It is therefore important for learners in this content area to understand the international context of trade and the performance of internationally traded currencies. In regard to Course 2, key to the philosophical underpinnings of the course is the need to equip potential leaders with the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities to recognize the need for, and effectively organize and manage change and development

processes in the regions' educational institutions. More important, learning will be taking place during a period that is continually demanding attention to cutting edge and innovative educational leadership, cognizant of international perspectives and best practice.

CONTEXT FOR ENHANCING QUALITY IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Academic Partnerships (2013, p.2) note the benefits of benchmarks which show that "quality in online learning has many dimensions". For the purposes of this paper, such quality will be discussed within the context of the applicability of course content, including learning activities that are directly linked to programme and course objectives. Relevant questions in this context would be: To what extent can course objectives be achieved and quality assured with OER use in course development? What processes would achieve best OER fit for online course design?

In response, searches for relevant OER content were conducted over a 3 month period by topic using the following criteria:

- Use of key words drawn from the course learning objectives and course description to ensure search relevance
- Identifying key international events and topic contexts to locate the search for relevant resources that provide an international perspective
- Search of frequently used open content sources such as MIT OpenCourseWare, You Tube, Zainbooks, Boonbooks and open source repositories using key words
- Identification of a variety of resources – types and sources to assess the best fit for different learning styles
- Iterative process for selection and best fit of resources and effective sequencing to supplement knowledge of theory and concepts in a variety of international contexts
- The need for integration of a range of interesting OER content guided by the relevance and appropriateness of the resource and the need to avoid confusing learners with many optional resources (COL, 2013).

Considerations for the selections also focused on basic principles of instructional design including the ability to achieve consistent layout of materials, clear organisation and appropriate chunking of content, and inclusion of a complementary number of learning activities to encourage self assessment and critical thinking, and the building of an effective community of inquiry.

Using the Resource Types in the Courses

A few of the resource types utilized in the two courses are presented in the tables below and illustrate use in accordance with course objectives and design of learning activities.

Course 1: Accounting and Finance

According to the approved programme proposal one of the main aims of the programme in which Course 1 is offered, is to:

"develop critical thinking skills of learners/practitioners so they may better understand and efficiently and effectively operate within the financial, economic, managerial, regulatory, social, cultural and business environments, within which institutions in the sector operate, and are expected to respond to the needs of its publics" (UWIOC Programme Proposal, 2010, p.7).

The use of OERs to supplement content and situate the learning activities was both to facilitate learner styles and to illustrate best practice or provide contexts for comparisons, critical analysis, evaluation and assessment of applicability to Caribbean work environments.

Table 1: Course 1 Resource Type and Objectives

Learning Activity	Type of OER	How Used	Objectives
Required Reading: The International Financial Environment	Academic E-book (ZainBooks.com)	To support facilitator presentations and introduction of the course content from an international perspective.	To assist learners with their understanding of the relationship between the international and Caribbean financial environments
Online Group Discussion Forum: The International Financial Environment	YouTube video on: structure of MNCs; theoretical perspectives; models of development; operations (8 minutes)	To create a context for critical evaluation of the best fit model, structure and function of an MNC located in the region.	To compare ways in which companies engage in international business To compare the models that explain the emergence of the MNC
Guided Reading: Exchange Rate Determination	MIT Open Courseware Reading (7 pages)	To supplement the course materials in preparation for a graded essay submission	To introduce key concepts using illustrations from the European, Japanese and United States markets To assist learners with real world application of changes in international financial markets in the context of the different currency regimes in the Caribbean
Tutorial: Currency Derivatives	You Tube lecture capture with Power Point slides and asynchronous illustration of concepts (47 minutes)	To facilitate development of an illustrated glossary of key terms To facilitate comparison with practice in work environments in the Caribbean To provide the foundation for learner submissions and commentary on the contribution of peer learners located in another Caribbean country	To assist learners with evaluation of risk and contribute to the process of collaborative decision making in work environments

Course 2: Educational Leadership and Management

According to the approved programme proposal, two of the main aims of the programme in which Course 2 is offered, are to:

“Introduce a body of knowledge that emphasizes the integration of theory and practice grounded in authentic experience of educational leadership and management;

Develop learners’ critical thinking skills and ability for effective functioning at the institutional level in their work-based setting” (UWIOC Programme Proposal, 2009, p.7).

The use of OERs to supplement the course content is intended to facilitate comparisons between the national, regional and international education contexts and use of reflective practice and constructivist principles to facilitate engagement of learner peers. The intent is to focus learners on critical analysis, evaluation and assessment of applicability of strategies in these environments to the local and wider Caribbean contexts.

Table 2: Course 2 Resource Type and Objectives

Learning Activity	Type of OER	How Used	Objectives
Required Reading: Theories of Educational Management, Change Management and Organizational Development	Academic e-book (Web-books.com)	To supplement course materials and illustrate key concepts and theories	To demonstrate application of organization development principles and best practice to the learner's organization To facilitate critical assessment of international perspectives of organizational change, development and evaluation in Caribbean contexts
Reflective Discussion Posting: Theories of Educational Management, Change Management and Organizational Development	YouTube video: A United States based educator sharing a context for organizational development (3 minutes)	A reflective activity. Comparative analysis of the international context to local practice.	
Online Group Forum Discussion: Common Problems in Educational Institutions for Change Management	YouTube video: Interviews with educational leaders and managers in three country locations – UK, US and Canada (10 minutes each)	To provide a foundation for comparative analysis and assessment of the recommendations for improvement in the local and regional country contexts. To facilitate informed comment on the contributions of peer learners from another Caribbean territory – building the community of inquiry	To explore commonalities and evaluate the approaches to managing common change management problems at educational institutions To propose a plan for dealing with related issues in the learner's work based environment and country context
Seminar Presentation: Team Building; Team Leadership; Strategy and Strategic Planning	You Tube video: capture of related activities in school based and tertiary level settings relevant to each topic (10 to 15 minutes duration per topic)	To illustrate key concepts via simulations and role play activity To provide a context for learner reflections and evaluation To encourage best practice through collaborative group work	To assist learners with evaluation and applicability of key concepts to their particular Caribbean contexts To relate learner experiences to best practice in accomplishing work related tasks

DISCUSSION

Were the objectives for use of OERs in the two courses met? The evidence suggests a positive response. An average of four OERs per course topic were utilized in both courses to supplement content and guide learning activities in accordance with the learning objectives that were defined in both courses.

What were the course outcomes? All learners attempting Course 1 passed the course having achieved an average of 65-70 percent of total marks in the course. In addition, at the mid semester course evaluation, learners reported satisfaction with learning activities, course materials and interaction with the course content. Facilitator evaluation at the end of the semester reported effective use of “internet links to useful sites and video tutorials that significantly encouraged students to read widely and apply theory to real world concepts and scenarios” (UWIOC Report on Course Delivery, 2013 p.2).

Course 2 has not yet been delivered but the process of blind peer review of content, objectives, learning activities and assessment structure conducted as part of quality assurance processes, was positive. The academic reviewer has noted that the “course presented some very interesting activities...materials are current and appropriate for meeting learning objectives ...the videos were found to be quite appropriate for the most part” (UWIOC Peer Review Report, 2013).

What are the lessons learned? Given that the time and resource availability did not facilitate development of resources that are designed in the context of local and regional country environments, should the process to identify and use OER content in this manner be continued, reviewed or strengthened? The institution’s learners are located in jurisdictions across 16 territories in the Caribbean with their individual or small group differences in approaches to policy, programming and operations in the specific sectors. Both course designs encouraged reflection, critical assessment of content and relating learner experiences to best practice in accomplishing work related tasks and activities. These all required culturally relevant resources that would provide multiple perspectives for learning. But clearly, learners benefitted from a design that used international perspectives for comparisons. While a more detailed study of the success of this initiative is no doubt required, the model presented in this paper has potential for informing course development practice at the institution. The cost/benefit of foregoing development of culturally relevant materials in the context of expedience and use of creative instructional design with OERs must be considered. There is support for the OER model as it allowed for learner engagement and positive learning outcomes evidenced by the pass rate for Course 1, and quality assurance results from course evaluations and the academic peer review process.

The courses utilized OERs to create the context for learning both from the perspective of the materials available and the design of learning activities to facilitate peer to peer collaboration, group presentations and exchanges in discussions forums for advancement of a learning community. There is support for the use of OERs to enhance learning activities that redound to the benefit of the learner, and improve the quality of online courses where institutional resources are limited.

The lesson is clear, there is need for an institution wide discussion to assess use and address policy development for identification of OERs, structured and improved use, reuse and sharing of OER content in courses.

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