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From Africa through Germany to the UK and back again: the potential of Open Educational resources

Tina Wilson and Patrick McAndrew

OpenLearn, Berrill Level 2, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, Bucks., MK6 7AA

martina.wilson@open.ac.uk

p.mcandrew@open.ac.uk

Abstract

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are freely available worldwide. Though sustainability (Downes, 2006) and production issues (Ferreira and Heap, 2006) have been discussed, more research is needed into how adopting OERs impacts on organisations. This paper will first report on how academics and teachers in ten institutions/organisations based nationally and internationally plan to use OERs with learners. Indeed, academics, teachers and facilitators are being encouraged to provide a wide variety of learning situations and experiences for the changing student population. The later discussion focuses on issues and possible changes required to internal procedures within organisations when OERs are adopted.

Introduction

This paper explores two strands of research. The first reports on how ten institutions/organisations plan to adopt Open Educational Resources (OERs). The second part of the paper discusses issues related to possible changes needed to institutional procedures in the ten institutions/organisations. OERs could play a vital role and potentially increase learning opportunities for those from non-traditional educational backgrounds. OERs add to the mix, in a climate where educational institutions and organisations of all descriptions are adopting online learning environments to enhance their teaching and learning processes. They are moving towards elearning approaches for course delivery. An integral part of this elearning agenda is the inclusion of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) such as WebCT, BlackBoard, or Moodle. These VLEs host course materials and communication facilities though often access is password protected. This suggests that many institutions or organisations develop and present their teaching materials in a closed environment. Indeed 'not all academics believe that all potentially eligible scholarly content should be open' (Smith and Casserly, 2006, p2). This is in contrast with Open Educational Resources (OERs) movement, which provides free access to educational materials. This paper will discuss how ten institutions/organisations worldwide (closed environments) propose to use and adapt OERs provided by The Open University in the United Kingdom (UK).

The Open University in the UK (a distance learning University) has been developing supported open learning multiple media materials for almost 40 years. A proportion of these high quality materials are being made available and accessible worldwide through the Open Content Initiative (OpenLearn). The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation fund the OpenLearn project.

The online environment

OpenLearn is an environment based on the Moodle course management system. It hosts twin Websites; a LearningSpace aimed mainly at learners and a LabSpace aimed mainly at educators. Units of material available on OpenLearn are taken from the original Supported Open Learning version of a course (which includes tutorial support and assessment). In the OpenLearn context the materials called 'units' are standalone without organised tutorials and formal assessment. OpenLearn provides similar facilities to a VLE but in an open and accessible environment.

The environment was launched on 25 October 2006 and worldwide access continues to increase. OpenLearn provides an observatory, which affords the exploration of the range of activities taking place. The OpenLearn website was visited by 649,424 unique visitors between 25 October 2006 and 25 June 2007.

Units of material in OpenLearn vary in length between four and twenty hours of study time. The learner can interact on an individual basis with the material in the eleven different topic areas or work in groups with other learners. A learner is considered to be anyone and everyone. Amongst these users, some 23,224 have also registered (by the end of July 2007) to use the additional facilities, which include forums, online journals and other resources. Forums are online conferences where learners can engage in asynchronous communication. Online journals allow learners to record their learning experience. The majority of visitors are from the UK and US with 90% being new visitors (not Open University staff or students). So how are these OERs being used?

The approach

This paper focuses on the educator and their perspective of how they would use OERs with their learners. As a first step to understand how OERs could be used by learners under the guidance of academics or teachers the following questions are being addressed:

- How do educators plan to make use of OERs with their learners?
- Do they use the content as presented or do they want to change it?
- How are the OERs integrated with other educational resources in the types of closed environment mentioned above?
- What are the implications in terms of policies and procedures when using OER's for accreditation?

Aim and research methods

The aim of the research is to investigate how educators can use OERs with their learners and to ascertain what impact this will have on established policies and procedures. Changes may be required to internal procedures within organisations to enable them to adopt standalone OERs as part of their curriculum and assessment strategy. This sees a model where content in itself, however well constructed, is only part of the education model – a survey of OU students carried out before OpenLearn started showed a desire for tutorials (64%), assessment (90%) and qualifications (89%). In practice there will be many informal learners attracted to free content without these aims, however it raises important issues for whether separated content gives organisations a chance to review their own approaches and to offer ways to bring open content into their curriculum. An initial survey aimed to establish across a small sample of organisations whether there was a recognition of these opportunities, what options might be considered and what ideas might emerge.

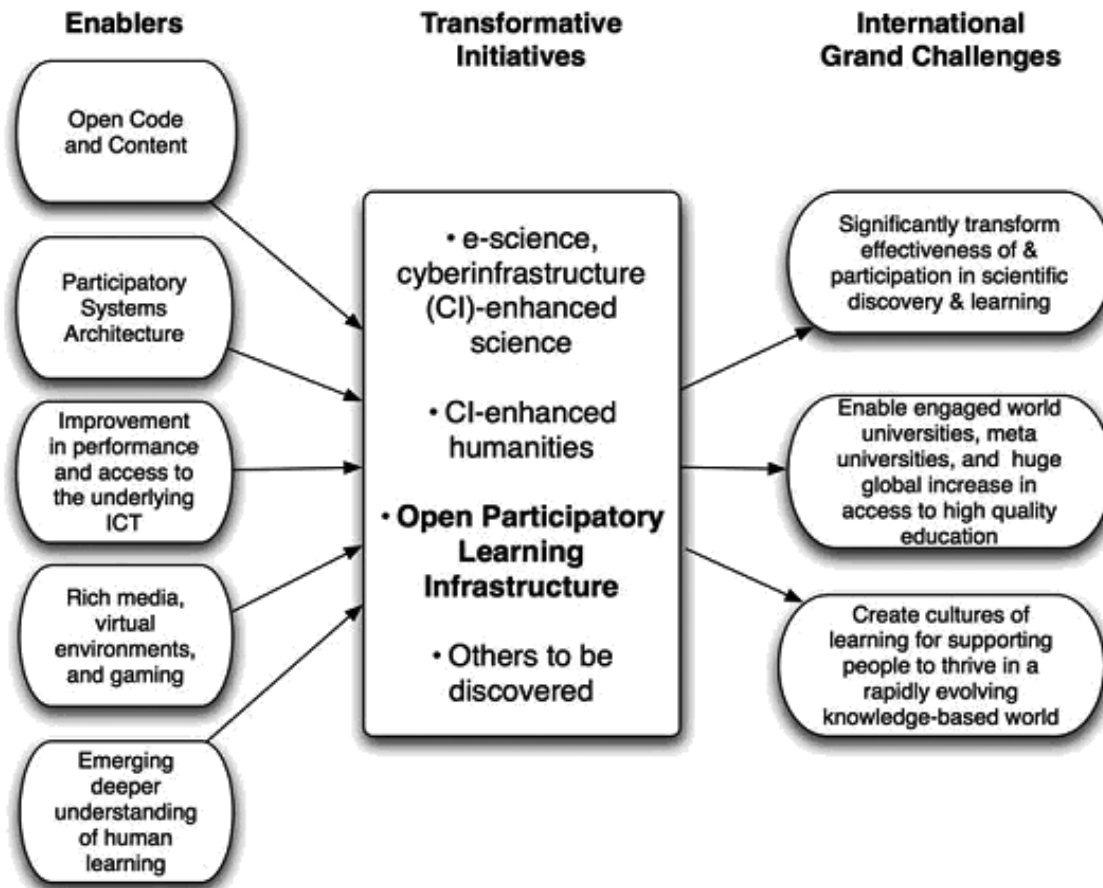


Figure 1. Enablers and collateral initiative context for the OPLI Initiative (from Atkins, Seely Brown, and Hammond, 2007)

The OPLI model considers that open content (including open code) needs to work through an overall infrastructure to then provide services to the communities. The three areas considered by Seely Brown et al. are:

1. Transformation of scientific discovery.
2. Engagement of universities to increase access to education.
3. New cultures for learning.

Of these the second aspect is the most incremental on current approaches and is in part dependent on the attitudes of existing providers. The more radical changes proposed in the paper are not dismissed but are not explored further here.

The study involves twelve representatives from ten organisations' (a school, colleges and universities) based nationally and internationally:

- five semi-structured interviews (Preece et al., 1994; Zand, 1994; Fowler, 1993) were conducted face to face when distance was not an issue
- seven personal online semi-structured interviews were conducted when the interviewer and interviewee were long distances apart. Debenham (2001) termed this technique the epistolary interview.

This research provides useful and important baseline guidance for future research into the many possibilities of how formal tutorial support and accreditation could be achieved with OERs.

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