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Am I good enough? The mediated use of open educational resources to empower learners in excluded communities

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SUMMARY

This paper explores the issues involved in providing education to excluded communities and reviews some case studies where the mediated use of open educational resources available from the UK Open University's OpenLearn website has empowered socially excluded groups. It argues that the successful use of e-learning in the long term is dependent on appropriate interventions within excluded groups and communities, and that open educational resources provide a safer option for them to gain confidence and competence and so become more empowered.

INTRODUCTION

Open Learning is predicated on the belief that openness in many forms is a key element to reaching out to as many people as possible, removing some of the barriers presented by more traditional forms of education (Lane 2008). However, while such learning may be openly available in principle, there can still be many barriers to some groups accessing or availing themselves of those opportunities (Wilson 2008). Even more critical is the plight of displaced people who may have to cope with a different system of provision and a different language of instruction to that of their home country. Is the provision acceptable to them and their context?

The advent of digital technologies and their use within e-learning or m-learning schemes has both opened up further possibilities for Open Learning by increasing the scope for much more non face-to-face two-way interaction and collaboration between groups of learners and their teachers. These possibilities are further enhanced by the development of digital open educational resources with open licenses that give users pre-defined rights to use and change the materials in various ways (Caswell, Henson, Jensen & Wiley 2008). At the same time the availability, accessibility and acceptability of this mode of teaching and learning is extremely variable, with socially excluded groups or communities being those who do not have much access to such technologies, may find few opportunities available to them in their circumstances and are worried that they cannot cope with these new technologies and ways of learning. In other words they do not feel included even when people are trying to reach out to them because they lack confidence in their competence to succeed – they feel disempowered.

This disempowerment can be viewed as excluded communities having few, if any, degrees of freedom to engage with open learning. The contrast here is between the discourse and practice of making educational materials, activities and opportunities as open as possible by certain groups in societies and with the freedoms that are embodied within the different types of openness. One example is the UK Open University's practice of open access to undergraduate courses where no prior qualifications are needed to register – that is students have freedom from discrimination on the basis of prior achievement. However open access does not mean that the course is free of cost or that there are constraints to the freedom of when the course can be studied and assignments submitted. Another example is open educational resources where there is much greater freedom around cost (they are free to access although there may be costs to being online) and time of study (they can be studied at any time as long as they are available and accessible by the user – that is they can get online). These freedoms are made more possible with digital resources as they can be accessed simultaneously by many people and infinitely replicated. The relative abundance of and non-destructive through consumption attributes of a digital resource means that issues of physical scarcity no longer apply.

EXCLUDED COMMUNITIES

Certain societal groups or communities may be excluded from current educational provision for a variety of reasons. Within higher education some or all of the following may be barriers to particular groups and communities engaging with available provision:

1. Geographical remoteness, even in rural areas of small countries;
2. Cultural norms, with some ethnic cultures not supporting the education of women in particular circumstances, for instance;
3. Social norms, whereby some family groups or communities do not value education as highly as others, so discouraging engagement;
4. Prior achievements, such as prior qualifications being used as a filter access to a scarce resource or as a filter to maintain an individual institution's social and cultural status;
5. Individual or household income, where the relative cost of accessing higher education by certain groups is very high;
6. Digital divide. Computers and the web offer many freedoms but they still cost money to access. People with less money may not easily afford such technology and even find that the absolute cost to them is higher than other groups because they are seen as a greater financial risk to a technology provider;
7. Physical circumstances. There may not be any easy places to undertake the learning due to lack of a home, space in a home or having particular type of home such as a prison. Similarly, people with certain disabilities may need specialist equipment or support;
8. Individual norms, where a person is constrained by social and cultural norms - attitudes and beliefs - that they are not capable or not good enough to study at this level.

This is a formidable set of barriers with possibly the last one being crucial as, without the intent to learn at this level, the other barriers may be perceived rather than real barriers, until tested out for real. Many open, distance and e-learning institutions and programmes have devised means of overcoming some or all of these barriers through formal programmes, but what, if anything, do open educational resources offer?

THE POTENTIAL OF OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Open educational resources on their own offer little respite to the barriers noted above. Yes, in principle, they are cost free to the learner and do not require any prior qualifications. They may enable some to study materials on their own without any social or cultural pressures. But they do require computers and internet access unless someone can produce low or no cost hard copies instead, and these problems are often exacerbated in rural/remote locations.

Another way to think about this is to consider the types of support required to encourage learning in any situation where educational resources are involved (Lane 2008) separately from those that enable learning to happen at all (such as social and financial support). In this respect there is a need to also consider the learning environment in which the resources are located and that is done by reference to features of the UKOU's OpenLearn website based on the open source software Moodle (<http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn>):

1. Pedagogic support built into the educational resources, such as exercises and activities that challenge students and enable them to assess for themselves the learning they are achieving (examples of these can be seen in OpenLearn units);
2. Personal support through encouraging self-reflection and guidance within some of the in-text activities, but also in formal assessments and underpinned by a broad range of guidance material on study skills and the recording of learning and achievements in e-portfolios or learning journals (examples of which are also on OpenLearn);
3. Peer support providing mutual reflection and guidance created within tutorial groups that can meet physically or virtually (each unit on OpenLearn has an associated forum or video conferencing meeting);
4. Professional support, the expert reflection and guidance provided by subject tutors available through face-to-face meetings, telephone calls or an online conference, and the guidance provided by support specialists whether individually or collectively through comprehensive online systems. Indeed, new technologies have greatly facilitated the mobility of support so that the supporter and supported do not need to be in the same country or

communicate at the same time (this is not directly provided by the UK Open University for OpenLearn although others could do so using the site or its content).

In other words if learners are to engage with educational resources then that process can be mediated by structuring of the resource, their own capabilities, the inputs of fellow learners and the interventions of professional teachers/support workers (Lane 2007). Digital resources and digital environments can substitute for physical resources and physical environments but they are different and the need to learn and understand how to navigate and use such resources must not be underestimated. So, just what type of mediated support is required to make open educational resources useful to excluded communities.

FOUR CASE STUDIES OF MEDIATED USE OF OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

To illustrate some of the ways that open educational resources can help reduce the barriers to learning I include below four case studies where OpenLearn has been used by people inside and outside the OU. Each case study is described in the actual words of key leaders of the separate projects.

Case 1: Billy Khokhar, Assistant Director, OU in Yorkshire

"We have set up a series of `taster` events and awareness sessions in community centres where we are using OpenLearn as a conduit into and catalyst for the Open University. We show the materials to groups of students (and individuals) for them to be able to see how electronic engagement works, what our materials look like and what is expected of them.

A very specific example of this is our work with Black and Minority Ethnic groups where we have met 2 sets of Asian Women Adult Education students at Bradford College. One group is completing ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses and the other studying health and working with children. We have created partnerships with this college on a local operational level to allow us to visit these students at `pinch points` before the end of the courses to introduce our materials. Where we have Internet access, we are using OpenLearn as our main vehicle to enable the students to make conscious decisions. They can also try the materials as can their tutors which then starts the process of preparedness and achievement that I mentioned earlier.

Many of these women would be lost to the system as they can only go to Community centres but their next natural progression would be to main campus from which they are often familially and culturally excluded. This is where we can provide the symmetry to allow progression as the colleges we are working with know that these students would be lost to academia anyway and therefore this is a complementary avenue of progression for them. Our challenge is to integrate this initial activity into our core practice and to systemise our approach to Widening Participation, total Inclusion, and equality.

Even though this may be resource intensive at the outset I feel that as a form of preparedness for the students this is an excellent tool. I consider that this approach will impact positively on our recruitment, retention and achievement statistics and is therefore a sound model. Moreover it is also an academically sound approach as our potential learners (and their families) can make informed decisions about their learning journeys."

Case 2: Sue Morris, Associate Lecturer, OU in the North West

"Leasowe on the North coast of the Wirral in the UK has large areas of deprivation and is isolated from amenities and services. Leasowe Development Trust offers a range of services, including OU courses, to residents. OpenLearn has been used to help introduce people to online study and supplement their current study programmes with study skills support. The group I worked with consisted of seven students, all highly motivated, but with few or no qualifications. I used material about analytical thinking which allowed me to provide the students with an understanding of academic study, whilst material on the process of thinking gave them an insight into the way they approach problems and their approach to study. Exercises such as those from Extending and Developing Your Thinking Skills demonstrated how to unpick and analyse the effective argument. A visit to the Tate Gallery highlighted the growth in confidence and ability to think, question and analyse. As a tutor I found the

materials on OpenLearn to be an extremely valuable resource. The quality of resources is excellent and I have recommended it to other tutors as well as students.”

Case 3: Meriel Lee, Assistant Director, OU in the South West

“The South West Higher Level Skills Pathfinder Project has funded a project focusing on development of a learning organisation within Plymouth City Council’s Children’s Services. The project aims to form a model for adoption by other Councils. To date, OpenLearn has been used to generate interest in higher education and foster development of e-learning skills. Four OpenLearn workshops have now taken place and been evaluated. It has become apparent that for some employees use of IT presents a real challenge, as does regular access to a computer for learning. However, the workshops have raised confidence and motivation for e-learning and some employees are now accessing OpenLearn units for self-development. Some staff indicated that they have no current interest in engaging with more formalised courses, but find OpenLearn very useful for learning. Foster carers, who work from home, find the units useful because they can study from home at a time that suits them. Relevant OpenLearn units have been identified as the first step of qualifications escalators (currently for Children’s Services, Youth Services and Management, with potential for Foster Care and other social care workers). Nine students have progressed from the OpenLearn workshops to registration on four of the OU’s Openings Programme courses, with a further cohort being identified for the June Openings start.”

Case 4: Aidan Hobson, New Zealand Cricket Players Association

“100 players each year participate in a leadership programme focusing on skills that are linked to high performance sport such as communication, self management/reflection, motivation and teamwork. One of the major challenges in designing the programme is finding learning materials that are not too high brow but have a good level of QA, relevancy, structure, and fit our budget. Of the hundreds of websites I’ve looked at, OpenLearn was the only one that provided a good range of topics that would allow players to take up study in areas of personal interest or skills development. While there is a lot of free information on the web it is lightweight. We also have a business mentoring programme for players to learn about different career pathways and the workplace generally, supporting them for careers after sport. Given the diversity of players’ interests and learning styles and the fact most players are away from home seven months of the year on tour or in the UK playing in the off-season, we have explored other, more informal ways for them to build their knowledge. So OpenLearn fits a number of needs of informal, self-directed learning. It is structured and quality assured but very flexible. Because of their time commitments the players cannot attend classes or keep up to date with the assessment requirements of formal online learning programmes. Many of the players don’t have any positive academic learning experiences so it is great for them to access knowledge without someone looking at their grades, without the pressure of them doing assignments.”

CONCLUSIONS

Open educational resources provide some freedoms that can address the barriers to education for people and communities who may otherwise be excluded from meaningful opportunities. It is still very early in the development and use of open educational resources to fully understand how big an impact they may make. The initial experiences around OpenLearn do, however, highlight the significance of targeted interventions made by key individuals or organisations at a local or contextual level.

The issue of localisation is often aired around the issue of reworking or remixing open content for a specific purpose and yet much can probably be done by contextualising the support needed to study or reuse the content as is. In other words it is the peer and professional support that is changed, not the pedagogical support in the content itself. This is not to argue against reworking or remixing, merely to point out that reuse may be the better starting option where resources are scarce and the needs of different small, excluded communities so large.

Lastly, there is emerging evidence that the form and nature of open educational resources, particularly if used in an e-learning setting, may be unfamiliar to inexperienced learners and that considerable effort is needed to encourage and enable learners to develop personal

support strategies. This is well known for formal learning, the lesson of good quality open educational resources in a good learning environment is that they can empower the non formal learner because they are the ones in control and not having to perform for someone else's benefit.

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