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## What about the teacher? Open Educational Resources *et al*

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### Abstract

As I began writing this proposal, serendipity struck in the form of two conversations about Open Educational Resources (OERs), one with a colleague in my own institution who has a respectable track record in innovative uses of educational technologies, another with a freelance learning facilitator engaged in full-time voluntary work. 'Without a teacher, learning is difficult and, often, impossible'. 'It took me six months to find my way around something I could have learnt in a week, if I had some stepping stones'. 'Even strongly motivated groups of learners quickly collapse without a teacher'. I was reminded of another colleague's view, of OERs as 'a modern version of a library'. In a world in which marketing and media discourses are strongly represented in widespread ideas such as 'content is free; it's a matter of editorialising', what is the role of such a library? Crucially, is there anything left for the 'teacher' in this scenario?

This paper presents a reflection on those conversations, which form part of my current ethnographic research in the area of engagement with OERs. The initial findings are consistent with previous work that has highlighted the role of contextual elements in shaping a learning resource, suggesting the need to understand the assumptions upon which OERs are built as a *sine qua non* for meaningful re-use. The discussion suggests that the definition of OERs should be extended to include, put simply, 'the role of the teacher', even if this needs to be reinvented in multiple, perhaps not yet imagined, ways.

### Keywords

OERs; pedagogy; academic participation; engagement

### Introduction

My current research project (Ferreira, 2007a) consists of a small study on the potential impact of Open Educational Resources (OERs), with OERs understood in broad terms to include not only 'content' but also resources such software tools, relevant documentation and good-practice guides (Margulies, 2005, quoted in OECD, 2007 p. 31). I am interested in gaining some insight into the issues surrounding engagement with OERs, specifically, issues impinging on participation in online learning contexts that are hosted by an institution offering a substantial OER environment without offering associated certification of learning. The work includes an action research element in that it involves actually capitalising on the institutional repository with the purpose of identifying possible ways to actively foster engagement, by teachers and learners alike, with the OER environment. From a broader perspective, I am locating my work as within the area of 'online informal learning'.

As I was preparing to write a submission for this conference, intended as a contribution to the 'Open Educational Resources in a Lifelong Learning Context' strand, serendipity seems to have struck in the form of two casual conversations with colleagues. One is a colleague within my own institution, someone with a respectable track record in innovative uses of educational technologies. The other works lately as a freelancer engaged in full-time voluntary teaching exploiting OERs. We talked about OERs and some of the Web 2.0 ideas that currently interest many educators. My colleagues are experienced teachers and, in their own view, part of a core group of stakeholders in the educational process. 'Without a teacher, learning is difficult and, often, impossible'. 'It took me six months to find my way around something I could have learnt in a week, had I been given some stepping stones'. 'In my experience, even strongly motivated groups of learners will quickly collapse without a teacher'. I kept in mind a comment I heard at a conference I attended last year, a not uncommon view in which OERs are equated to 'a modern version of a library'.

But in a world of 'open content', a world in which marketing and media discourses are strongly represented in ideas such as 'content is free; it's a matter of editorialising', what is the role of such a library? Crucially, what about the teacher in this scenario?

This paper presents some issues that have arisen whilst I reflected, against the backdrop of my research, on a number of conversations such as those mentioned above. Previous work has highlighted the role of contextual elements in shaping a learning resource (Ferreira, 2007b), suggesting the need to understand the assumptions upon which OERs are built as a *sine qua non* for meaningful re-use. The reflection in this paper is consistent with those earlier findings and suggests that a further, perhaps essential, OER that is not usually included in definitions of the term is the 'teacher', even if the role is to be re-defined in multiple ways, possibly ways not yet imagined.

## **Teaching, learning and the Web**

The notion of supporting open access to learning resources is consistent with current initiatives in the fields of widening participation and knowledge sharing in a 'globalised', assumedly 'flat' world (Friedman, 2005). Indeed, the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has gained rapid institutional support, and a variety of initiatives in the area are currently underway (Smith & Casserly, 2006). Nevertheless, despite some convincing arguments supporting the movement (Hylén, n.d.), it would seem that 'engagement' with OERs is not an entirely unproblematic proposition.

A core issue facing OER initiatives is that of teacher engagement from the perspective of contributing and re-using resources. A recent study on the attitudes to the rights and rewards for contributors to open repositories (Bates *et al.*, 2007) identifies a number of very tangible concerns that are not easily allayed by claims such as that 'for most faculty, open educational resource initiatives are no more of a threat than the university library' (Wiley, 2006). In my own experience as part of a team supporting the development of an institutional OER initiative, much time has been spent discussing with academic colleagues, those who create the resources being made available by the project, assumed pros and cons of engagement with what some may view as a 'cause' worthy of much more evangelism, whilst others view with scepticism, and, often, varied degrees of cynicism.

Part of the institutional rhetoric surrounding the OER initiative in which I have worked included practical ideas in terms of benefits to staff. In addition to the idea of sharing 'legacy' resources, i.e. course materials no longer in use, two aspects have been highlighted: the ability to support pilots of new ideas that can be subsequently incorporated into the main university provision, and the possibility of showcasing the existing learning provision offered by the institution with the creation of open-access 'samples' or 'tasters' and, therefore,

(assumedly) contribute to raising the number of formal registrations in courses. Nevertheless, buy-in from colleagues has been an elusive commodity to secure (Ferreira & Heap, 2006). Some of the underlying concerns do not seem to revolve around the difficulties in actually assessing whether there is a correlation between usage of the OER repository and migration to the formal provision of the institution. Whilst some of the underlying concerns amongst colleagues seem to revolve around views that construe 'openness' as a potentially destabilising element, less reactionary views revolve around concerns with 'quality' as something that can be assessed, measured, and used as evidence of 'success': 'quality' of learning resources, 'quality' of the learning experience afforded by the involvement of a teacher and 'quality' of the individuals produced by such experiences.

But are these concerns rooted only in politics and its questions of power?

As McWilliam (2005) points out, the 'tension remains between the "democratic classroom" as an ideological ideal, and the role formal educational institutions continue to play as credentialers [sic] and reporters to industry and the professions'. However, post-modernist criticism has cast doubt on the notion of a single, universal narrative, implying that the location provided by academic discourses, their structures and categories, provide one amongst many possible locations for knowledge to be created and situated. Indeed, media and policy discourses, 'market' pressures and corporate 'culture' pose many challenges to previously established boundaries and threaten this 'credentialer' role of universities.

In particular, the growing requirements for professional development for teachers raises several questions regarding 'competence', 'capability', 'skills' and many other terms often found in statements attempting to regulate professional practice. Whilst policy discourses construe teaching as an 'expert' activity, 'professionalism' and 'expertise' have become deeply problematic notions. As Edwards *et al.* (2004 p. 55) point out,

'in the media and elsewhere experts and expertise have become subject to greater distrust ... standards of competence are developed upon the basis of evidence of what already competent practitioners do. Assessments and curricula are built on those standards, the logos for which stands in sharp contrast with the more reified, "arty-farty", "trendy" theory or, even worse, "jargon" of experts.'

The availability of the Web has been undoubtedly contributing to a generalised dispute over the meanings and significance of 'expertise'. In an often extreme critique of the impact of the Internet on contemporary life, Keen (2007) appeals to the 'infinite monkey theorem' to describe what he sees as an absurd portrayal of the significance of some categories of 'user-contributed content'. The theory claims that 'if you provide infinite monkeys with infinite typewriters, some monkeys somewhere will eventually create a masterpiece – a play by Shakespeare, a Platonic dialogue, or an economic treatise by Adam Smith' (p. 2). Although this is, in my view, too radical a description, Keen goes on to question the validity of a world in which 'everyone is broadcasting themselves' (p. 15), a world of noise in which actually listening, an essential part of the learning process, is relegated a secondary role.

In inviting us 'to remember and to forget' what we know about pedagogy, McWilliam (*op. cit.*) neatly summarises the challenges facing educators in this world of contestation and change. She provides a critique of what she describes as the 'seven deadly habits' that underlie traditional approaches to pedagogy. Amongst these habits, she lists 'Teachers should know more than students'; 'Teachers lead, students follow' and 'Curriculum must be set in advance', all of which have come under heavy fire in current discourses surrounding the potentials of the Web 2.0 in education. McWilliam's invitation, however, is to re-think tacit assumptions that underlie practice, not to abandon it altogether.

But is this merely a form of inertia masking the inevitable question of whether teaching is about to become – or has already done so – superfluous? If my two colleagues mentioned above are in any way representative of existing, perhaps predominant in some quarters, views on the relationship between teaching and learning, rumours announcing the demise of the teacher would seem, however, premature. Indeed, Mason (2006) is positive in this regard by suggesting that ‘the role of the teacher/trainer/tutor is changing rapidly, but there is no evidence that the role is diminishing, it is rather evolving’. The question remains, however: in what ways in this role ‘evolving’, in particular, not in the least with the availability of the Web and OERs?

### **New meanings, new roles, evolving metaphors**

Despite a growing body of work dedicated to the ideological basis as well as technical and legal aspects of OERs, relatively little is known about their actual impact, particularly outside the confines of institutions directly associated with the movement. Learner engagement with OERs, in particular, is a proposition that raises profound questions, and some of them have arisen in the many conversations I’ve had over the past two years. Who are these learners? What are they looking for, especially the ‘online informal learners’, those who are not formally associated with an institution and will not have their learning experience validated in the usual ways that lead to certification? What do they make of their experience of using OERs? How does the use of OERs provided by Higher Education (HE) institutions compare with the use of those resources offered by multiple other sources available on the Web, including, in particular, ‘user-contributed content’? How do people rate and select resources found freely on the Web, and is the current Web 2.0 rhetoric around ‘the wisdom of crowds’ argument (Surowiecki, 2005) affecting this selection? Ultimately, a question remains: what is the possible broader value of OERs produced in HE outside this context?

Some of the difficulties appear to arise because it is yet unclear what types of learning OERs may afford outside their original context. Different aspects of academic practice are inscribed in the resources being made available by OER initiatives, regardless of how carefully resources may have been fashioned for self-study without support. This is critical for the OER movement because re-use (by teachers and learners alike) requires a double move of de-contextualisation and subsequent re-contextualisation under circumstances often quite distinct from the original location of the resources.<sup>1</sup> If viewed simply in terms of objects, OERs themselves, regardless of how inclusive the definition may be to accommodate different types of objects, cannot entirely replace a much more complex scenario. Crucially, OER initiatives compete, in an unlevelled field, with other sources that may provide a much more immediate appeal, even if they lack the ‘authority’ conferred by ‘official’, institutional endorsement. Although ‘authority’ is a concept worthy of challenge in its clearly political implications, current debates on ‘expertise’ risk over-politicising the issue and may, consequently, dilute its significance in other spheres.

Indeed, preliminary analysis of feedback gathered in my research suggests that ‘authority’ is a theme of crucial importance regarding engagement with OERs. However, the concept is gradually emerging from this analysis as an idea connected with ‘authenticity’ in terms of purposes, background and, interestingly, level of commitment to and engagement in a given practice. Therefore, the argument above is not to be read as dismissive of the potential

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the existing OER literature refers to issues of ‘translation and localisation’ (see, for example, OECD, *ibid.*, pp. 104-108), but emphasis is normally placed on the second step of the double move described above, re-contextualisation, partially in connection with the use of fairly broad categories to describe differences (e.g. ‘Western world’ vs. ‘developing countries’). It is beyond the scope of this text to delve into this area, but it is worth noting that such broad categories provide too rough a description of a much more complex scenario, which risks obscuring differences as well as potential similarities across contexts.

'value' of any available text, including 'user-contributed' sources, but as a pointer to difficulties implied in the idea that 'learning communities', actively engaged in learning with OERs, can 'spontaneously' form around these resources. Many, if not all, of these resources are profoundly intertwined with particular types of practice surrounding their production, but detached from their normal avenues for legitimisation through various mechanisms that are, essentially, social.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in outlining 'communities of practice' as groups that cohere in three dimensions – 'mutual engagement; a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire' (Wenger, 1998 p. 73) – Wenger (*ibid* p. 74) stresses that 'the kind of coherence that transforms mutual engagement into a community of practice requires work', and that 'the work of "community maintenance" is ... an intrinsic part of any practice'. Furthermore, he suggests that,

'because communities of practice are organic, designing them is more a matter of shepherding their evolution than creating them from scratch. Design elements should be catalysts for a community's natural evolution. As they develop, communities usually build on preexisting [sic] personal networks.' (Wenger, 2002, p. 51)

A social view of learning in fact underpins much that is being mobilised by the discourses surrounding the Web 2.0 and its envisaged promises to education. As an alternative to 'Cartesian learning', which assumes that 'knowledge is a kind of substance and that pedagogy concerns the best way to transfer this substance from teachers to students' (Brown & Adler, 2008), 'social learning' is proposed as learning through engagement in 'communities of practice' (*ibid.*). Interestingly, tackling a different set of questions, Mason (*op. cit.*) suggests that, in more student-centred pedagogies, 'the teacher becomes a facilitator, guide or even expert resource'. In contextualising the relationship between teaching and learning, a social view of learning not only opens up new avenues for pedagogic exploration and development, but, crucially, it highlights the importance of the 'teacher' role in the learning process.

Brown & Adler's (*op. cit.*) examples include the traditional apprentice and studio-based learning models, on the one hand, and the mechanisms established within the open source software community, on the other hand. In historicising the notion of 'communities of practice', Engström (2007) suggests a number of different metaphors to characterise learning within these contexts, and his proposed typology highlights some crucial differences afforded by activities under the label 'wildfire', which include, as an example, open source software development. Although the politics of the types of groups mentioned above present considerable differences, from this historicised perspective, 'teaching' and 'learning' emerge as locations that can be variously occupied by teachers, learners, and virtually anyone engaged in knowledge construction, sharing or co-construction. Since a 'learning to be' (Brown & Adler *op. cit.*), the *raison d'être* of social learning, cannot take place without engagement with other individuals, OERs as mere objects can provide but a glimpse into the multiple contexts and possible beings they traverse.

Current thinking around the idea of 'open participatory learning ecosystems' (Atkins *et al.* 2007) brings to the fore the role of social interaction, which supports development of the OER initiative in the direction of providing mechanisms to encourage that. Although teaching figures relatively prominently within possible scenarios, the ideas of 'teacher' and 'learner' are historically burdened with debatable political significations, implying the need to re-consider the part they play in learning, not in the least because learners themselves may

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<sup>2</sup> These mechanisms may involve assessment leading to some form of accreditation in some cases, and there is some research evidence supporting the need to develop links between OERs and accreditation mechanisms (Godwin & McAndrew, 2008). Accreditation, however, is not necessarily the only purpose of potential learners using OERs; indeed, research focusing on trials with 'online informal learning' groups suggests a host of other possible motivations for involvement (Ferreira, in preparation)

conceive of the role of 'teacher' in ways that make the involvement of a teacher essential to learning, a view that can only change gradually. A more clear emphasis on networking and peer-support may not be sufficient, in itself, to raise the interest and, consequently, encourage engagement of learners in these ecosystems, particularly those learners that may not be affiliated with any particular institution to gain certification of their experiences. Community membership plays an essential role in the process, but membership can take many different forms, which implies that, although peer-support is an attractive idea, it is not itself devoid of political workings.

Another aspect of relevance to this discussion is that sustained learning is purposeful, and this questions the ability of passion and enthusiasm alone to provide sufficient motivation for the process, regardless of the context in which it is located. My colleague who would have wanted 'stepping stones' put themselves in the role of a learner with a particular, very practical purpose. The groups with whom my other colleague works also share a common purpose but value the unique types of feedback offered by the teacher. Crucially, they value the teacher's role as a 'point of convergence' around which a group has indeed come together, with objects including 'content' and tools being perceived as of secondary importance in contrast with the actual transactions they enable. The idea of 'convergence' is another theme that is gradually emerging from the group-related aspect of my research.

What seems to be the case is that there is a need for critical debate to take place on existing categories for 'teacher' and 'learner', rather than their reification and tentative re-location in potentially inappropriate contexts. The issue of 'authority', central to notions of 'expertise', seems to be acquiring new meanings, as noted above, and this opens up avenues for constructing new categories in education, with renewed meanings, metaphors and locations for individuals engaged in the process. Whilst teachers remain an essential part of institution-based mechanisms, particularly those associated with accreditation, this too appears to be changing and, in some cases, going through a process of distancing itself from academia. The opportunities created by OERs potentially cover much more ground than institution-based learning.

## **In closing**

This paper has offered more questions than answers, and indeed it has included only a few questions in a much longer list. OERs truly constitute a field in its infancy and OER initiatives appear indeed quite accurately described as 'action research projects' (Lane, 2006). This suggests that much work remains to be done in terms of trying ideas, evaluating trials and disseminating as well as, most importantly, discussing findings and their broader significance to education.

My experience in dealing with colleagues working in a wide variety of disciplines and subjects, together my own experience as a teacher, researcher and learner, supports the idea that teaching remains not only a necessary but indeed a gratifying thing to do. Whilst much can be said about the role and value of the teaching-learning relationship within institutional (accrediting) contexts, it seems that, within the context of OERs, work remains to be done to draw attention to the importance of this relationship to the further development of the movement. Whilst teachers can no longer be viewed as the sole repositories of meaning, they can provide an essential contribution, in a parallel to those authors whose names are tucked away, engulfed in the *et al.* expression used in academic writing. This paper calls for debate to cast new light on the role of 'teacher' with a view to collaboratively re-creating this role in ways that bring all authors to the fore.

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