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Evaluating three different Open Educational Resource models provided to enable Learning in Our Connected World

The swift advancement of Web technologies has provided real opportunities for improving access, transfer and sharing of knowledge and information. One of the outcomes facilitated by these technologies is the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement, which has increasingly expanded during the last decade. The term OER was first used in 2002 at a UNESCO forum about the impact of the OpenCourseWare (OCW) movement on higher education institutions (D'Antoni, 2009). Though the term OER emerged after the OCW initiative, OER has a wider meaning, which also includes OCW. The OECD (2007) defined OER as including "learning content, software tools to develop, use and distribute content, and implementation resources such as open licenses" and referred to OER as "accumulated digital assets that can be adjusted and which provide benefits without restricting the possibilities for others to enjoy them"(OECD, 2007, p.10). There are now many OER initiatives around the world, each with their own "distinctive models" (Sclater, in press, p.9). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) OpenCourseWare initiative – "the publication on the Web of course materials used in MIT classroom teaching- is perhaps the best-publicized and most copied institutional OER model" (Albright, 2005, p.4). The MIT OCW movement played a very important role in initiating and disseminating OER around the world and this successful movement could owe its achievement in part to the popularity of MIT and the financial support it received. However, the adaptability of the MIT model by other institutions could be very difficult since MIT was well supported by funding from different foundations (i.e. the Mellon and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundations) (Abelson, 2008) and a dedicated OCW group. It is unlikely that many other institutions would benefit from such opportunities.

Therefore, we need to investigate a number of OER models and find working strategies that can be applied in other contexts as well. In this sense, the main purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast different OER initiatives in terms of the OER development model adopted to enable information transfer to future projects. More specifically quality assurance strategies, sustainability, content type (resource format), pedagogical approach, licensing and user participation are the main perspectives to be considered. To do this, three major OER projects (MIT OpenCourseWare, Rice University's Connexions, and UK Open University's OpenLearn) were selected for investigation. The rationale behind this selection is that they are successful and most importantly they each appear to have their own distinctive OER development model that differentiates them from other OER initiatives. The findings from this study will influence institutions that are new to the OER arena. New initiatives will be able to learn from the challenges faced and opportunities gained from these earlier initiatives. Thus, new OER initiatives will be able to build on, learn from and take advantage of the working strategies of the previous OER initiatives discussed in this paper.

The Approach

Although OER initiatives have been examined (Atkins et al, 2007; Stacey, 2007), they have been discussed in broader terms. This study however, will explore these three OER projects not only in detail, but also from a critical perspective. In this sense, the current study will try to answer the following research questions:

- What makes the OER development models from the three selected institutions distinctive?

- “What models are ... [the three selected institutions] adopting in terms of the production of OER?” (Conole and McAndrew, in press, p.9)

This study will be based on both desk research (reviewing published reports, journal articles etc.) and semi-structured interviews with key people at the three selected institutions. The preliminary results from the desk research are considered below. Interviews have already been undertaken with the three key people in OpenLearn and one key person from MIT and another interview is planned with one key person in the Connexions project within the next few months. The findings from the interviews will be reported as part of this paper. Although there are some specific questions related to each project, the themes in general are focused on the structure of each project, sustainability, reusability, community building and staff engagement.

Preliminary Results

These three models can be compared and contrasted in terms of different perspectives. However in these preliminary results, we will examine these different initiatives in terms of content production, content type and revenue model. When we looked at the structure of the content production cycle, it can be said that MIT follows a very faculty centric model. That is, content has been produced from teaching materials of the faculty members. However, in the other two models, users have a chance to contribute their own content. In reality, the general structure of the Connexions model is decentralized which means it is mainly based on end-user participation. As for OpenLearn, we can say that it has a kind of mixed model. That is, its content relies heavily on the Open University’s course materials, but the end-user can contribute their own content in the LabSpace, as well. Secondly, in terms of content type, the MIT OCW initiative has materials which are used as supplementary material in traditional classrooms, whereas the OpenLearn project has self-learning materials designed for distance learners though these also have the potential to be used as supplementary material in traditional campus based institutions (Wilson, 2008). Connexions OER are comprised not only of self-learning materials, but also material that supports traditional classroom learning. Finally, when we look at the revenue model, the MIT OCW project has been supported by external funding (discussed above) and OpenLearn had external funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and JISC in the UK. Although Connexions has some external funding, the revenue model is based on the relationship with profit or non-profit making institutions.

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