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An Open Educational Resource environment: exploring the potential benefits of OpenLearn for seniors

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Abstract

Open Educational Resources (OERs) are freely available and have been accessible globally, in a variety of forms, since September 2002 (Smith, and Casserly, 2006). The initial thrust of The MIT OpenCourseWare initiative in 2002 appeared to be aimed at those interested in learning or teaching at university level. The main focus of this paper is on the potential benefits of OERs for seniors, a new area of investigation. The research centres on an institution dedicated to seniors who plan to adopt OERs provided by The Open University in the United Kingdom (UK). The UK Open University is a recent entrant into the OER domain with its Open Content Initiative called OpenLearn.

Introduction

Life-long learning needs to be actively supported through easy access to online educational resources (Geser, 2007). This paper investigates the potential benefit of Open Educational Resources (OERs) to seniors. The research complements the United Kingdom (UK) Government's Link-Age consultation for an aging society (Department for Work and Pensions, 2004). The Report forecasts that by 2021, the population will include more people over the age of eighty than children under the age of five. The document discusses possibilities of joining up services for older people as part of a wider strategy to change the way that an ageing society is viewed. Indeed Goodeve (2007) argues that later-life learners 'are a rich source of knowledge, information and experience ...' and '...should be consulted and utilised by national and local governments'. This research could inform the debate on the overall provision of services for an aging society, which could include OERs.

The OER movement has encouraged sharing of assets between individuals and organisations (Atkins et al. 2007). MIT led the way with their OpenCourseWare initiative in 2002. In the last five years the number of different OER initiatives has grown (John Hopkins School of Public Health, Connexions, Utah State, Wikiversity and others). The UK Open University has joined this field of enquiry with a new enterprise called OpenLearn (Open Content Initiative, 2006). This initiative is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and was launched on 25th October 2006.

The paper starts with an overview of the ethos behind OpenLearn. A brief discussion of the OERs and the interactive facilities follows. The main part of the paper focuses on the potential benefits of OpenLearn for seniors. The discussion is based on research, which revolves around a later-life learning institution and how they intend to use OERs. The institution has almost 200,000 members and has a global reach.

OpenLearn

The UK Open University has been developing high quality distance learning courses for almost forty years. The Council of the Open University were very content 'that the philosophy of Open Content is entirely commensurate with The Open University's mission to equalise access to high quality educational opportunities' ...particularly among educationally marginalised groups' (Open Content Initiative, 2006; Appendix L and H).

OpenLearn is adapting distance learning multiple media materials for delivery as OERs across eleven different topic areas. These materials are taken from the original Open University supported open learning courses, which include tutorial support and assessment. From the OpenLearn perspective the materials, called 'units', are standalone without organised tutorial support or formal assessment. The significant difference between OpenLearn and the previous initiatives (discussed above) is that the materials are from distance learning courses and designed to be self-supporting. They include many activities such as self-assessment and review questions. The material for OpenLearn OERs has been developed previously rather than devised from scratch for this initiative.

The screenshot shows the OpenLearn website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: 'OU Home', 'Study at the OU', 'About the OU', 'Research at the OU', 'Search the OU', and 'Contact the OU'. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with 'Home', 'Get Started', 'About Us', 'News', and 'Contact Us'. The main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, there is a 'Welcome' section with a 'Browse Topics' tab, 'Top 10 Units', and 'Spotlight On'. A large green banner reads 'Free higher education for everyone' and 'Connect with other learners'. Below this is a testimonial from an 'OpenLearner'. In the center, there are two prominent boxes: 'LearningSpace' and 'LabSpace'. The LearningSpace box says 'Start learning with our free study materials' and has an 'enter' button. The LabSpace box says 'Reuse and remix our open education resources' and also has an 'enter' button. On the right, there is a 'Login' section with 'Is Open Learning for you?' and links for 'Learners', 'Educators', 'Organisations', and 'Researchers'. Below that is a 'Newsletter' section with a 'Sign up' button. At the bottom, there are social media links: 'Add to favourites', 'Save to Del.icio.us', 'Stumble It!', and 'Add to Onlywire'. A Creative Commons license notice is visible at the bottom right.

Figure 1 The OpenLearn home page, showing the entrance to the LearningSpace and the LabSpace

OpenLearn hosts twin websites: the LearningSpace and the LabSpace. The LearningSpace website within OpenLearn is aimed mainly at learners and presently holds 3,406 study hours of material. The units of material in the LearningSpace are taken from currently available courses delivered by The Open University. They vary in length between four hours and thirty hours and are categorised within a particular level of study (Lane, 2006). The number of units and thus study hours will continue to be updated to make 5400 learning hours available in the LearningSpace by April 2008. The research discussed in this paper centres mainly on the LearningSpace.

The LabSpace is aimed mainly at educators and presently houses 5,194 study hours of material. The materials in the LabSpace are quite different (to the LearningSpace) an indication of the experimental nature of this website (McAndrew and Hirst, 2007). This material is from: discontinued courses at The Open University, ideas for new courses, resources from other providers and other less well-ordered assets. The number of units and thus study hours will continue to be updated to make 8100 hours available within the LabSpace by April 2008.

The units of material can be accessed through: the LearningSpace, the LabSpace or by 'Browse Topics', the tab near the top of the screen in Figure 1. OpenLearn units are delivered using a Moodle enhanced environment that provides freely available online forums, unit reviews, unit rating and community building tools (all advocated by Smith, and Casserly, 2006). The community building features include video conferencing, synchronous messaging and mind mapping tools.

Technique adopted to investigate how seniors might use OpenLearn OERs

The institution involved in this research is non-accrediting and has been delivering course for twenty-five years. The members work together and help each other on a voluntary basis. It is the combined knowledge and expertise of the members, which provides the learning opportunities and informs the subject matter covered.

The areas addressed reflect the interests of this group and are as follows:

- Topic areas and associated units most favoured by this group.
 - Including a short case study example in the Modern Languages topic area.
 - Additional units, which would generate enthusiasm.
- Proposals planned by the organisation for using these units with groups of learners.
 - Including a short case study example in the Health and Lifestyle topic area.
- Planned utilisation of communication facilities for collaboration and cooperation.
 - Including a short case study example in the Health and Lifestyle topic area.

A high-ranking member of the organisation was interviewed in February 2007. He was previously aware of the OpenLearn initiative through attending a pre-launch meeting. Members within the institution were asked to visit the OpenLearn Website. They reviewed its content and provided short case studies in February 2007.

Topic areas and associated units most favoured by seniors

Lets now look at the Topic areas and associated units that are of interest to later-life learners. The interviewee was aware of the OpenLearn website before the interview took place and could also use the OpenLearn website as he answered the interview questions. Eight of the eleven different topic areas within OpenLearn appear to be of interest to this group, see Table 1. These topics cover a broad range of subjects and are in-line with those taught by the institution. This suggests that the OpenLearn OERs could form part of the institutions teaching materials. The three topic areas, which were thought not to be of interest to seniors, were: Business and Management, Education and Study Skills.

Table 1 Topic areas and number of associated units of interest to seniors

Topic areas	Suitability	Number of units
Arts and History	Y	11
Business and Management		
Education		
Health and Lifestyle	Y	2
IT and Computing	Y	4
Mathematics and Statistics	Y	2
Modern Languages	Y	4
Science and Nature	Y	2
Society	Y	2
Study Skills		
Technology	Y	5

A follow up question focused on actual units of material within the topic areas, which would be of interest to this group. The interviewee's response (in February 2007 when less units existed) suggests that the number of units available provided a large resource. 'There are simply too many to list them all: at a preliminary look through the lists I checked 32 potential areas of interest. This has to be a guess, of course, but based on some knowledge ...' of our members 'and on our own, Online Courses'. The number of units associated with each topic area is shown in table 1 and the actual unit titles are listed below in table 2. Arts and History appeared to hold the most units of interest. Followed by Technology, then jointly by Modern Languages and IT and Computing.

Table 2 Unit titles of interest to seniors

Studying the arts and humanities	French: Ouverture
War memorials and commemoration	French: Le quatorze juillet
Commemoration: visual texts	Spanish: Espacios públicos
Form and uses of language	German: Lebensumstände
History as commemoration	Global warming
Goya	Earthquakes
Delacroix	Reading visual images
Brighton Pavilion	Understanding dyslexia
Wilberforce	Computers: bits & bytes
Napoleonic paintings	ICTs: device to device communication
Europe's awakening	ICTs: information
Understanding health	Living with the Internet: online shopping
Life stories	Information on the web
An introduction to data and information	Living with the internet: keeping it safe
Differential equations	Why sustainable energy matters
Maths everywhere	An introduction to sustainable energy

The interviewee was also asked about additional units, which would generate enthusiasm. He suggested that 'there would be great interest in some study of comparative religions'.

Using its internal publicity, the institution asked its members, to view the OpenLearn website and provide feedback. The following short case studies indicate a number of the members' reactions to one of the OpenLearn units. The unit called German: Lebensumstände was selected for review by two of the institutions members. This unit was also selected by the interviewee and therefore seems to confirm that German would be of interest to seniors. Lets now see how these two members rated this unit.

Case study 1 - German: Lebensumstände

'I spent several hours going through this on Friday and am enjoying it on the whole. I should be interested to know the level of student this is aimed at as it is certainly not for beginners, You need an 'in depth' knowledge of the language to begin with. The course is accompanied by a video recording but my criticism of that is that the speech is not very clear, and is *very* fast. I am able to keep up with it on the whole, but find parts of it hard to grasp. However, the grammatical exercises are clear and helpful. The other comment that I could make is about the subject content. The whole discussion is about family life and childcare in Germany. This is meant to give an insight to the way of life in the country, a very interesting social subject, emphasising the seeming breakdown of the family unit due to the incidence of so many one parent units nowadays and the resulting effect this has on children. This subject would perhaps not hold the interest of some participants as you are asked to form opinions on the different scenarios and aspects of childcare within the community. I have by no means been through the whole course yet, but, as I say, I am finding it personally enjoyable and helpful'.

This learner enjoyed reviewing the German: Lebensumstände unit. She mentions that she would be interested in the level the unit it aimed at. The unit is aimed at intermediate level (introductory is the level for beginners) and her reaction that it is not for beginners suggests that it is aimed at the right level. However the fact that she did not see the unit level indicating intermediate is an important finding in terms of accessibility. Her comments on poor speech quality on the video recording raise another accessibility issue. The transcript of the audio would have helped this learner, perhaps it was not obvious where to find it. The exercises with feedback are reported to be easy to understand and supportive. The subject matter (family life and childcare), which is the vehicle, used to learn German was reported as not of general enough interest.

Case study 2 - German: Lebensumstände

I am 'a member of the advanced German conversation group. I therefore chose from the modern languages listing ... Technically, there is the need that one has broadband access with video and audio capabilities on one's PC.

I liked the course. It comprises, initially at least, to listening to dialogue about family matters and how two families arrange for the care of their pre-school children whilst they are at work. Video clips support the text that can also be downloaded as a German manuscript. Questions are set and answers given supported by a small amount of commentary in English. There are grammar links too helping to create confidence when the student wants to make German conversation outside of the course.

Some might complain about the subject being child centred but since many members will be grandparents and in today's society may be part of the childcare chain, I, for one, do not object. The topic reflects cultural problems for parents living in an urban situation in the course's case, Berlin. ... I am grateful just to be immersed in the language, but I feel others may say the aural skill level required to follow the conversations is pitched at quite a high level of fluency, so some students may be put off if they have not achieved what passes for good everyday language skills rather than holiday ones'.

This learner with more advanced skills in German also liked the course. He highlighted the need to have broadband access and audio and video capabilities on

his PC. He reported that the video clips supported the other elements of the unit. He found the grammar links helpful for general use of German. He reiterated the point made in case study 1 that the subject matter (family life and childcare) may not appeal to all learners. However he did infer that it might appeal to seniors who are often also grandparents. He also expressed concerns about the level of the unit as he was of the impression that it was an introductory unit.

Table 3 The impressions given by the *German: Lebensumstände* unit

Points in favour of the unit	Issues
The unit was very enjoyable	Level of the unit should be more obvious
Exercises are clear and helpful	Poor quality speech on video recording
Transcripts of video clips were useful	Subject content could be more general
Video clips support the text	Need Broadband, video/audio facilities
Grammar links are helpful	

Having assimilated the detail of the case studies for the Modern Languages unit lets now move on to possible ways that OpenLearn units could be used with groups of learners.

Proposals planned by the organisation for using these units with groups of learners

Openlearn provides opportunities for both individuals and groups to work through units. The interviewee indicated that he would expect learners to work on the units both on an individual basis and in groups. Case study 3 also gives valuable insights into how the Health and Lifestyle Topic area could be utilised by groups.

Case study 3 - Living with Death and Dying

'This is a subject relevant to [our institution] but perhaps not popular. The topics raised could lead to lively group discussion. For instance, how beliefs affect attitudes to death. The Buddhist concept of meditation and reincarnation is contrasted with other beliefs. How would we live if there were no death? Are near-death experiences valid? What makes a 'good death' - And a bad death? Does death give life its meaning?

These questions are illustrated by extracts from authors from Tolstoy to Julia Neuberger and there is a range of 'activities' to stimulate discussion. Occasionally the writers make an exercise optional if the material is too sensitive. On this course the social work aspect is minimal. Four detailed case studies widen and personalise the discussion

It would be a bold [institutional] group, which tackled this course and great sensitivity and tolerance would be needed. However there is a wide range of topics and activities and studying this course could be thought provoking and worthwhile'.

These comments illustrate how this unit's content could encourage learners to reflect and how activities would help to generate and support group discussion.

Planned utilisation of communication facilities for collaboration and cooperation

Within OpenLearn an individual can use the online journal to keep their thoughts private or make them public. The communication facilities (forums, video conferencing and synchronous messaging) enable learners to also contact and work with other learners. An online journal and a forum are attached to each unit of content. When asked about forum usage, the interviewee responded that he would encourage the institutions learners to use both the online forum provided with each unit in OpenLearn and also a communications area provided by the institution. He clarified this by saying: 'but until we have had a little experience of the OU forum arrangements and also worked on our own system, it isn't yet clear how this will develop. In some ways our members may prefer to work within a closed forum'. This latter remark is echoed in the following excerpt from case study 1.

Case study 1 - German: Lebensumstände

'I shall continue to follow the course, but have not actually enrolled in the [forum] debates, being slightly nervous at committing myself! I have full access as a member and may pluck up the courage to join in more deeply as I go on. It is so new that there are no open debates so far -- at least not as far as I can see'.

What makes learners comfortable to contribute to open access forums needs further investigation. The case study above suggests that it takes time to build up enough confidence to be the first contributor to an open forum.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that a wide variety of the units provided are of interest to seniors across eight of the eleven different topic areas. The institution reports that the units offered by OpenLearn complement those that they already provide. Members of the organisation would be actively encouraged to make use of the online facilities for collaborative group work as well as investigation of the content available. The case studies provide more insights into what works well within this environment and also highlight a number of issues for further investigation. These findings (particularly from the case studies) suggest that OpenLearn could provide a very valuable resource and communication environment for seniors.

This research provides early findings with reference to the potential benefits of OERs to seniors. The results will inform more detailed research into the best ways to support communities of later-life learners to collaborate and cooperate in an OER environment.

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