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Editorial: Focus on Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP)

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Focus on: Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP)

The present Special Issue is the second of two dedicated to the EUROCALL Teacher Education and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Special Interest Groups' joint seminar, which took place at the University of Bologna on 29-30 March 2012. The theme of the seminar was "Learning through Sharing: Open Resources, Open Practices, Open Communication".

The first of the two special issues of this journal was dedicated to CMC in the context of foreign language learning and in particular to how Open Communication, understood as "the reciprocal and respectful exchange which contributes to social presence in online learning [...] and the development of intercultural awareness and competence in language learning" (Guth and Helm, 2012) has impacted on online communication in the language classroom. This second issue, therefore, is dedicated to **Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP)**, and how they are being applied in foreign language teaching and learning, and in Teacher Education for both continuing and new language teachers.

Since the middle of the 1990s, and thanks to the digital revolution, information has become more openly available (Wikipedia and YouTube are but two examples), and this trend towards openness, based on "the simple and powerful idea that the world's knowledge is a public good, and that technology in general and the World Wide Web in particular provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use and reuse it" (Smith and Casserly, 2006) has naturally reached the world of education. Making more open content available was the aim of early initiatives that focused on creating and sharing Open Educational Resources, defined as "materials used to support education that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared by anyone" (Downes, 2011). Large investments in infrastructure (repositories, referatories and search tools) and efforts to improve interoperability and discoverability (through metadata and agreed standards, for example) characterised this period. More recently the

focus has shifted towards assessing the impact of this growing body of open content and promoting reuse to achieve the resource savings and improvements in the quality of teaching and learning that the concept of Openness in education promised. Fostering Open Educational Practices (OEP), defined as practices which “support the production, use and reuse of high quality OER through institutional policies, which promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path” (ICDE, 2011) is now recognised as being equally important to ensure open education can deliver on its promise. There is no doubt that these concepts have shaken the foundations of educational practices in all areas of formal, non-formal and informal education.

The present Special Issue opens with an overview paper by Pantò and Comas-Quinn, based on the keynote lecture delivered by Pantò on the challenge of Open Education. In it, the authors review the development of openness in education since the creation of MIT’s Open Courseware a decade ago to the more recent alternative approaches to education, from the flipped classroom to new initiatives based on “peer-to-peer” or “DIY” approaches. They also examine the critical issues of assessment, accreditation and sustainability, and they argue that if Higher Education institutions are to continue being the main providers of tertiary education they need to rise to the challenge and develop new approaches to content delivery and accreditation.

The second paper, by Ferrari and Traina, describes OERTEST, a project funded by the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme to mainstream OER within Higher Education and create a model for assessing learning achieved through OER. The paper depicts the project’s efforts, from the creation of a “clearinghouse” to bring together Euro-centric open content, to the development of quality standards, and assessment and financial models, and makes a number of recommendations to encourage greater collaboration in the field of OER production and exchange among Higher Education Institutions in Europe.

Although the next paper, by Rivens Mompean and Guichon, illustrates a case study that is specific to foreign language learning, the issues it addresses, namely the local appropriation of online resources, are relevant to all fields of OER re-use. Taking the case of an online learning environment for the teaching of English, the authors argue that, if OERs are to be truly shareable, they need to be open to appropriation from a technical, semiotic and pedagogical point of view.

Tiedau leads us fully into the field of language teaching and learning. The

VirtualDutch portal described in this paper, a joint project by the very small number of university departments that offer Dutch in the UK, is a clear example of the benefits that openness and collaboration can bring to education. By advocating in favour of the creation of communities of practice and of learning, the author shows how “openness” can provide a viable and sustainable future for lesser-taught languages and generally for strategically important but vulnerable subjects, particularly in an age of shrinking funds.

Tita Beaven’s paper investigates the issue of OER use and re-use. Through professional conversations with language teachers, the author questions the widespread belief that, despite the exponential increase in the number of OERs and OER-related initiatives, teachers and learners are generally still not using them in their daily practices. She argues that some of the use and re-purposing of OERs, as well as the practices connected to them, may remain invisible or immeasurable with traditional metrics, as the very nature of openness makes it difficult to track reuse.

Turning to practices, Borthwick and Dickens describe the *Community Café* project, where teachers of community languages in the UK had the opportunity of creating and sharing resources whilst engaging in professional development activities to increase their digital literacy. Nurturing and supporting this community, whose training and developmental needs are rarely met due to funding constraints, was the key to success for this project, and making the openness agenda a core aspect of the training allowed this group of teachers to recognise its own place in the wider language teaching and learning community.

The final contribution to this Special Issue, by Álvarez, Beaven and Comas-Quinn, offers a case-study of integrating open practices in staff development for language teachers. Drawing on feedback questionnaires and debriefing sessions with participants in the European project *Performing Languages*, the authors discuss how the teachers’ increased awareness of the benefits of sharing and collaboration (through collaborative writing and peer review of the resources produced) has resulted in changes in their professional practice, both in relation to openness and pedagogical approach.

As guest editors, we would like to thank the authors as well as the reviewers who generously contributed to the review of the papers, and to acknowledge the valuable support of the colleagues at Je-LKS during the preparation of this special issue.

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