

Openness and Practice: Innovations through Openness in Partnership

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Abstract

At the Open University in Scotland (OUiS) being open is part of our sense of who we are through open licences like Creative Commons we have developed suites of Open Educational Resources (OER) which are “freely” available online to use, to reuse and remix. However, while there is great deal of rhetoric around OER, it is not clear how openness is changing practices. The paper explores this through two case studies. The first case study draws on work the OUiS has done with a national charity that supports community energy projects. The second case study will draw on some work with a regional charity that provides home energy advice. It looks at how we can develop appropriate energy advice by working with tenants and the charity to create a series of home energy OER by tenants for tenants. The paper closes with some question about the sustainability of “free” resources.

Keywords: OER, OEP, Partnership, Practice

1. Introduction

At the Open University (OU) in Scotland being open is part of our sense of who we are, as an open and distance learning provider our message is that we are open to people, places and ideas. The open narrative on which the OU was founded over 40 years ago was about open access, life long learning, first and second chances, and promoting social justice. Over the last two decades open has also become associated with open and accessible content, Open Educational Resources (OER), and the OU has embraced that shift. In this paper we explore what means for the OU in Scotland and look at what we have learnt from our experiences. Using two case studies that focus on the design and development of OER we look at some of pressing issues that have emerged, make an early assessment of how (and whether) OER has the potential to destabilise present HE, then look at models that promote the sustainability of these initiatives.

2. Open Educational Resources and Practices

The OER movement was kick-started by the release of MIT's OpenCourseWare in 2001. Since MIT's decision to make some of its content “freely” available on the internet many other HE providers have followed suit.

The OECD define OER as

“... digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research” (p10, OECD 2007)

As well as the materials the report also noted the importance of the tools (software) to facilitate sharing, reuse and adapting those resources. It is difficult to discuss OER without reference to the means by which content might be shared (typically online), or about the licensing that facilitates that openness. As an organisation our main OER focus has been on the medium of exchange (online), and the licence that appears to facilitate that exchange. Not all readings of OER focus on the digitising of materials and some account for other mediums by which materials can be made publicly available (Atkins *et.al* 2007), but licensing remains key. The most common licence (only

just over a decade old) is Creative Commons (CC). In “The Power of the Open” the people behind the CC licence indicate that

“our vision is nothing less than realizing the full potential of the Internet – universal access to culture, education and research – to drive a new era of development, growth and productivity” (p6, Creative Commons 2010).

For HE, this contrasts with the normal HE approach where providers develop and manage knowledge and release it to select people, normally in particular places at particular times. While the question of licensing may only be an issue for the provider, and is not always an issue for the learner. Clearly openness has a huge potential to destabilise the typical pedagogical relationships that have developed within the HE sector.

This presents HE with opportunities and challenges. At a strategic level the opportunities have been presented in two distinct ways. The altruistic and the self-interested (McGill *et al* 2011). The altruistic set focuses on the emancipatory nature of OER as a way to break down barriers to HE access for students, but often for HE providers in the majority world. This “Social Justice” perspective highlights the ways that freeing up knowledge can benefit those people who might not otherwise be able to access education (dos Santos 2008). However, the altruistic narrative can be difficult to sustain. These resources are only free to a point, and only accessible to a point. While the medium of exchange (the internet) offers the chance to access content, it is only for those who have access to the relevant infrastructure, and this is an issue for those in the minority and the majority world (Willems and Bossu 2012). Even where it can be accessed, design decisions can effect the accessibility of content. For example, a JISC report on OER (Masterman and Wild 2011) highlights the granularity of resources, with educators and students requiring smaller and more adaptable OER that they can use in “their” own context. The proliferation of content leads to accessibility issues around the storage and the findability of relevant and appropriate content (Olcott 2012), and the provenance (trustworthiness) (Masterman and Wild 2011) of that content.

We can see that accessibility is not free for the user, and it is not free for the provider. Most of the funding for OER has come from charitable foundations. The short term nature of these funds within an uncertain HE economic landscape means that the altruistic ideals of openness need to be tested against the reality - an neo-liberal education sector where “common good” rhetoric behind OER comes into conflict with the “business model”. This is where self-interest comes in. The self-interested set focuses on the way that OER can enhance individuals or an institutions reputation, cost savings in developing materials, and articulation from OER into paid content. Recent reviews of OER policies within HE that looked at the strategies and views of academics and senior managers found that those that produced content were interested in individual reputation and cost (time/money savings) associated with OER, and those who manage education focussed on institutional reputation and articulation from informal to formal learning (Nikoi and Armellini 2012).

That is production, which so far has tended to be the focus of activities, questions around remixing and reuse are harder to answer. Outside of specific projects (e.g. TESSA) it is hard to find evidence of reuse and remixing; partly this might relate to the open licence, where the very openness of the content means that people can be reusing and remixing without you knowing (McAndrew and Cropper 2010). There is also an argument that the reason that there is a lack of research on how effective OER are is that HE institutions are often uncertain about the purpose of OER – e.g. altruism or self interest (Nikoi and Armellini 2012). However, it also appears that institutions have been better at creating OER than they have been at reusing OER, either internally, or across the sector. Some commentators have begun to argue that content is now at saturation point (Conole 2012). Behind this argument of content saturation is a sense that we need to move beyond the content and start thinking about the practices. Thus we see a move within the literature to talk about Open Educational Practices (OEP) as well as OER. It is how we use OER in practice. It means shifting our thinking about OER from production, to what users need

and how to support those needs (Blackhall 2011). It may also mean thinking about whether we risk imposing our ideas of openness on learners, and reflecting on how practices around openness might reconfigure practice for educators and learners. The review has touched on what users need to be able to use the resources in practice. They need it to be relevant to their needs, for example the TESSA programme (Wolfenden 2012). They need to be small “bit size” so that they can be used and remixed in and for different contexts (Masterman and Wild 2011). They need to be stored and structured in a way that means they can be located, and in a format that allows users to reuse and remix them (Olcott 2012). Provenance is an important area of study of learners accessing HE OER found that users have to be able to trust the source of information (Masterman and Wild 2011), though we need to be careful as trustworthiness may not only be an academic attribute, but may come from informal interactions within peer networks or other sources.

The structure and storage of OER is key to its accessibility, and the OU is a global player. For example, in 2011 the OU reported that it had 16 million unique visitors to its open platforms, and nearly ¼ million registered users on OpenLearn and LabSpace (Lane 2011a). Of those registered users only 10% are present OU students. Most of the other registered users appear to be students at other HE institutions or informal learners (Lane 2011b). Clearly figures like this demonstrate that the OU is a major global player in producing and disseminating OER. The OpenLearn platform is reserved for OU content, either from existing modules or bespoke, and this draws on a fairly standard marketing led model of OER that focuses on production. Labspace is different. Here the OU stores content created by other HE institutions and/or material it has created in partnership. It is within these collaborative spaces that we start to see the emergence of new educational practices. For example, the review noted the evolution of the work in the South West, in 2008 (Lane 2008) it was reported as being an interesting series of workshops using OER, now it is fully fledged Widening Participation (WP) that provides routes into formal learning. Key to the success of projects like this is recognising that the academy is not the only source of education materials. Thinking about practice means we move away from OER's as an end in themselves, and think about how they can reconfigure education practice (McAndrew and Cropper 2010). In the next section we look at how we have accessed practice through our engagement with third sector partners.

3. Case Studies

This section introduces two case studies as examples of our work around openness and practice in partnership. The focus on practices outside the academy naturally asks you to consider practices within the academy. Therefore, these are reflective accounts that eschew theorising in favour of a “warts and all” account.

3.1 Supporting Communities to Reduce the Energy Use of Community Building

This case study is based on work we have conducted with a charity that supports communities looking to improve the energy performance of community buildings. Our partners support for communities tended to be reactive, individualised, face-to-face and “just in time”. It has built its organisation round a distributed network of support staff who can react. However, as the sector has grown so it has become over-stretched and less able to provide the tailored one-to-one support it had in the past. It needed a more structured and consistent set of support materials. It had begun to assemble all its individual information sheets into one single (but very large) “toolkit” that was open but not accessible (Olcott 2012). Our early engagement with the partner focussed on our role in providing storage and structure facilitate openness.

Community energy projects have a number of different components, requiring a broad range of knowledge skills and experience. Typically having identified a need to consider energy in their building they will need to; analyse bills, conduct an energy audit, inspect the building and look at feasibility of different options, consult with the local community, raise finance, select and manage contractors, and conduct ongoing monitoring. These are a complex suite of practices. Our

partners knowledge of those communities learning journeys meant we could create a structure that reflected how people actually developed and used knowledge and skills. However that knowledge was held at the individual level. Exploring this with our partners we looked how a persona or scenario's (Holtzblatt & Beyer 2013) based approach might help us capture and codify that individual knowledge, allowing us to understand communities learning journey's. The need for a clear narrative within the materials led us to develop a series of "imagined communities". We asked front line staff to develop a narrative that accounted for their experience of supporting community groups. We then looked at how that learning journey might be supported through OEP, rewriting the narratives to account for a learning journey where communities could developed the skills themselves rather than calling on outside experts. It is based on a team approach with a range of authors working together to create learning materials. We adapted this model in the partnership, shifting power relationship, and creating a joint OU/CES team to develop materials that accounted for knowledge, skills and expertise outside the academy. Here openness shifts the focus of our production model, it also provides as welcome disruption to the normal HE pedagogical model.

These knowledge and skills need to applied to a series of tasks. Learning is through "doing", engaging with techniques and technologies in the material world (Fenwick *et.al* 2011). Learning is shaped by those material relations and the material fabric of of the building is in turn shaped by what has been learnt. This is "citizen science" or "enquiry based learning" (Scanlon 2012) with very tangible outcomes. Content needs to structure "enquiries", guide tasks and provide a way to record and analyse "data". We used the "imagined communities" to show how data is collected, the data outputs, analysis, and interpretation. These are not individual learning journeys. Each person within the group takes a different role and uses different resources. Learning is shared, in terms of the knowledge and skills required, and also the outcomes. Within our "imagined communities" we allocated different sets of existing skills, and different roles to different people in the community to illustrate the different ways people might use the resources. This means resources whose "granularity" and flexibility accounts for collective learning journeys.

When working with Third Sector partners capacity is sometimes a problem. For example, for the the partners uncertainty over funding can mean that projects are often interrupted. The case study presented here has stalled at the implementation stage, with concerns over funding and staffing meaning the module is not being used consistently within operations. The focus on practice also creates capacity issues for us. For these communities success is measured by improving the energy performance of their building, that can take up to three years. It seems that one thing we ought to recognise is that engaging in partnership to support material actions is likely to require us to take the long view. We need to "take time" to assess the value of our work, these delays may mean that we need space to and time to manage relationships long term. This has resource implications, and suggests that if we are to move beyond content and resources to consider practice then we need to look more clearly at how we resource that engagement.

3.2 Working with Communities to develop Energy Advice Literature

The second case study also focuses on energy management. Our partner provides energy advice and leads on campaigns and actions that tackle fuel poverty. They work with other charities, local authorities, and housing associations to achieve their aims. Our relationship with them is based on consultancy work we have undertaken for a Scottish local authority into the user experience of social housing tenants who live in newly built low energy homes. Our technical monitoring of the buildings found that the low energy bills that were expected did not always materialise. Through our qualitative work we began to explore why that was. Finding that people found it difficult to adapt to what were novel energy management practices. In part that related to design issues that created a complex energy management system of overlapping technologies, in part it was technical problems, and in part it also related to poor and contradictory advice supplied by "officials" who ought to have been trusted sources.

Overall the complexity of the systems and the distance between these new energy management

practices and those they were familiar with appeared to be at the root of the problem. We began to conceive of the research as relating to adaptation and learning, not only for residents, but for developers and local authorities. Our approach to the research was to recognise that people are experts in their own lives. This recognition led to a focus on how tenants engaged with the systems in their homes, those socio-material/technical relationships (Sorensen 2009), and from this a realisation that residents had developed a richer understanding of "how thing worked" than existing expert or technical guide.

We wanted to work with these tenants to explore how we might use the knowledge they built through practice to help others, to support the development of knowledge for practice. As a learning provider that often works with uncertain learners we would consider ourselves well placed to support the shift from thinking about those outside the academy as consumers of knowledge to recognising and supporting them as producers. However, our previous experiences of engaging in partnerships to support and develop knowledge for practice has told us that we need to do engage with trusted local organisations to ensure that the materials are used and the long term sustainability of their use. Hence our engagement with a local organisation that already provides support to social housing tenants. This takes time, and we are just beginning the process now (April 2013). The conference paper itself will report on the outcomes of that work.

4. Conclusions

On the surface what these examples have in common is the use (or creation) of open licensed material. However, for us the similarities illustrate a deeper trend, the ability to pursue opportunities that were previously closed to HE. They highlight opportunities to collaborate with organisations outwith the formal education sector. Part of that is leaving behind institutional concerns about IP. The "freedom" that this type of open provides leads us to think about openness more generally. Co-producing content that is relevant to our partners, and opportunities to access new kind of learning spaces, for example within work or in a community context. It also offers the opportunity to explore new models of learning, situated learning, informal learning, and inquiry based learning.

Opening up these possibilities is not without its problems. These case studies focus on the pedagogical design of the materials rather than the outcomes for practice. They focus on that aspect for very practical reasons, it is because our focus on practice and working with people outside the academy to co-produce knowledge takes time. This leads to the question of finance; how do we pay for "free" OEP? At present it relies on charitable foundations, central government and the marketing arm of HE providers. It is not seen as something that ought to come out of central HE funds, it is not seen as teaching. In two of the case studies the delivery and development of materials were funded as a service to a third party. This "service" model may be the way forward, certainly the projects that are emerging in 2013 are based on this approach. Careful evaluation of these is required, not just the pedagogical models and how it enhances our understanding, but how socially useful it is, and economic analysis of cost benefit. If that takes time, and our work suggests it does, then we must also look at how we can account for that in our development models.

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