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# When two worlds don't collide: the marginalisation of open educational practices outside academia

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## **Abstract**

A canyonesque gulf has long existed between open academia and many external subject communities. Since 2011, we have been developing and piloting the public open scholar role (Coughlan & Perryman 2012) - involving open academics discovering, sharing and discussing open educational resources (OER) with online communities outside formal education in order to help bridge this gulf. In 2013 we took the public open scholar into Facebook (Perryman & Coughlan, 2013) to reach an international audience of autism-focussed Facebook groups in India, Africa and Malaysia, with a combined membership of over 5000 people.

Performing the public open scholar role within Facebook led to our learning from group members about new resources produced outside formal education, for example by voluntary sector organisations, government and professional bodies. These resources are surprisingly numerous and compare favourably with those from universities. Seeking to source more such resources we conducted a systematic large scale search, recording not only the number of learning materials available but also how easy it was to find them.

We found that provision from formal education, especially universities, dominates the returned results when searching for free online courses. Consequently, resources from outside formal education, while they exist, are difficult to find. Indeed, most aggregators and repositories proudly state that the free online courses they list are from 'Top Universities', appearing blind to provision from outside formal education. We extended our research to cover e-textbooks and found a similar situation, with content from formal education again dominating provision and collections such as the 4000 free textbooks from The National Academies Press ([www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu)) being practically invisible.

The prominence of university-provided content within search aggregators not only marginalises externally produced resources, relegating them to even more obscurity than has been the case thus far, but also marginalises the open educational practices that were involved in the production of these resources. We propose that the OER movement's questions about ways of involving end-users as co-producers may be answered by looking to external communities and, accordingly, we should be supporting and learning from these communities. Additionally, our findings indicate a need for an impartial open content search facility presenting resources from within and outside formal education in order to help discoverability of the latter. The recently launched search engine <http://solvonauts.org> is very much a step in the right direction.

Further research might usefully investigate in more depth the open educational practices of external subject communities, who are clearly more than just passive consumers of resources and are involved in both producing and adapting OER. There are clear parallels here with research exploring the localisation of resources produced for and by people in the developing world (e.g. Wolfenden & Buckler, 2013; Ivins, 2011) and the ways in which heavily promoted content from the developed world continues to dominate, at the expense of more relevant local

provision. Our study links to several other research contexts, including the recent research into the use of OER by informal learners (e.g. Law, Perryman & Law, 2013) and the growing body of research on the impact of MOOCs (as summarised by Haggard, 2013).

## **Keywords**

Open educational resources, non-formal education, public open scholar, open educational practices

## **Introduction**

The open education and open educational resources (OER) movements remain almost inseparable from the higher education institutions from which they emerged and little attention is given to the wealth of OER that are being produced by subject communities outside higher education, for example professional and regulatory bodies. The 2013 report by the Hewlett Foundation (The Hewlett Foundation, 2013, p. 4) touches upon the massive potential for OER use and production beyond higher (and formal) education when stating that:

By enabling virtually anyone to tap into, translate and tailor educational materials previously reserved only for students at elite universities, OER has the potential to jump start careers and economic development in communities that lag behind. Millions worldwide have already opened this educational lockbox, but if OER is going to democratize learning and transform the classroom and teaching, then it must move from the periphery of education practice to center stage.

Subject communities outside academia could very well be the key to this 'lockbox' for many people and moving to 'center stage' will involve paying attention to open educational resources and practices from beyond formal education.

Relevantly, the UK-based OER4Adults report by Falconer et al (2013, p. 4) recommended that the OER movement should 'recognise that 'learning' takes place everywhere' and should 'extend the range of people and organisations who produce and use resources' and 'encourage OER development by organisations and communities outside mainstream education' (p. 46). The authors explain:

An assumption we often encountered is that universities are best placed to produce quality OER. However, during our study we sourced excellent examples of different types of organisations producing OER specifically for lifelong learners - sometimes in partnership with professional educators, but often in fields not normally touched by mainstream education. These organisations included private sector companies, public sector institutions, professional bodies and third sector organisations (e.g. Social Care Institute for Excellence, OpenScout, C4EO). All types of organisations should be encouraged to consider their contributions to learning, triggering a re-evaluation of inter-relationships. (Falconer *et al*, 2013, p. 46)

Since 2011, we have been working with subject communities outside formal education when developing and piloting the public open scholar role (Coughlan & Perryman, 2012), with the aim of increasing awareness of open educational resources and disseminating information about the resource needs of people outside the academy. The public open scholar role involves open academics working with online communities outside formal education who might benefit from OER, identifying members' expressed needs and then sourcing OER to meet those needs. As such, the role is an extension of Weller's 'digital scholar' - 'someone who employs digital, networked and open approaches to demonstrate specialism in a field' (Weller, 2011, Chapter 1). The public open scholar role was piloted in 2011 within UK voluntary sector online welfare

communities who were using bulletin board-style forums for information sharing and peer support (see Coughlan & Perryman, 2012) and in 2013 we took the public open scholar into Facebook (Perryman & Coughlan, 2013) to reach an international audience of autism-focussed Facebook groups in India, Africa and Malaysia, with a combined membership of over 5000 people.

Whilst performing the public open scholar role within Facebook we began learning from Facebook group members about new resources that had been produced outside formal education, for example by voluntary sector organisations, government and professional bodies. Table 1 shows a selection of free Autism-related online resources produced outside formal education, some of which are openly licensed and Table 2 shows a selection of free Autism-related e-textbooks, again some of which are openly licensed.

Table 1: free autism-related online resources

<b>Type of resource</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Producer</b>	<b>URL</b>	<b>Licence</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Interactive courses (VLE)	Autism Spectrum Disorders	Geneva Centre for Autism (Canada)	<a href="http://elearning.autism.net/">http://elearning.autism.net/</a>	CC-BY-NC-SA	A suite of nine free modules aimed at parents and those working with school-age children and young people. Moodle VLE available in both English and French.
	Autism Internet Modules (AIM)	Ohio's Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI)	<a href="http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/">http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/</a>	All rights reserved	43 comprehensive & sophisticated modules - a broad range, similar in style to those of the Geneva Centre for Autism. 138,000 users.
Interactive courses (Flash)	Inclusive education: Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders	Spanish Government	<a href="http://www.ite.educacion.es/formacion/enred/materiales_en_pruebas_2013/teamb_2013/index.htm">http://www.ite.educacion.es/formacion/enred/materiales_en_pruebas_2013/teamb_2013/index.htm</a>	CC-BY-SA	10 modules in Spanish only. The first five offer relevant knowledge about people with ASD and their needs, and the following are guidelines for an oriented educational intervention.
	Introduction to Autism	Southampton Hampshire Isle of Wight Portsmouth Autism Partnership Board, UK	<a href="http://www.forms.portsmouth.gov.uk/autismawareness/">http://www.forms.portsmouth.gov.uk/autismawareness/</a>	Not stated	20 to 30 minutes e-learning module, powered by Learning Pool. Offers a Certificate of Completion for Autism Awareness
US-style courses (videos & handouts)	Creating Classroom Connections for Children with Autism	www.danya.com - a US social impact company	<a href="http://www.autismonline.org">www.autismonline.org</a>	All rights reserved	One of ten free modules. It's a 40-page pdf document with an accompanying 15-minute YouTube video.
	Autism Case Training	US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	<a href="http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/ACT/class.html">http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/ACT/class.html</a>	Not copyrighted - attribution only	Videos, pdf handouts, slideshows, guides & worksheets; 10 modules in total.
Collection	Autism Toolbox	Scottish Government	<a href="http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/07/06111319/0">www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/07/06111319/0</a>	UK Open Government Licence (similar to	A comprehensive package for schools from the Scottish Government. In total it's a 224-page pdf document, but

				CC-BY)	it can also be downloaded in nine separate parts
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Table 2: free autism-related e-textbooks

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>URL</b>	<b>Licence</b>	<b>Comments</b>
IACAPAP Textbook of Child and Adolescent Mental Health	International Association for Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions.	<a href="http://iacapap.org/iacapap-textbook-of-child-and-adolescent-mental-health">http://iacapap.org/iacapap-textbook-of-child-and-adolescent-mental-health</a>	CC-BY-NC	Colourful 27-page Chapter C.2 of the IACAPAP Textbook covers autism spectrum disorders. It's up-to-date and has reliable references. IACAPAP also publish a corresponding open-access (CC-BY) journal: <a href="http://www.capmh.com">www.capmh.com</a> .
Treating Children with Autism	Eric J. Lund & Chris Van Dyke	<a href="http://lundvandyke.com/resources/download/autism-treatment">http://lundvandyke.com/resources/download/autism-treatment</a>	not stated	A 176 page book written by two doctors who run a private Autism clinic. Downloadable as a complete book or as 15 chapters in PDF.
A Spectrum of Relationships	C. S. Wyatt	<a href="http://theautisticme.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/free-ebook-on-autism-and-relationships.html">http://theautisticme.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/free-ebook-on-autism-and-relationships.html</a>	not stated	Free eBook on Autism and Relationships. The author reflects on his own experiences as a diagnosed high-functioning autistic individual. An 81 page abridged edition in ePub format.
A Parent's Guide to Autism Spectrum Disorder	US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)	<a href="http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/a-parents-guide-to-autism-spectrum-disorder/index.shtml">http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/a-parents-guide-to-autism-spectrum-disorder/index.shtml</a>	Public Domain	NIMH's useful 27-page booklet is offered in Epub and Mobi formats for e-readers, alongside the common PDF format, and is also published in Spanish.
The Good and Bad Science of Autism	Dr Neil Walsh & Dr Elisabeth Hurley	<a href="http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/files/thegoodbadscienceofautism_v2.pdf">http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/files/thegoodbadscienceofautism_v2.pdf</a>	Free PDF download, all rights reserved	94 pages. An attractive and easy-to-use book designed to introduce the reader to autism research.
Ohio's Parent Guide to Autism Spectrum Disorders	Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI)	<a href="http://www.ocali.org/project/ohio_parent_guide_to_ASD">http://www.ocali.org/project/ohio_parent_guide_to_ASD</a>	Free PDF download, all rights reserved	A 274-page manual providing an overview of the world of autism spectrum disorders. Developed by Ohio parents, for Ohio parents.
Educating Children with Autism	US National Research Council	<a href="http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=10017">http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=10017</a>	Free PDF download, all rights reserved	324 pages. Outlines an interdisciplinary approach to education for children with autism.

At this point it is worth explaining that while our paper is grounded in our work within the OER movement we have included in the tables above resources that are free but which are not openly licensed. Recent research by the OER Research Hub (2013) has found that ‘while many educators state that open licensing is important, this does not always transfer into their own practice’ and that ‘for learners the presence of an open licence is not seen as important’. For the current study, the distinction between open and non-open licensing is less of an issue than the matter of whether resources and practices from beyond the academy are being marginalised.

While examining such resources in depth during our public open scholar work it became apparent that free online resources from outside formal education are surprisingly numerous (for example the 4000 free textbooks from The National Academies Press ([www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu))) and compare favourably with those from universities in being pedagogically sound, properly referenced, well-supported with evidence and up-to-date. In addition, the status of the authors of such resources tends to be clear (e.g. their qualifications are given, showing their authority and the provenance of the resources). The Good and Bad Science of Autism [[http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/content/930593/understanding\\_autism/understanding\\_a\\_autism/our\\_publications](http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/content/930593/understanding_autism/understanding_a_autism/our_publications)] is a notable example. Written by geneticist Dr. Neil Walsh and neuroscientist Dr. Elisabeth Hurley, the 94 page book brings together scientific research from multiple disciplines including neuroscience, genetics and psychology. They are writing from within the context of an autism charity and they interpret the science to make it accessible. In addition, the examples are very relevant to charity members.

## **Methods**

Seeking to source more high quality resources from outside formal education, and motivated by Falconer et al’s OER4Adults report, we conducted a systematic large scale search, recording not only the number of learning materials available but also how easy it was to find them. We began by identifying target personae as a means of shaping our search strategies. Our search was based around two typical personae: (1) the parent/carer of a child who they suspect may have autism, or who has been recently diagnosed; (2) teachers and support workers seeking to meet the needs of autistic children in their classes or groups. We decided to search for courses as the complexity of autism cannot easily be reduced into a single book.

With the two personae in mind, we began by keeping the search as broad as possible, using the search term online autism course and Google.co.uk. We chose Google for its popularity, and accepted the default Google.co.uk version for UK users. We then varied the search to include the variations online ASD course, online autism training and free online autism course. Finally, we compared the Google search results for online autism course with results returned using the search engine Bing. Mindful of the impact of cookies on Google search results, we cleared all cookies and the browser cache before conducting the search and between each episode of searching.

Once the results were returned we closely examined the top 50 results for each search and allocated them to one of the following categories:

- Courses from universities (subdivided into fee-paying and free for the *free online autism courses* search);
- Courses from colleges and private training companies (subdivided into fee-paying and free for the *free online autism courses* search)
- Lists & aggregator sites
- Courses restricted to members or a particular location
- Open and/or free courses from outside formal education

- Erroneous results, e.g free newsletters.

We then looked at the balance between formal education and external subject communities.

## Results

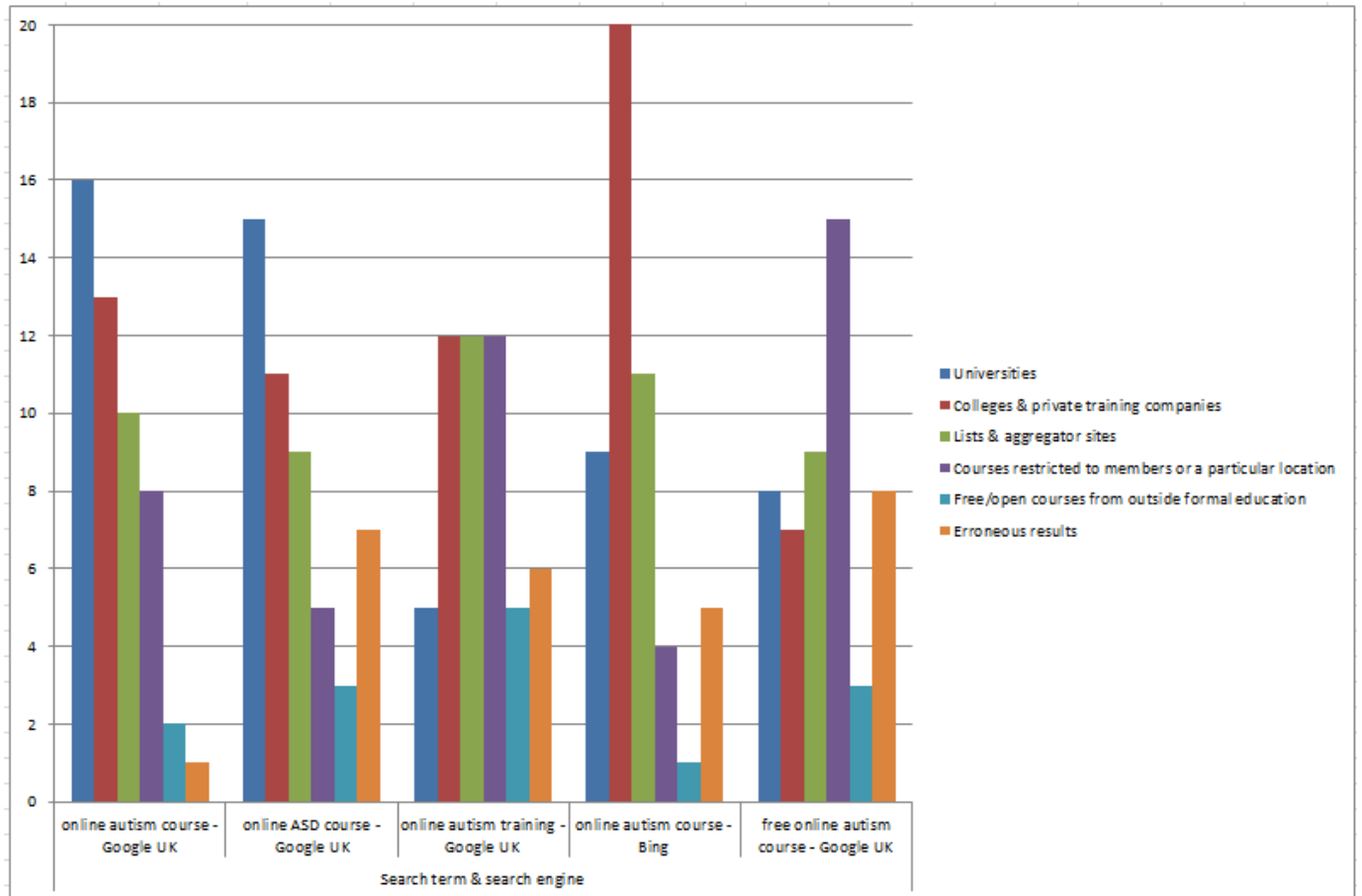
The results of our search are provided in Table 3 and represented in Figure 1.

Table 3: Search results

	<i>Universities</i>	<i>Colleges &amp; private training companies</i>	<i>Lists &amp; aggregator sites</i>	<i>Courses restricted to members or a particular location</i>	<i>Free/open courses from outside formal education</i>	<i>Erroneous results</i>
online autism course - Google UK	16	13	10	8	2	1
online ASD course - Google UK	15	11	9	5	3	7
online autism training - Google UK	5	12	12	12	5	6
online autism course - Bing	9	20	11	4	1	5
free online autism course - Google UK	8	7	9	15	3	8
Total	53	63	51	44	14	27

Figure 1: search results





It was clear from the results that autism courses from outside formal education are hard to find, irrespective of the search term or search engine used. Aggregators and lists fetching, filtering and organising information about courses from multiple online sources represented a high proportion of the search results and we felt it reasonable to assume that our imagined personae would investigate what they had to offer. We therefore conducted a search of the results delivered by aggregators. Table 4 shows the six most frequently appearing aggregators and lists and gives a breakdown of the online autism courses offered through them.

Table 4: results of searching aggregators for 'autism'

<b>Aggregator</b>	<b>Result of search for 'autism'</b>
<i>onlinecourses.com</i>	It is not possible to search, only to select from categories; none were relevant.
<i>openculture.com</i>	Yale's autism course x 2
<i>academicearth.org</i>	Yale's autism course x 3, plus 10 YouTube videos from various universities
<i>oedb.org/open</i>	5 courses from universities: Yale, MIT, Liberty (x2) & University of California.
<i>class-central.com</i>	No results
<i>topfreeclasses.com</i>	No results

Here too, we found that formal education provision dominates the returned results, to the total exclusion of provision from elsewhere. Indeed, most aggregators and repositories proudly state that the free online courses they list are from 'top' or 'well-known' universities', appearing blind to provision from outside formal education, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The OpenCulture header



## ***Discussion***

The prominence of formal education provision within the results returned by both search engines and aggregators has several implications. An obvious implication is that resources produced outside formal education are being marginalised, rendered very difficult to find, especially by people who lack Web search experience. As a consequence, learners are prevented from benefiting from a wealth of high quality resources that may be more relevant to their needs than those produced within formal education. Falconer et al (2013, p.3) assert that 'approaches that work well in a university context may be less appropriate elsewhere' adding that 'transferring resources produced in one community such as a university to another such as a group of workplace learners can be difficult' (p. 4).

It is worth noting that one course from Yale appears repeatedly in the results from both search engines and aggregators, with results returned for the course's appearance in Yale's own website, in iTunes and in YouTube. In contrast, the 43 autism modules from the external body OCALI rarely appeared in the search results and when they did, they appeared as a single entry. This disparity could be due to universities being particularly good at marketing and syndicating their content very well.

Falconer et al (2013, p. 4) state that it is important to 'think of OER more broadly than as content' and a further, perhaps even more important implication of the marginalisation of resources produced beyond formal education is that this, in turn, marginalises the open educational practices that are involved in the production of these resources. For example, an electronic textbook on child and adolescent mental health is freely downloadable on the website of the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions (IACAPAP), a non-governmental professional organization that serves as an umbrella for child and adolescent mental health associations and societies throughout the world. The book's 42 chapters were written collaboratively by over 90 international experts, particularly for the benefit of professionals who would otherwise not be able to purchase a printed textbook. IACAPAP are committed to updating the book annually and actively invite feedback from users on any alterations or improvements needed. They are particularly sensitive to issues of cultural and ethnic variations and interpretations and are keen to offer resources in other than English in future. The book is released with a CC-BY-NC licence.

The OER movement has increasingly emphasised the need to move beyond top-down content production to consider ways of involving end-users as co-producers [literature] and our findings suggest that much can be learned by looking at the practices of (and supporting) external communities. Falconer et al (2013, p. 46) recommend that collaborative relationships should be developed between universities and organisations in other sectors, reporting that::

We identified numerous potential benefits of collaboration of HE institutions with public, private and third sector organisations to produce OER. These benefits include: an increase in the number and range of resources available for adults and lifelong learners; development of resources that can improve the employability of registered students in HE institutions; useful links and networks for learners involved with their potential future sectors; improved understanding of academic and industry/sector needs which can impact on curriculum development to reflect better sector requirements; new business models for the production of OER.

Working with external communities could also help academics to be relevant in their work, to be better informed and to be more up-to-date about topical issues in their subject area. As a result they would be better able to respond to the real identified needs of external subject communities.

Our findings also indicate a need for an impartial open content search facility presenting resources from within and outside formal education in order to help discoverability of the latter. The recently launched Solvonauts open content search engine (<http://solvonauts.org>) and the OpenScout open management content search facility are both very much a step in the right direction.

## Conclusion

Our study findings indicate the existence of very active subject communities outside the academy whose open practices are not necessarily recognised within academia. As such, our findings add weight to the existing literature asserting the need for the open education and OER movements to broaden their scope and to support, promote and, indeed, value resource production, use and re-use by communities outside formal education. In outlining open educational practices beyond the academy, and the differing needs of learners within and outside formal education, our study links with recent research into the use of OER by informal learners (e.g. Law, Perryman & Law, 2013). There are also clear parallels with research exploring resource localisation for and by people in the developing world (e.g. Wolfenden & Buckler, 2013; Ivins, 2011), especially research focused on investigating the ways in which heavily promoted content from the developed world continues to dominate at the expense of more relevant local provision. Further research building on the findings of our study might usefully investigate in more depth the open educational practices of external subject communities, who are clearly more than just passive consumers of resources, being involved in both producing and adapting OER to meet their own specific needs.

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