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Towards Open Educational Practice

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Strand: Open and flexible education, new opportunities for universities

Abstract

Significant claims are made for the potential of Open Educational Resources (OER) to widen access to higher education. Most recently, the very large numbers of individuals enrolling on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has dominated discussion in universities and beyond. Advocates such as D'Antoni (2013) have written persuasively of how OER can potentially open up access to education and redefine the boundaries between institutions and society. However, the evidence from the first wave of MOOCs suggests that the participants are primarily individuals with prior experience of higher education. While this indeed widens access, there is no evidence that it is widening participation from those distanced from education (Lane et al, 2014). Indeed there is limited evidence of significant impact on widening participation by OERs (Falconer et.al, 2013).

The Open Educational Resources (OER) movement, however, has longer and deeper roots (Lane, 2012: 140), roots that are about more than licensing and has engaged in educational practices that break down barriers to education. This paper explores recent examples from Scotland of partnership-based approaches to the development, design and delivery of OERs. Drawing on this experience and ideas from the academic literature on educational technology, pedagogy and widening participation, we draw some provisional conclusions on an approach that combines key elements from all these fields. In particular we note that openness is not simply a matter of barriers to access related to licenses or technological aspects, but are inherently cultural, social and situational. We conclude that while the OER movements early focus on licenses and technology was useful, widening participation requires a shift in emphasis, a shift that accounts for peoples, places and the practices of open education

Keywords: OER, Pedagogy, Widening Participation

Introduction

A recent report on Open and Online Education from the Welsh Government (2013: 6) notes that in recent years a *'fresh philosophy of 'openness' has made itself felt in higher education and the wider world'*. The report goes on to suggest that in higher education the new spirit is having an impact on the practice of learning and teaching and raising questions about institutional boundaries and ownership. Of course open education; open software and open content are not new concepts. The Welsh report provides useful and clear definitions and notes that the development of OER movement has taken place over an extended period. Some of the early milestones in OER are summarised by Yuan et al (2008). For example the launch of the Open Content Initiative in 1998, MIT's OpenCourseware in 2002 and the Cape Town Declaration in 2007. More recently the UNESCO Open Educational Declaration (2012) highlighted continuing developments in policy and practice and signposted ten important recommendations for further development. Broadly the declaration focuses on policy

frameworks, creation of infrastructure and awareness to facilitate progress. In this paper we are concerned primarily with the first recommendation, which calls for action to

'Promote and use OER to widen access to education at all levels, both formal and non-formal, in a perspective of lifelong learning, thus contributing to social inclusion, gender equity and special needs education. Improve both cost-efficiency and quality of teaching and learning outcomes through greater use of OER.'

In part the increased prominence of open education in higher education and in public discourse has been driven in by the success of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in recruiting very large numbers of students (BIS, 2013) and also in response to the huge increase in ownership of digital devices across the world. Access is no longer restricted to those with a computer but is possible through a wide range of devices including mobile phones and tablets. Despite the increased prominence of online education the impact of this digital revolution has been less apparent in higher education than in other sections of society. For example, Goodfellow and Lea (2013) describe how students operate in a digital world that shapes how they engage with learning materials, how they encounter and communicate ideas and how they learn. They observe only a limited impact on learning and teaching approaches in HE, with discussion and acknowledgement of the importance of digital literacy confined to a limited number of discipline areas and to a minority of staff. Support for this contention was found by (Cannell and Gilmour, 2013) who surveyed staff across all HE institutions in Scotland; the need to develop pedagogy in the context of digital literacy was not mentioned by any of the survey respondents. Alongside this there is evidence that much of the development of open education takes place in an institutional frame where online content is conflated with openness and viewed as something that ought to be corralled behind the walls of institutional Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). In a collection of essays on OER in Asia (Dhanajaran and Porter eds, 2013) the contributors from a wide range of different countries find significant similarities in the challenges facing the further development of use of OER. Prominent among these is a disjuncture between institutional policy and staff practice, as is a strong culture of individual academics wanting to retain ownership and control of resources that they have developed.

In this paper we focus on OER defined as free, online educational resources that are in the public domain and are licensed to allow anyone to legally and freely copy, use, adapt and re-share. We are particularly interested in exploring the meaning of 'open' through a widening participation lens. Before looking at some examples from practice in Scotland it is helpful to look in a little more detail about issues of openness and who participates. Rather than simply looking at the "freedoms" that open licensing affords, the means, it is worth looking at what we want those freedoms to do in the world. Dhanajaran and Abeywardena (in Dhanajaran and Porter eds, 2013) highlight Marshal Smith's (Smith, 2011) three principle narratives of OER; making access to knowledge more equitable; enabling users to become producers and transforming opportunities for both learning and teaching. They concur with Smith's conclusion that implementation constitutes an overarching narrative. since it underpins any attempt to successfully realise the first three. Although Smith was writing in the context of the developing world we find this framework and the conclusion helpful in an exploration of the relevance of OER to widening participation in Scottish higher education and we argue in the rest of this paper that it has more universal resonance. Other writers, for example D'Antoni in McGreal et al (2013), note the potential of OER to widen participation in higher education and remove or reconfigure institutional and other boundaries to access. However, that promise is still simply a promise, and it remains the

case that there is deep-rooted inequity of access to higher education within nations and between nations. In Scotland, a developed and relatively wealthy nation, reports on widening participation over more than a decade (for example NUS Scotland, 2013) have highlighted persistent and sharp educational inequality driven by socio-economic disadvantage.

The scale on which MOOCs are delivered and the ability to study without charge or prior credentials has the potential to make an important contribution to the equitable distribution of knowledge. However, this promise is not being delivered, and the 'O' for open within MOOCs' is often neglected (Macintyre 2014). Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that the main audience for MOOCs consists of those who have already had significant and successful access to higher education. More than seventy per cent of all the students who registered on Edinburgh University's first wave of MOOCs (offered on Coursera) already had a degree of some sort (Edinburgh University, 2013; Clow, 2013). Similar inequity of participation is apparent in most of the other published analytics. John Holmwood (2013) goes beyond the demographics of participation to argue that the separation and unbundling of assessment from content in the MOOC model leads necessarily to a strong trend for enclosure of the commons, with content being open but credit being enclosed.

If MOOCs are mainly reaching the educational haves is OER realising the promise of open education envisaged by D'Antoni (2013)? In the developing world lack of infrastructure and equipment presents barriers to developing education at all levels. There are significant instances of OER supporting access to education, particularly at school level. The provision of OER can, for example, provide cost effective ways of providing materials that would traditionally take the form of printed textbooks (for example Garcia et al, 2013). However, developed countries with universal school education and relatively strong technological infrastructure still have significant inequity in access with those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds having much less opportunity to access higher education through traditional routes from school to college or university. An important component of programmes to reduce such inequality of access is the facilitation routes into higher education for mature students and lifelong learners. However, there is little evidence that at the moment OER is contributing to this. Falconer et al (2013) in a study in an OECD study on the use of OER across Europe found only a few instances of OER contributing to the support of life long learners. In reviewing the state of play in Scotland, in the context of the OECD report and the broader widening participation literature, Cannell and Macintyre (2014) comment that

'The issues are not just about access to devices or software or familiarity with using new technology. The opportunities presented by OER are also in tension with the social, cultural and material barriers to participation in learning that are well established in the widening participation literature (for example: McGivney1999; McGivney 2000).'

'Digital Scotland', a 2010 report on access to the Internet in Scotland drew a similarly nuanced conclusion, noting that

'People remain unconnected for a variety of reasons of cost, availability and choice. Those well-connected use the internet to access goods and services, jobs, benefits, friends and relations. Those already most disadvantaged are least likely to be connected.'

All the evidence suggests, that at least in the domain of access to higher education, the vision of OER as a way of opening up opportunities to new groups and in new ways is not yet being realised. In the remainder of this paper we look at some emerging practices in Scotland and consider whether they may indicate some possible avenues for progress.

Developing new OER in partnership

The Open University in Scotland (OU) is in a unique position of being a Scottish University by statute, funded through the devolved Scottish Funding System but also part of the larger OU UK. The wider university provides access to free online resources created by the OU through the OpenLearn site launched in 2007, and through a community site OpenLearn Works open to other institutions and individuals. Though uptake for this latter service has been limited to date. Free material is also available through a number of other channels including iTunes U, YouTube and AudioBoo.

In an environment where OER is well supported institutionally the OU in Scotland has developed a number of examples of new OER modules and new ways of working with existing OER. In 2010 the first such course, Gaelic in Modern Scotland was produced in response to requests for accessible cultural material to support already existing language learning materials on Gaelic. The new OER was produced using the course team approach that is part of the OU's approach to producing high quality material. In this instance the team involved academic experts from a number of other universities and from key cultural bodies like BBC Alba (the Gaelic Language arm of BBC Scotland). Over the subsequent four years six more free online courses have been created in conjunction with an eclectic range of non-university partners.

We have reported in detail on examples of partnership working elsewhere (Cannell 2013; Macintyre 2013). Here we want to explore the common themes running through these developments. All were built on existing partnerships. In most cases these were established as part of long-term engagement to support our core mission to widening participation. In contrary to mainstream curriculum development, which is most often institution centred, demand has come from the partner and the external context. And in every case the development of the OER has involved combining specialist and contextual knowledge from the partner with academic knowledge, technical expertise and learning design skills from the university. In reality this is a three-way partnership between organisations traditionally outside the domain of higher education, university based widening participation practitioners and educational technologists. The importance of partnership is best exemplified in the creation of 'Caring Counts', a new OER designed to help individuals in unpaid caring roles become conscious of the skills they develop in these roles, and support transitions into education and possibly employment. The value of an OER based approach to reflection, in and through transitions, had been established in a previous project working with a large organisation supporting refugees and asylum seekers. This has resulted in the production of OER that was rapidly taken up by individuals and organisations far beyond the initial partnership grouping. In the case of 'Caring Counts' the collaboration involved national and local organisations supporting carers. Critically the development of the OER involved a team-based approach that included carers themselves who had engaged with earlier OER initiatives and some accredited OU study; professionals working for carers

organisations and Open University staff. The carers were also students and in essence the development of the educational resource became a very particular example of co-creating the curriculum (Bovill et al, 2011).

This ability to focus on widening participation is based on a higher education funding regime in Scotland which is supportive of widening participation and partnership working; between universities and between universities and other bodies Cannell (2013). Indeed it is not just the OU in Scotland that has developed an approach to openness that is about partnership; partnership has been a significant component in the way that educators have approached openness across Scotland. For example, The Co-operative Education Trust worked initially with The University of Aberdeen to develop openly licensed materials on co-operative business models for use in undergraduate degrees, and the University of the West of Scotland is now using these. In this case partnership is about organisations supporting each other to create content.

There are also emerging examples of partnership supporting the use and re-use practices around openly licensed resources. In particular The OU in Scotland has been working with Trade Unions to develop practice in this area. The University of Edinburgh are working with Edinburgh City Council to look at how partnership can enhance the widening participation profile of MOOC users (Woodgate 2014).

In evaluating and recording these collaborations the question that arises is whether this is a something that derives from affordances or a requirement of open education, in that it allows and forces people to work between and across sectors? Is it simply a function of Scotland being a “wee place” and Scottish Government’s focus on partnership? Or perhaps it is pragmatic around how we support the development of OER and its use by students. It may even be an approach that derives from the particular approaches to education within Scotland. More work is required to understand and track the development of these open practices in Scotland in their global context.

There is however another aspect to all these case studies – Marshall Smith’s overarching narrative of implementation. Growing out of existing widening participation partnerships meant that each instance of development, described briefly above, took place in a connected social context embodying relationships of trust, of prior action and shared activity. The evidence emerging from what is now a sequence of diverse partnership developments is that these relationships enable each OER project to be more than simply robust development of content, but also a way of facilitating use by actors in the network. So targeted OER content, created in this way, already had a ready audience for use that enables implementation at significant scale. From a practice perspective, a core part of the widening participation in partnership methodology employed by the university had already been the identification of key individuals in organisations who could promote and facilitate the use of more conventional educational resources. This approach of supporting individuals embedded in organisations and networks has transferred across to the OER domain. These key individuals have their own networks and communities of practice and it’s then possible for good practice to be propagated to other organisations that the university was not necessarily connected to. It’s striking that this approach has also been adopted in

the Welsh context. The Open University in Wales, operating in a different policy and funding environment, has created a network of community and workplace based 'OpenLearn champions' whose role is to promote the effective use of OER (Welsh Government, 2013).

Opening up educational practice

In 2007 the Cape Town Open Education Declaration stated that '*open education is not limited to just open educational resources*'. Cannell (2013) notes that

'The declaration stresses that developing the potential of open education requires practices that enable educators to share approaches and ideas and promote development in pedagogy.'

This focus on Open Educational Practices (OEP) marks a distinct shift from OER as content to a focus on the facilitation of effective use.

'Understanding of what is encompassed by "practices around OER" is changing from a narrow view of educational practice which centres on the production of content, to a broader definition that encompasses all activities that open up access to educational opportunity in a context where freely available online content and services (whether 'open', 'educational' or not) are taken as the norm.' Falconer et al note (2013: 7)

The stress on '*all activities*' is important. In considering OEP it is still most common to think about the nature of platforms, the importance of learning design and the embedding of motivating devices such as badges. We would argue that all of the experience described in the previous section underlines the importance of these technical and pedagogical practices. So, for example, Macintyre in the conclusion to his 2013 paper on a partnership with Community Energy Scotland remarks that:

'One of our original goals was to look at how working with partners outside the academy might make the development OER and OEP more sustainable and more relevant. What we have found is that there is a role for partnership, but that role is not simply as about bringing in new materials, new markets and new finance. This paper suggests that open is not simply about content and licensing, it is also opening up educational practices more generally.'

But we would also argue for a wider definition of the P in OEP. Opening up educational practices in the projects we have been engaged with suggests that the effective implementation of OER is possible through the integration of the processes of identification and co-construction of content with context specific understanding of social relationships and networks. On the basis of this limited and geographically specific experience we suggest that combining good practice in OER design with approaches to implementation and dissemination that are more familiar in the world of Community Based Adult Education and widening participation can provide an effective way of enabling large-scale use of OER with non-traditional learners. There are echoes here of D'Antoni's aspiration for OER. In particular the process of OER creation involves, as a core and necessary practice, relationships with individuals and organisations that would normally sit outside the academy. One university operating at a relatively small scale in one country is clearly no more than a glimpse of a possibility. However, the importance and potential benefits of this area of work has prompted the Scottish Funding Council to fund a three-year sector wide

project on developing open practices in education. The project 'Open Educational Practices in Scotland' (www.oepscotland.org) is led by the Open University in Scotland but involves the other 18 higher education institutions, the college sector and non-university bodies and aims to act as a test bed and a catalyst for a major step forward in the implementation of effective practice in the development and use of OER in Scotland.

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