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Reflecting on Open Educational Practices in Scotland

Ronald Macintyre, Open Educational Practices Scotland, The Open University in Scotland,
ronald.macityre@open.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper reflects on the work of Open Educational Practices Scotland (OEPS) a Scottish Funding Councils (SFC) programme to promote the development and use of free and open online educational resources within the informal and formal education sectors in Scotland. Hosted by the Open University (OU) in Scotland (OUiS) it leverages OU experience of Open Educational Resources (OER) in relation to the OUiS long history of working in partnership.

OEPS joins two distinct but overlapping open traditions. Work on OER on the affordances of free and open online content, considerations of licence, platform functionality and the designing digital learning objects in for and through Open Educational Practices (OEP). With approaches from older traditions of open education, based on education as a common good and narratives on equity and social justice. For OEPS the merging of these discourses is based on a decade of OUiS work engaging in a series of diverse partnerships with employers, formal and informal education providers to support those diverse needs.

The paper introduces examples of what this means in for and through practice. Exploring work we have done with Parkinsons UK to develop a series of OER focused on neglected area of curriculum Then looks at the work have done with the Scottish Union Learn (SUL) to promote use of free and open resources by learners in the workplace. Through these examples we explore possibilities of partnerships to bring new voices into the academy, to create supportive structures based on shared values and trust to support uncertain learners. It is our sense this approach allow the benefits of openness to be shared in a just and equitable manner. It then reflects on the issues that arise when you work in-between two senses of open.

Keywords

Learning Design, Participatory Design, Open Educational Practice, Widening Participation

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on the work of Open Educational Practices Scotland (OEPS), a Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funded sector wide programme hosted by the Open University in Scotland (OUiS). The principal focus of the project is the practices around the creation and use of free and open online content. It draws on the experience of the Open University (OU) UK in Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) into the world of practice based research into partnership and widening participation to open up opportunities within education developed by the OU in Scotland. The paper begins with some background on those influences, exploring how this context has shaped our approach to OEP. It then reflects on those experiences in relation to two short case studies. The first with Parkinsons UK which looks at the reversioning of a set of education materials to create and free and open resources within a neglected curriculum area for a neglected cohort of learners. Then looks at our work supporting the use of free and open online content through our partnership with Scottish Union Learn (SUL). Here through a series of workshops with SUL organisers, we have developed a series of pilots exploring how to structure and support the use of this content in the workplace. The paper

concludes by suggesting partnerships of this kind create a useful way to accommodate the affordances of well-designed OER within an older tradition of open education, and suggests a set of OEP that can ensure the benefit of free and open and equitably shared. Finally the paper reflects on what it means to operate within a space where you are between different approaches to open, the possible for creativity and tensions.

2. Emerging Approaches to Open Educational Practice

Divergences within Higher Education narratives and the value of HE in society within the UK have highlighted a distinct focus on equitable access in Scotland, Full Time HE is still free and there is a political commitment that the socio-economic profile of those studying at HE level reflects the socio-economic profile of the Scottish population (see <http://www.commissiononwideningaccess.co.uk/>). Alongside this focus on access and participation is a legacy of working in partnership across education sectors and between providers. In part this is “forced” by funding structures (Cannell *et.al* 2015), however it met a receptive audience and has become a key part of the landscape in Scotland.

The OU UK has established a reputation for leadership in OER, for its development of free and open materials open platforms like OpenLearn (see <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/>), and more recently for its work on “free” platforms like FutureLearn (see <https://www.futurelearn.com/>). It has worked on capacity building within OER for example SCORE (see <http://www.open.ac.uk/score/>), and scholarship activities that have evaluated and informed the development of OER and OEP, for example the OER Research Hub (see <http://oerresearchhub.org/>).

The OU Open Media Unit (OMU), leads on open platforms and is a core partners in OEPS. In its early formulation OMU tended to focus on the making HE level learning accessible through releasing OU core curriculum. OMU’s OER production model has typically built on existing OU production models which uses multidisciplinary teams to create learning materials, materials that carry many of the assumptions on being open to learners on different parts of their journey embedded within the production process (Lane 2012).

However, for those working in broadening the socio-economic base of HE level learning there is a general recognition that access is different from participation. OUiS work on OER and OEP has focussed on participation. It arose across a number of outreach projects independently of each other, sometimes as a response to issues of participation through creating outside the formal curriculum, sometimes ways of working in partnership to support participation (Cannell *et.al* 2015). It was opportunistic, fragmented and reactive. However, what emerged was a set of practices based on participatory design (Macintyre 2015a), recognising online participation patterns varied by socio-economic status and educational attainment (Schradie 2013). Exploring these challenges by taking OUiS experience of partnership and participation and building OU UK knowledge of OER access to create context specific solutions.

3. Co-Design of Content with Parkinsons UK

Parkinsons UK (<http://www.parkinsons.org.uk/>) is a charity that supports individuals and their families to deal with Parkinsons. Over time it has developed a rich set of educational resources and accredited programmes. Originally these were print and delivered face to face, but like many public facing organisations with a social mission it is increasingly looking to online learning. Our relationship with Parkinsons UK developed out of collaborative work between OUiS and

Parkinsons UK based on a Scottish Government funded OER about care. They were keen to develop some existing resources on Parkinsons Awareness delivered face to face and aimed at front line care staff into a free open online resource.

The material we have developed together, the technical aspects, the look and feel do not differ greatly from any online learning experience. We have drawn on “what works”, videos of front line staff, carers, and the partners of people with Parkinsons, formative assessments, reflective learning journals and Open Badges to recognise learning. However, what has been different is the focus on what being open enables them to do. We have developed an approach to working in partnership that draws on soft systems, participatory design methods and design thinking (Macintyre 2015a) to focus on the learner their experiences wants and needs, the organisation and its capabilities (Grant 2010)

This can be a drawn out process, as it asks an organisation to consider who their learners are, what they know about them, how they know, and importantly what they want to know, how and who will support them. In doing so organisation has to consider how openness fits within their overall strategy. With Parkinsons UK, the initial interest in open and online was about scaling existing resources, where demand outstripped delivery capacity. Through the partnership it became about scope, OER was not a replacement, but an enhancement, being open an opportunity to think about how to deploy resources (including support) efficiently and effectively. It is an attempt to move beyond discrete OER, and enabling things to be open, into a more strategic focus on what openness enables. At the time of writing Parkinsons UK see this initial stages as part of our “prototype” partnership, and are looking to develop materials aimed at other user groups. Together we are exploring the role of openness plays in developing high quality materials into their own CPD programmes, and how they might use openness to influence curriculum in HE and public and professional discourses.

4. Collective Learning with Scottish Union Learn

Scottish Union Learn (SUL) are the body who support Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) in Scotland. ULRs are specially trained members of Trade Unions (TU) who have a statutory right to explore and develop education in the workplace (Macintyre 2015b). OUiS have been working with SUL for more than a decade, in the initial part of the partnership our focus tended to on providing routes in for those distanced from HE with the OUiS and the TU acting as a support structure for uncertain learners (Macintyre and Heil 2013). Over time as we built trust and developed mutual understanding based on shared values, we have begun to explore new avenues, in particular to look at questions of digital participation and how to broaden the socio-economic base of those using free open online materials.

SUL and OEPS decided to explore this question by designing a series of workshops with ULRs to share our questions with them, explore the challenge of ensuring the benefits of openness are equally spread, share examples from the TU movement where people were started to use free and open material, and listen. Each workshop series featured an initial introductory session where people were asked these questions, provided with examples and invited to explore the possibilities, and a follow up workshop where we discussed their experiences. We ran each series in 7 locations across Scotland and attracted more than 100 participants (Macintyre 2015b). What developed from these workshops was a different kind of model for OER use. ULRs questioned the kinds of free and open content available and the assumptions about educational attainment embedded within them. In particular the focus the self-directed learner, and assumptions about

digital literacy which they saw as privileging confident learners. They also questioned the types of content, wondering whether one of the reasons that MOOCs tended to be used by well educated people was that it was designed for that audience. They emphasised the idea of collectivism as a TU value, and suggested collective approaches, structured sessions with peers supporting each other might help break down some of the hidden barriers to participation. Our sense is that collective model might be able to provide a support structure and allow learners to contextualise existing OER appropriately within a peer community. At the time of writing we are about to start piloting these approaches with SUL and a range of TU's in workplaces across Scotland. The paper will report on the outcomes of this pilots.

5. Conclusion

Our approach builds on the OU UK experience and developed high quality materials in multidisciplinary teams, first within a blended content, then online and most recently in the open. First in a number of different and unconnected areas developed by OUiS, recently brought together within OEPS. Our partners tend to be in the informal sector, public facing organisations with a social mission. Where the sense of OEP is built on a techno-legal understanding of OER, but focussed on participation and partnership. While this does allow us to bring new voices into the academy, what does it mean for a sector wide HE project when it is places itself in-between different ways of seeing the critical questions and solutions posed by openness.

It asks us to think about what public means, about the role of the academy and free and open content (Coughlan and Perryman 2012). Previously, it has been suggested OEPS would move beyond the R of OER to consider what they enable in the world (Macintyre 2014). As the programme developed this became a half-truth. The in-between space OEPS occupies opens up the possibilities of using free and open materials to mediate interactions within neglected cohorts. Through the use of free and open we have tried to shift our thinking about learning design as not just a matter of content, but about the social process's that support the use of content.

We are also starting to see a shift within Scottish HE, the interests is coming from research groups with very specific research areas and a "public mission", developments that tend to be in-between, crossing disciplinary, organisational and geographic scales. Working with their learning and teaching teams we are exploring the development of content for their external audiences, and the role these developments have for curriculum design. The paths these will trace are uncertain, as designing in and for partnership leads us down new avenues. We will report on how these have evolved during out paper. However, there is a sense these in-between spaces offer innovative ways of creating content, in partnership outside the formal curriculum, a place to experiment, develop learning materials. It suggests a porous model of curriculum created in-between formal and informal which may inform curriculum development in the future.

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