***Open Educational Resources and Teaching in the 21st Century:
questions concerning authority***

200-word summary [197 w]

As a source of materials for education the Web is, to a large extent, shifting ground. Open Educational Resources (OER) provided by Higher Education Institutions constitute, at least in principle, a reliable category of Web-based resources given their association with traditional forms of expert authority. Nevertheless, OER embody different aspects of academic thinking and practice, competing, in an unlevelled field, with other sources that may provide a much more immediate appeal in that they afford quick and easy consumption of information delivered in a piecemeal, often uncritical, fashion.

This paper draws upon a piece of research in the area of 'online informal learning' to illustrate issues arising from the availability of open content and, in particular, OER. This research suggests a number of aspects related to the impact of open content on assumed boundaries between teacher/learner, formal/informal learning, training/education, content/presentation and, crucially, in how the blurring of these boundaries may have an impact on the location of 'value' within views of education in which marketing and business discourses predominate. The paper argues that, despite the need for critical debate on issues regarding validation, current arguments focusing on 'expertise' risk diluting its significance in subtle yet fundamental ways.

60-word summary for programme [59 w]

This paper draws upon research in the area of 'online informal learning' to illustrate issues that arise from the availability of open content and, in particular, OER. The paper argues that, despite the need for critical debate on issues regarding certification of learning experiences using OER, current arguments on 'expertise' risk diluting its significance in subtle yet fundamental ways.

KEYWORDS
Communities – resources – recognition – authority – validation – accreditation – ownership

MAIN TEXT (up to 2500 words)

Introduction

This paper draws upon a piece of research carried out between October 2007 and December 2008. The study set out to provide a contribution to enquiries on the impact of Open Educational Resources (OER) by exploring engagement in computer-mediated communication (CMC) in 'informal' yet institutionally-hosted contexts. The project consisted of a small investigation into engagement, in particular, with communication and discussion tools provided by OpenLearn, the Open University's (OU) Open Content Initiative (http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn).

OpenLearn has delivered, for free re-use within a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike-NonCommercial license, a wealth of self-study learning resources that correspond to about 3% of the OU's course provision. Two sites were created, the LearningSpace (http://openlearn.open.ac.uk), aimed primarily at learners, and the

LabSpace (http://labspace.open.ac.uk), aimed primarily at other educators. OpenLearn offers an integrated learning environment encompassing not only 'content' but also a variety of communication and social networking tools available or attached to the Moodle environment upon which the project Web sites are built.

The research focused on a selection of examples of asynchronous and synchronous communication situations within OpenLearn. These included a selection of forums from the LearningSpace as well as examples of synchronous communication via FM (FlashMeeting) that took place within the context of two pilot studies organised by the researcher. Each of these pilots consisted of a series of discussions over FM in which a subject-specialist acted as convenor. In each case, a LabSpace unit was created to provide a home for resources and asynchronous discussion (please see Ferreira, 2008 for further details). In short, the research was based on an action research orientation, but the approach was predominantly exploratory and ethnographic methods (observation and participant observation) were used, complemented with semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used within a grounded theory approach.

A fuller discussion of this work is provided by Ferreira (2009), which provides a contribution to enquiries on the impact of OER in that it brings to light, from within a sample of learning situations across the 'informal'/'formal' space, a number of boundary issues concerning curriculum and, in particular, pedagogy. The study suggests, however, that a major aspect of the impact of OER is that their availability is not only creating new challenges but also uncovering previously veiled tensions and questions regarding identity and boundaries. These issues are underpinned by questions concerning 'authority', the focus of the discussion below.

Purposefulness, leadership and validation: a place for 'authority'?

A core question concerning engagement with OER is that of purpose: why engage in the first place? This is not necessarily a trivial issue. As sources of information, OER initiatives compete in an unlevelled field with sources that may offer a much more immediate appeal (e.g. more intuitive navigation and/or search features, piecemeal-like presentation or more interactive features), even if they lack institutional or 'expert' endorsement. Why choose to engage with OER provided by a HE institution rather than anything else freely available on the Web?

It is interesting that, whilst OER rely strongly on the availability of the Web, this availability has been contributing to a generalised dispute over the meanings and significance of 'expertise'. Despite intense criticism (e.g. Keen 2007), rhetoric supporting 'the wisdom of the crowds' (Surowiecki 2004) contributes to a growing distrust of experts and expertise, threatening what McWilliam (2005) labels the 'credentialer' role of institutions. Edwards *et al.* (2004 p. 55) nicely encapsulate this general wariness of expert 'authority':

> 'In the media and elsewhere experts and expertise have become subject to greater distrust … standards of competence are developed upon the basis of evidence of what already competent practitioners do. Assessments and curricula are built on those standards, the logos for which stands in sharp contrast with the more reified, "arty-farty", "trendy" theory or, even worse, "jargon" of experts.'

Expert 'authority', however, is an important feature of OER as, indeed, different aspects of academic practice appear inscribed in the resources being made available by OER initiatives. It is perhaps not a coincidence that 'many [OpenLearn] registered

users have a connection with the OU' (Goodwin, 2008). [1] Evidence from asynchronous forums supports this observation in their frequent inclusion of messages requesting information on particular courses, posted by prospective or registered students planning their study pathways. Sustained discussion, however, does not seem to have developed around such prompts, which suggests a predominant use for the forums as 'information gathering' tools rather than the originally envisaged platform for peer-supported learning.

This suggests some difficulties implied in the idea that 'learning communities', actively engaged in learning with OER, can 'spontaneously' form around such resources. Consistently with the affordances of the Moodle platform itself, the OpenLearn sites are structured around units of 'content' (Moodle 'courses'), providing specific affordances amongst which communication and peer interaction appear as secondary possibilities. These, however, are essential to group/community formation and maintenance inasmuch as they allow purposefulness to be expressed and shared. The many cues for self-reflection and discussion with others included in the learning resources do not appear, in themselves, sufficient prompts to enable community formation outside the original context of those resources, namely, supported distance learning in HE. Indeed, in outlining 'communities of practice' as groups that cohere in three dimensions – 'mutual engagement; a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire', Wenger (1998 p. 73) highlights the role of purposefulness and leadership.

Participants in the pilots reported a 'shared something', 'above and beyond' the number of different purposes reported for their involvement, which include networking ('to meet like-minded people'), professional development ('to learn about topics relevant to work/studies') and development of IT literacy (learning how to use new tools). Indeed, the purpose of meeting others was wide-spread amongst participants, some of which reported emerging from the experience with a 'true feeling of knowing the others in the group'. Variety of purposes, therefore, does not seem to imply a lack of 'something in common that binds us together', as put by one of the participants interviewed. It was, however, the opportunity to discover this 'something in common' that was particularly valued, even in the face of different purposes, conflicting agendas and mutually-excluding beliefs. This is not to say that there was no purposefulness or purposes underlying the exchanges in the open site forums, but to highlight that there seems to have been no *finding out* or clear establishment of this amongst users.

Naturally this is not an idiosyncrasy of OER environments. Indeed, there is strong support in the literature on CMC in education to the role of 'moderation' in encouraging online participation, dialogue and productive work. Palloff & Pratt (2007) neatly encapsulates this view: 'The creation of community in the online class is not an "if we build, they will come" situation'. A core feature of different descriptions of the 'online moderator' ('facilitator' or 'teacher') is that of providing direction as well as keeping the focus and momentum of discussions, often with less focus on subject expertise than might be 'traditionally' expected from individuals fulfilling a teaching role. Interestingly, feedback from participant-learners in both pilots suggests that considerable value was placed on the availability of specialists or experienced professionals, with special emphasis on subject knowledge. Participant-learners

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[1] The forthcoming *OpenLearn Research and Evaluation Report* will include more up-to-date data and associated discussion of user types and purposes for using OpenLearn, but in this study I was concerned with sustained engagement with CMC tools, not occasional use or browsing of 'content'. This report should be made available via the link http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/workspace.cfm?wpid=8776

reported having welcomed 'the unique opportunity to have access to a knowledgeable specialist', as encapsulated in an interview remark. Value, however, was not assigned exclusively to the subject specialist, but also to the tools specialist who provided a measure of scaffolding in the early stages of the project, and, crucially, to fellow participant-learners, for their perceived knowledge, experience, enthusiasm, 'courage in revealing so much about [themselves]', curiosity or, indeed, contributions in terms of 'forcing' opportunities for group discussion by asking probing or challenging questions.

Interestingly, mishaps with the technology itself were generally viewed as having fostered 'the best bits of discussion', rather than unwanted or unhelpful disruptions to the ongoing process. This is profoundly meaningful. Unexpected events, either due to problems with the technology (e.g. server problems) or to uncertainty on the side of participants on how to behave or use the technology indeed provided interesting disruptions of the balance of power within the groups. Participants in the pilots agreed that they were all involved in tentatively charting new territory as far as behaviour protocols are concerned. FM is a multimodal tool, and initial planning of the pilots focused on the use of its video-based mode, whilst further features are available that participants gradually adopted as the experience progressed. The text chat, in particular, provided, in both pilots, a channel for a number of different exchanges: 'whispered chat' in which humorous and 'off-the-cuff' remarks were exchanged; requests for clarification; probing questions; register of reactions, emotions and otherwise fleeting thoughts; feedback to main speaker without interrupting the flow of the main discussion. All of these were exchanged against the video-led discussion on the foreground, evoking varying reactions. Whilst some of the feedback suggests that the text chat much contributed to the process of familiarisation with one another in the group, all participants reported having faced some confusion created by the perceived need not only to attend but to be able to respond to cues in more than one channel simultaneously.

The question of cues is crucial also in another way. Both pilots were clearly structured around specific tasks that, whilst requiring a measure of individual preparatory work, were essentially designed to foster discussion and peer-collaboration. Feedback regarding this structure clearly suggests the importance of leadership. All participant-learners placed clear value on the planned structure and direction provided by the convenors. Whilst some of these individuals presented themselves as experienced learners and/or professionals (in areas related or not to that of their respective pilot), with a few presenting themselves as 'not very confident' (in different aspects of the experience, or as individuals, when in private conversation with the researcher), all invariably valued the idea of 'stepping stones' guiding their work. Indeed, the overall experience of these pilots strongly supports the idea that 'leadership' is essential to learning, an idea further supported by the clear differences between the types of conversations carried out in these pilots and the message exchanges in the open site forums.

The observations above lend support to the idea that the 'teacher's role' is important to engagement with CMC also in an OER context, but it would seem that the role emerges, generally, in a different guise. Indeed, it emerges as multiple possibilities of shared leadership. Wenger claims that 'the kind of coherence that transforms mutual engagement into a community of practice requires work', and that 'the work of "community maintenance" is … an intrinsic part of any practice' (Wenger, *ibid* p. 74). This 'work' is that of leadership, but it is possible that it can take many shapes beyond that of 'personified leadership', the 'leader' embodied in the 'moderator', 'teacher' or 'subject expert'. This study suggests the prospect of leadership as a *process* which, while entailing a particular role, entails also the possibility that this

role may be taken up, at different times, by different participants in the broader group processes.

This possibility, however, does not circumvent the issue of validation of learning experiences within OER contexts, which remains an important practical question in the area, one which may indeed have a profound impact on education once practical avenues are found to address it. Traditionally, 'teachers' have been a major category of actors within the processes that support validation of learning inasmuch as they have held (and still retain) the role of learner assessors. Accordingly, the relationship between 'teacher' and 'student' is historically burdened with political significations. Nevertheless, there is, perhaps, more to be said that sheds new light on the role that the relationship between 'teaching' and 'learning' plays in the process of learning. From a fairly simplistic perspective, the presence of a teacher' may be part of the set of expectations that learners have regarding learning, a view indeed strongly represented amongst participants in this study. Despite concerted efforts on the part of educators to help students to become 'independent learners', such views can change only slowly. The comodification of education may be, unfortunately, contributing to hinder these efforts inasmuch as it is easily perceived as an encouragement for certification to become the primary goal of education, to the detriment of the process of learning itself. The current emphasis on social networking and peer support may offer potential in some ways, but, since community membership retains its essential role, and considering that 'membership' and 'community can take many different forms, peer support cannot itself be devoid of political workings. The experience of the pilots provides some support to that.

On the other hand, the feedback obtained in this research suggests that certification may not be the only source of validation of a learning experience in this context. Although feedback from the pilot studies indicates that certification might be a desirable outcome of (and purpose for engagement in) the process – 'it would be nice to have a piece of paper at the end', as put in an interview – further sources of validation in the sense of justification and support were suggested. Participants (learners and convenors) were generally very positive regarding the lack of 'formal assessment' in the shape of a graded assignment, indeed expressing various degrees of 'contentment', 'relief' and 'feeling free to just go with the flow'. As put by the convenor of one of the pilots:

> 'I haven't had to assess your learning. So that, of course, gave me a great deal of freedom. There weren't, as we have in education these days, learning outcomes that we were targeting. I guess I did have particular views in mind, but they were more to do with attitudes and awareness than things that could be easily tested.'

A short discussion of the merits of learning outcomes followed this statement, leading, interestingly, to an overall agreement that 'a more formalised process of taking-stock' might be helpful even within that context. Interestingly, despite the presence of the specialist/teacher/facilitator in the pilots, not a usual feature of OER environments, and despite the relatively structured nature of the experiences, participants not only qualified but indeed valued the experience as 'informal'. In particular, the ideas of 'simply belonging' – to a group of 'like-minded people' – and 'being part' – 'in a cutting-edge experiment' emerged not only as appealing but, crucially, as valued justification and confirmation of the experience for participant-learners and teachers alike. 'I felt I was truly part of a group, we really shared things in those discussions', commented one of the participant-learners. This suggests a conceptualisation of 'validation' as something that can be construed through the experience itself rather than an end with the experience as a means.

Surely there is a profound relationship between 'leadership', 'validation' and 'authority' in education, and an implication of these considerations is the need for a re-examination of the notion of 'authority'. Rather than a general, absolute quality of particular individuals, 'authority' could be viewed as linked with the ability of the individual to be listened to by others within a particular context, a possibility consistent with a view that 'there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination' (Bakunin, 2003, p. 20).

Conclusion

This discussion is clearly only the beginning of a much more complex enquiry. There is a vast literature approaching 'leadership' and 'authority' from many different angles, as there are many different views of 'assessment' and its role in the learning process, particularly in contexts construed as 'informal'. What I hope to have achieved is to highlight the need for critical debate on issues regarding 'authority', current arguments focusing on 'expertise' risk diluting its significance in subtle yet fundamental ways.

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