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Cultural Imperialism or Multicultural Mix? Promoting OER Reuse Through Collaboration

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Abstract:

The release of open educational resources (OER) from the Higher Education sector has increased in recent years (Carson, 2007) but might be perceived as dominated by English speaking organisations and built on their cultural and educational models. The usability and reusability of the content then could also be limited to English-speaking audiences. While there is certainly some truth in this view and legitimate concern about the potential for a "cultural imperialist" (e.g. posts such as Blackall, 2009) approach led from the easy global transfer of culturally-based material, the very openness in OER offers opportunities for exchanging the provider and consumer roles to offer a "multicultural mix".

In this paper we will look at the cultural messages that are contained in OER in the context of the variety of material that is on offer and the diversity of those involved in the field. This will then lead to a case study of an organisation that has embraced the opportunities that are offered to discuss a successful experience of OER provision and reuse, prompted by a dynamic collaboration between the distance education department (UnisulVirtual) of the Brazilian university Unisul, and the British OER initiative OpenLearn, of the Open University.
Through an active collaboration cycle involving mentoring and supporting OER *champions* at UnisulVirtual (McAndrew, P. and Santos, A.I. 2009), this collaboration resulted in a number of outcomes: the translation and adaptation of OpenLearn content from English into Portuguese; the publication of new content provided by the user in both English and Portuguese at OpenLearn and, most interestingly, a new mode of OER use that resulted in the enrolment of nearly 400 students to undertake an open content-based course in Brazil.

We will discuss a number of issues faced in the process of content localisation and adaptation, and how the user-collaborator ended up assuming a leadership role in terms of staff engagement and content provision. This role evolved into a self-sustainable content production, adaptability, use and reuse approach that can inform a framework for OER that embraces the opportunities for cultural communication and sharing.