Open Research Online

The Developing Role of the Educator in Web 2.0 and OER Environments

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Abstract

The proliferation of Web 2.0 social networking tools enables the creation of new open teaching and learning spaces. However the adoption of open social networks to encourage collaborative work around Open Educational Resources (OER) is a more recent phenomenon. This paper investigates the use of an open social forum associated with OER to facilitate informal and formal online activity between learners and teachers. The two participants who are lecturers are familiar with the use of closed and password protected online environments.

The developing role of the educator in open social networks is investigated through actual use of OER and open forums for informal learning and the lecturers' attitudes towards use for formal learning are explored. The findings suggest that one lecturer wanted to consider using open environments for formal learning and one lecturer did not. Although the findings in the main are positive, there is a suggestion that facilitative techniques (both human and activity based) need to be further developed to support and sustain learning communication with OER and associated open forums. This paper gives initial feedback about expected and actual usage of OER and open forums for co-operative and collaborative learning.

Introduction

The first stage of Open Educational Resources (OER) development has been discussed by a number of authors (Geser, 2007; Hylen, 2006; Smith and Casserly, 2006), however the association of social networking tools (advocated by Smith, and Casserly, 2006) to encourage collaboration with OER is a more recent development. This paper investigates how an open OER Repository, which includes Web 2.0 social networking tools could facilitate formal and informal online activity between learners and teachers who are used to closed and password protected online environments. The specific focus of the paper is on OER and associated open forums.

The paper reports on whether open forums attached to OER will be adopted instead of closed and password protected areas. The discourse is based on an intervention involving actual use of OER and associated open forums by Higher Education Lecturers (based in the United Kingdom).

One of the open OER Repositories, which includes open social networking tools is OpenLearn from the United Kingdom (UK) Open University (Open Content Initiative, 2006). This initiative was funded initially by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and was launched on 25th October 2006. OpenLearn has adapted in excess of 15,000 study hours of distance learning material from the university's curriculum offering and made these into OER units across twelve different topic areas. The OpenLearn OER materials are called 'units', and an open online forum (one of OpenLearn's social networking tools) is attached to each 'unit' of OER.

The learner can interact on an individual basis with the material or choose to work with others within the forums, attached to each unit of material. More information is available about OpenLearn (McAndrew and Hirst, 2007; Downes, 2006/2007; Wilson and McAndrew, 2009; Lane, Connolly, Ferreira, McAndrew and Wilson, 2010).

Remmele and Seeber (2009) envisage learners working with OER as a single learner or for self-

regulated learning. However another study (Wilson, 2008) suggested that a number of institutions were enthusiastic about the potential for learners to work both individually and in groups in open forums associated with OER units. This paper focuses on the facilitators' perspective; of how they actually did use OER and associated forums with learners in informal settings and would plan to use them in formal settings. This paper is a first step towards finding out how one of the networking tools, (the online forum) can be used with OER to support learners and teachers.

The study (the approach)

The study discussed here involves the actual use of open forums associated with two OpenLearn Human Computer Interaction (HCI) units for informal learning and plans for use for formal learning. To find out how OER and open forums function and whether they could be adopted for formal learning? The following questions are addressed:

- How does the use of the OpenLearn open forums different from usage of closed and password-protected forums used elsewhere
- How does interaction in open forum, differ to interaction in closed and password-protected forums.
- How does the role of moderator differ between open and closed and password-protected forums.
- Could open forums be adopted for university teaching?
- In what ways might open forums improve the learning experience for users

The data gathering techniques used were observation of online activity and semi-structured interviews. Data was collected from two Associate Lecturers (based in the UK) through semi-structured interviews using an approach advocated by Preece et al., (1994); Zand (1994); and Fowler (1993). Two Associate Lecturers in HCI familiar with usage of closed online forums discuss their experience of monitoring and contributing to two HCI open forums in the period 17th February to 1st March 2008 and in the period 3rd to 17th March 2008 respectively. The semi-structured interviews with each of the two Associate Lecturers were conducted in June 2008.

The interviews were analysed (using a method influenced by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997)) to identify categories that could be compared and contrasted.

Actual usage of open forums and associated OER for formal and informal learning

Having established that a number of institutions were interested in adopting OER and associated open forums (Wilson, 2008) it was necessary to ascertain how the lecturer's role might change within an open forum as compared to a closed and password protected facility. It was deemed appropriate to ask two Associate Lecturers who were used to traditional teaching at the Open University (in the UK) with closed and password protected forums to try out open forums in OpenLearn and comment on their experience. In the following sections the two Associate Lecturers discuss their experience of monitoring and contributing to two OpenLearn open forums associated with HCI OER units.

Differences between open forums and closed, password protected forums

It was important to ascertain the opinions of the HCI lecturers in relation to their experience with the

open forums. They were asked how use of the OpenLearn open forums differed from usage of the password-protected forums they used elsewhere. The first lecturer indicated that s/he '… ran the tutor group conferences ... And the difference … is that the people [in the open forums] … are very much anonymous. Whereas with the tutor groups … I know who they are, I know their background and the … students … are actually there with me for two years. … With the OpenLearn open forums there isn't any expectation that people will be there for any particular length of time. … They may come and read one piece of information that they are particularly interested in … They may go through the whole course… visit other modules within the OpenLearn website … But they are unlikely to keep returning to the same [open forum]. … I think once they've actually finished [the unit] … they may return once or twice for interest's sake but I don't think they will keep coming back. And certainly I wouldn't expect them to be there frequently and build up any kind of relationship with people there'. This lecturer finds it difficult to see a benefit in having an open forum attached to an OER unit.

The second lecturer suggested that the difference between open and closed forums is that with open forums '…You can get to content … and inevitably it has so much more benefit than [closed forums] which are heavily constrained. … in terms of lacking in content, … or to be able to contact people. I think open forums are easier in terms of interaction, … in terms of how you upload content and how you retrieve content'. S/he can see the possible benefits in having the content and interaction around the content in one space.

One lecturer can see benefits in having content and communications facilities within the same space. S/he sees the OER units as an additional resource to the interaction with learners whilst the other lecturer sees the OER units as standalone material that can be discussed in a separate closed space.

Interaction in open forums as compared to closed and password protected forums

The lecturers were asked how open forum interactions, differed to those in closed and password-protected areas. The first lecturer explained 'Well in some ways I think … you're less inclined to be sort of very chatty there. Because you really don't know the people that you are actually interacting with. And also I'm very wary with the OpenLearn open forums of not giving out any personal information which … in a sort of much more closed group which is password protected I would be less bothered about I think'. The openness of the forum environment appears to be creating a possible barrier to adoption by this lecturer. The use of a pseudonym may have made the open forum a more comfortable environment; though over a longer time period the existence of the characteristics of the true individual would have become apparent (Bayne, 2005).

The second lecturer appeared to be less intimidated by the open environment. 'I wouldn't mind personally replying to a query from a non OU student from … outside my tutor group so that's not an issue, as long as s/he doesn't jeopardise my role … within my own tutor group'. This lecturer is suggesting though that parameters for this type of interaction outside the tutorial group would need to be put into place.

Roles in open forums as compared to those in closed and password protected forums

The lecturers were asked whether it feels different to be a moderator in an open forum as compared to being a moderator in a closed and password protected forum. The first lecturer explained 'I wasn't actually taking on the role of moderator in that experiment that we did, I actually had the role of anyone who was coming into that space. … so in some ways I felt a little bit strange because I was putting forward postings … (not have them in the term of the moderator) just as [messages] anybody

else would post. … If I had been a moderator … I still would have found it slightly strange … because … there wasn't anything to structure the conversation around. We weren't aiming towards a particular assignment, or an activity, or anything like that. It would have been a case of just sort of floating a couple of ideas and seeing what happened, which effectively is what I was doing without the moderator tag'. This lecturer suggests that timetabled activity could drive interaction in the open forum.

The second lecturer agreed that the roles in open and closed forums were markedly different. '… yes, because … in [closed forums] … I have a much more defined role and [the learners] involvement in the forum is much more intensive. In an open forum I wouldn't think it would be as intensive, and … probably the definition of moderation would be more vague, I mean although you could moderate it in terms of making sure that people, … post the right types of comments and it doesn't contravene any of the rules for open forums. [In closed forums] there is a policeman's role … and there is the teacher's role and they're very defined. In open forums … I don't think it's as well defined. … I think [in] open forums… the role of the Moderator is … to get the student to become more interested in the subject … I think [we need] … to have a Moderator prepared to direct the student to more information and to stimulate that curiosity with more questions … providing information but at the same time opening doors to new forms of knowledge …'. This lecturer agrees with the other HCI lecturer that there is a need for an evident moderator.

Use of Open Forums for teaching and learning

The lecturers were asked whether they would be happy to use open forums for university teaching. The first lecturer indicates that s/he would be happy to direct students to the OpenLearn material but not to the open forums. 'I have actually used [OpenLearn}in … other teaching that … I'm engaged in [other than for the OU]. … I point [students] to … OpenLearn as being a good resource to have a look at. I'm quite happy to … point them at the OpenLearn material but I don't encourage them and wouldn't expect them to engage in the forums. ... Partly because they already have a set up which they're coming from where they can discuss the material themselves within the group'. This lecturer prefers his/her students to collaborate in closed and password-protected environments rather than in open forums.

The second lecturer was keen to use both the OpenLearn OER and the open forums though s/he indicated that there was very little HCI content available, which s/he could structure activity around. 'Yes, no problems, [however] … I think in terms of content [on OpenLearn] for my [HCI] area,] that you have very [little], but [with] … the right content, or … enough content … I wouldn't mind doing it'. This lecturer would find it difficult to use an open forum without more OER content.

Suggested improvements for open forums

The lecturers were asked in what ways open forums might improve the learning experience for users of OpenLearn. The first lecturer felt 'it's a bit of a two edged sword really … if they could actually sort of register and join in as part of a group that … becomes an online community of their own with known people. … an existing group who are using those forums for additional activity. … I found it a very public anonymous space and I wasn't comfortable actually working in that space in the sense of engaging with a lot of other people. So as I say I think there is an issue there, on one side I was very aware that I didn't want to have my personal details available, on the other hand if I had wanted to join into a group then I presumably would have to [register]. I think the problem comes when you have individuals using [OpenLearn] because individuals would typically not want to use forums. So I don't think that there's any particular drawback about the forums, I just think that they are not used'. This lecturer can see that preformed groups could make good use of the open forums. The approach this lecturer suggests is more in line with 'Learning Clubs,' which were made available in May 2008 after this intervention occurred. For example an individual who wants to invite other

learners in to discuss a subject of shared interest can set up a Learning Club. Alternatively a group of learners can use the Learning Club to meet online for discussion in the club forum, to share information, to set up events or store resources.

The other HCI lecturer wanted to consider using open forums in his/her teaching. 'I think the challenge for new … open forums is to make [them] an honest and visible alternative [to closed online conferences] and also compulsory within the path of learning for the student'.

The findings from this section suggest that the open forums would be more enthusiastically used if:

- they were less anonymous,
- a moderator was available,
- they were easier to find,
- a wider variety of content is made available,
- interaction was driven by activity,
- already formed groups could join on mass.

Conclusions

Although the majority of participants in Wilson's (2008) study were enthusiastic about adopting open forums approximately 25% would have preferred their learners to use the private communications facility provided by their own institution. A similar view is expressed by the first lecturer in this study. Certainly there are risks associated with open community forums and Ross (2002) discusses risks and ways to control the situation. The second lecturer involved in this study however agreed with the majority in Wilson's (2008) study and was keen to use open forums together with OER.

This study indicates that the use of Open Forums can be quite different to the use of closed and password protected areas. The two HCI lecturers suggested the need to drive social interaction in open forums with activity. The first HCI lecturer said that learners are unlikely to return to the open forum when they have completed their study of the OER unit. This HCI lecturer also appeared to be suggesting that the use of pre formed groups could make online forums appear less anonymous.

The lecturers raised a number of concerns such as:

- a difficulty in finding OpenLearn open forums at OER unit level
- possible barriers with registration and login in terms of the amount of personal information required.

Although these new communication tools are available, it remains to be seen how learners might actually interact in such open environments and what collaborative and cooperative learning experiences will be presented. The initial findings suggest that learners may need to have a moderator and a group established before using an open environment to exchange learning experiences.

This research provides early findings with reference to the potential benefits of OER and open forums. Although the potential use of forums to discuss personal catalogues of library books (in conjunction with LibraryThing) is indicated in Geser (2007) actual usage is not discussed. These results form a basis for more detailed research into the best ways to support communities of learners to collaborate and cooperate in an OER environment.

The impact on education of open social networked environments is yet to be fully realised. There are a number of hurdles that need to be overcome before the educational setting is truly transformed to

allow the role of the educator to develop in social networks. Future work will investigate the use of a variety of Web 2.0 social networking tools associated with OER with students and their lecturer within the HCI discipline area.

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