Reaching out with OER: the public-facing open scholar and the benevolent academy

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Abstract

Open educational resources (OER) and, more recently, open educational practices (OEP) have been widely promoted as a means of increasing openness in education, with implied social benefits. Thus far, such openness has been restricted by OER provision typically being supplier-driven and contained within the domains of higher education (HE), often comprising universities' release of a limited range of existing, sometimes dated, digital content. Furthermore, this content can be hard to find, with a low awareness of the existence of OER outside HE.

Seeking to explore ways in which OEP might achieve greater impact beyond universities we conceptualised a new ‘public-facing open scholar’ role involving academics working with online communities outside HE to source OER to meet their specific needs. To explore the potential and viability of this role we focused on the voluntary sector, which we felt might particularly benefit from such collaboration. We examined 50 representative communities for evidence of their being self-educating (thereby offering the potential for academics to contribute) and for any existing learning dimension. We shortlisted four communities for detailed evaluation; each of these was found to be self-educating and each included learning infrastructure elements, for example provision for web chats with ‘experts’, together with evidence of receptiveness to academic collaboration. Our findings indicated that there was considerable scope for the role of public-facing open scholar. We therefore developed detailed guidelines for performing the role and are currently piloting the concept with a further online voluntary sector community. To date, our pilot findings indicate that the role of public-facing open scholar is viable and well-received. However, the pilot process, conducted in a community where all participants are necessarily anonymous, has also highlighted the need to be aware of the impact of privacy constraints when choosing a community with which to work.

The implications of our findings are wide-ranging. Voluntary sector online communities offer one platform for the public-facing open scholar to realise the transformative potential of open education, raising awareness and increasing the use and re-use of OER by people outside HE. However, the scope for the role is not limited to the voluntary sector. Furthermore, whilst we have concentrated on the role of the individual academic, institutional dimensions are also relevant. For example, the public-facing open scholar role has the potential to help UK universities to satisfy their Public Benefit Reporting requirements under the Charities Act 2006 by supporting ‘specialists in higher education [in] listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with non-specialists’ from the public’ (HEFCE, 2007). Universities which formally recognise such activities as a component of academic output may, in turn, be seen as performing a new institutional role of a ‘benevolent academy’ which takes seriously its responsibilities to civic society.

1) The context

Discussions around openness in education increasingly involve consideration of OER. However, true openness in education will remain beyond the grasp of the OER movement as long as resources remain offered by Higher Education (HE) institutions on a top-down, supplier-led basis, rather than in response to the needs of a broader range of potential end-users. In 2008 Guthrie et al (2008) had observed that ‘understanding user needs is paramount but often neglected’ within the OER movement. By 2011 Walsh observed that little had changed. Furthermore, people who could most benefit from OER may be the least likely to encounter them, with awareness of OER being limited outside HE.

The shift of emphasis from OER production to Open Educational Practices (OEP) ‘which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers’ (Ehlers, 2011, p. 4) goes some way to moving from a supply-push, educator-driven mode of learning to a demand-pull mode of learning which is responsive to learners’ needs and interests, to use Seely-Brown and Adler’s (2008) distinction. Relevantly, Seely-Brown and Adler address the potential for OEP outside HE, suggesting that OEP are best enacted in ‘rich (sometimes virtual) learning communities’ which may involve ‘collaboration
between newcomers and professional practitioners/scholars’. This dynamic is at the heart of our own concept of the public-facing open scholar.

2) The concept
The public-facing open scholar role revives the age-old role of ‘public academic’, which became prominent in 18th century England through scientist Humphry Davy’s theatrical and engaging lectures at London’s Royal Institution of Great Britain. 21st century public academics including particle physicist Brian Cox, philosopher Michael Sandel and anatomist Alice Roberts have gained celebrity status by disseminating their work through radio, television and the Web. However, even these celebrity public academics exert a top-down influence, giving the public knowledge academics deem they need, rather than what they ask for. The new role of ‘public-facing open scholar’, inverts this relationship, with scholars identifying online communities who might benefit from OER in their specialist area, identifying participants’ expressed needs and sourcing OER to meet those needs on a demand-pull basis.

The public-facing open scholar role is an extension of Weller’s ‘digital scholar’ - ‘someone who employs digital, networked and open approaches to demonstrate specialism in a field’ (Weller, 2011, Chapter 1). It builds on his argument about the possibilities for public engagement offered by universities’ production of ‘long-tail’ content - the plethora of small learning objects produced by academics (for example videos, podcasts and articles) that Weller (2011, Chapter 7) suggests is ‘capable of gathering niche audiences, which collectively would fulfil a large element of a university's public engagement function’. The public-facing open scholar role is a way of ensuring that long-tail content reaches people who really need it.

3) Methods and findings
To assess the viability of the public-facing open scholar role we focused on the UK’s voluntary sector, which uses online communities to support fundraising, disseminate information and promote discussion. Our research was conducted in two phases and was intended to answer the following broad research question: ‘Does the voluntary sector offer any opportunities for a public-facing open scholar to extend their digital scholarship for public benefit?’

3.1 Phase 1 methods
Phase 1 comprised a scoping study of the types of online communities who might benefit from the activities of a public-facing open scholar, followed by a more detailed exploration of four case study communities, chosen by evaluating a shortlist of 25 communities against two criteria:

(1) The community should be open and accessible to all, allowing others to visit and further explore the case study communities.

(2) The community should have reached the ‘creative capability’ phase of its development, following Galley et al’s (2012) ‘Community Indicators Framework’ (see Figure 1). Galley et al (2012) suggest that fully developed communities share four indicators - ‘identity’, ‘participation’, ‘cohesion’ and ‘creative capability’ - which develop in sequence and can therefore be used to evaluate a community’s strength. Where all four indicators are present it is likely that the community would be receptive to the intervention of a public-facing open scholar.
On the basis of our scoping study we identified four representative communities to explore as Phase 1 case studies: Talking Point (http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/forum.php), Carers Trust (http://www.carers.org/forums), Talk about Autism (http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk) and Gransnet (http://www.gransnet.com/forums), which hosts the forums for Age UK. All four communities are completely open access.

3.2 Phase 1 findings

Our research question comprised three sub-questions:

(a) Are there any communities in the voluntary sector who have reached the ‘creative capability’ stage of their evolution and would therefore be receptive to the participation of a public-facing open scholar?

The case study communities show evidence of all four of Galley et al’s community indicators. Each community has a strong group identity with extensive use of shared language and references to the group as an entity, for example the widespread use in Gransnet of the term ‘Gransnetters’ for community members. Participation levels are high across all four communities, though Talking Point is particularly busy. (By August 2012 the community had 22,891 members and comprised 818 blogs with 3,117 entries plus a discussion forum with 44,776 threads and 618,637 posts.) Community cohesion is present in abundance in each community, evidenced through explicitly voiced mutual support and tolerance of divergent views, and a willingness to listen and learn from others. Multiple viewpoints, campaigning activities and collaboration in developing and promoting relevant petitions are common amongst the four communities, showing high levels of creative capability.

(b) Is there any evidence of voluntary sector communities having a learning dimension that might accommodate the activities of a public-facing open scholar and is there any precedent for academics working with voluntary sector communities?

All four communities feature some sort of educational dimension and/or academic activity. Each has a dedicated forum for education and/or research and Gransnet has an explicit partnership with academic publisher Pearson, who offer several free taster courses. Gransnet, Carers Trust and Talk About Autism also hold web chats. Posts by identifiable academics feature in all four communities, though these are fairly scarce.

(c) Is there a need for a public-facing open scholar or are communities entirely self-contained?
In all four communities members express a need for information and guidance. In some instances the communities themselves appear unable to meet these needs, indicating that the public-facing open scholar role would have value. Furthermore, the enthusiastic reception afforded to existing visiting academics, evident across all four communities suggests that members would welcome more extensive participation by academics.

4 Phase 1 implications: How to become a ‘public-facing open scholar’

Following our scoping study we conceptualised the steps that might be involved in becoming a ‘public-facing open scholar’:

(1) Find a community and identify its OEP-readiness;
(2) Listen to the needs of the community;
(3) Search OER repositories and collections for resources that might meet those needs then share them with the community;
(4) Disseminate information about the community’s unmet needs.

4.1 Find a community and identify its OEP-readiness

Some academics may have a pre-existing relationship with or interest in a particular charity established through personal experiences, regular donations or voluntary work. Indeed, it is likely that community participants will be particularly welcoming to academics who can empathise with the issues they are raising. Alternatively, an academic may choose to work with a voluntary sector community that is closely related to their subject specialism. It is important to check for any rules regarding participation in a particular community as these may restrict certain types of scholarly activity.

Not all online communities will be sufficiently well-developed to become ‘self-educating’ - i.e. receptive as a group to academics’ interventions in in sourcing OER and giving their time in other ways. It is therefore suggested that shortlisted communities should be evaluated against Galley et al’s Community Indicators Framework, as discussed in Section 2, and only those communities who have reached the ‘creative capability’ stage of their development should be considered ready for productive intervention by the academic.

4.2 Listen to the needs of the community

Operating on a demand-pull basis will require a public-facing open scholar to be attentive and responsive to the diverse, ever-changing needs of their chosen community. An academic may find their usefulness to a particular community, and the level of intervention required, ebbs and flows.

4.3 Search OER repositories and collections for resources that might meet those needs and then share them with the community

Having found OER that will meet a community’s needs academics should participate in any discussion about the resources and share information about where OER can be found and what resources might be available, as the basis for empowering community participants to self-source resources.

4.4 Disseminate information about the community’s needs

Finally, academics should disseminate information about their chosen community’s unmet needs within their own institution and elsewhere. In particular, they might lobby for further OER to be released to meet these needs. Social media such as Twitter and blogs might be a useful platform for disseminating such information.

Figure 2 summarises the various components and phases of the collaboration between public-facing open scholars and communities outside HE.
5 Phase 2 - piloting the role

Having firmed up the steps involved in being a public-facing open scholar we then piloted the role in a further voluntary sector community in order to assess its viability in practice.

5.1 Pilot methods

The pilot study is still ongoing and involves one of the authors performing the public-facing open scholar role in a child welfare community which uses an open online forum for peer-support and knowledge-sharing. The public can read all posts and consequently there are strict rules on confidentiality, with all names and any identifiable content being anonymised. This is a contentious policy and many members suggest they would prefer to have closed forums where they can discuss more freely. Every post on the forum is read by a moderator. The forum name is not being publicised here in respect for the community’s privacy, though the information is available privately to anyone wishing to verify this research.

The forum began in 2003 and has over 25,000 registered members, of whom about 1,600 actively and regularly use the website. The forum does not publish usage statistics but some members’ histories show they have been active participants for 9-10 years, contributing up to 10,000 posts. An initially evident core group of members have between 1000-8000 posts each. Typically, about 200-300 posts are made each day. Popular topics can be viewed 500-1000 times and receive 20-50 replies. While there is no learning infrastructure, the forum has dedicated areas for ‘Suggested Resources’ and ‘Research and Media Requests’.

To date, the pilot study has comprised the researcher:
• Evaluating the community against Galley’s community indicators framework;
• Making an introductory post explaining his connections with the community focus and his role managing university childhood & youth courses;
• Contributing his knowledge and experience in 26 posts between 7 September 2012 and 31 December 2012, 20 of which were in response to posts by other people and six of which were self-initiated. Five of the posts have been about free/open e-resources, six about topical items in the media, and the remainder have been diverse responses to other issues. The posts have generally been well-received.

5.2 Pilot findings

The pilot study has shown that the public-facing open scholar role is viable and has resulted in a better understanding of how a community might be selected and about what performing the role might involve. To date, some important findings have emerged:

• The community features all four of Galley et al’s community indicators and has reached the creative capability stage of its development.
• There are frequent posts requesting help, advice and information - 1000 in the last month. Often these are about how to do things or how to respond to unfamiliar events or circumstances. Reading these requests can be emotionally draining as many community members are seeking support in difficult situations.
• There is likely to be a interpersonal /counselling dimension to the public-facing open scholar role - extending beyond just pointing to a wiki or a book in an unmediated way. Small-chunk OER could form part of the response, but would be inadequate on their own. The requirement for a counselling dimension would be dependent on the type of community.
• The anonymity of the forum is a marked contrast to other social media which encourage users to post photos and personal information. An effect is to create a level playing field where no-one begins with automatic authority or status.
• The community members have quite a different approach to information-gathering than that found in academia and the researcher has learned about three new resources.

5.3 Implications of the first phase of the pilot

The pilot findings have highlighted the fact that performing the public-facing open scholar role is likely to require a long-term involvement and, in some communities (notably those focused on sensitive topics), mediating the links to resources will involve a substantial time-commitment. Above all, the pilot experience has emphasised the importance of step 2 in the role - ‘listen to the needs of the community’ - extending this to involve taking time to learn about the community culture and modes of interaction, in addition to reflecting on the extent to which any resources/links to resources need to be accompanied by an explanation of how the resources relate to the expressed needs of community members.

We had not foreseen the implications of working with a community which demands a high level of privacy and requires participants to be anonymous. For example, in this context it could be difficult, at least at first, for an academic to establish their professional credibility amongst community members when stating one’s profession in a signature is against community rules. In such cases credibility would need to be developed slowly, through sustained participation. In addition, an anonymous forum would be unsuitable for a scholar wishing to increase their own or their institution’s visibility and reputation.

6 Conclusion

The public-facing open scholar role has the potential to extend the beneficial impact of existing OER and to prompt institutions to release new OER in response to the needs of people outside HE, not least of all in the voluntary sector, where resources are often scarce. A public-facing open scholar, in identifying relevant OER repositories, could also help voluntary sector online communities to further develop their capacity to be self-educating and sustainable beyond the academic’s interventions.
However, the beneficial impact of this new type of academic may be compromised by the time demands of performing the role, notably when this clashes with the demands of paid work for the employing university. We share Weller’s (2011) assertion that the time is now right for universities to start recognising digital scholarship as an important part of academic output, according digital scholarship parity with more traditional outputs such as journal publishing. Furthermore, we propose that universities should formally recognise the activities of public-facing open scholars in reaching out with OER to benefit communities outside higher education, perhaps rewarding such activities through the staff appraisal process. Should such recognition and institutional support for the public-facing open scholar be afforded, a new role for learning institutions may be on the horizon – that of a ‘benevolent academy’ which takes seriously its responsibilities to civic society.

References


