Qualitative methods for researching teachers' (re)use of OER

Tita Beaven, The Open University

tita.beaven@open.ac.uk

Abstract

The literature on Open Educational Resources (OER) points to a need to further research how best to foster teachers' reuse of OER (Masterman and Wild, 2011), and how best to enable the infrastructure for sharing OER to appropriately support the needs of teachers (Davis et al., 2010).

This paper proposes variations around the themes of Peer Observation of Teaching and Professional Conversations as tools to investigate the use and reuse of OER by teachers. It reports on two qualitative studies on the use and reuse of OER by language teachers at the Open University UK. Teachers use LORO (loro.open.ac.uk), an open repository of OER for language teaching, to select their teaching resources.

Using Peer Observation of Teaching and Professional Conversations for data collection and a thematic analysis, the studies looked at how teachers used OER in their teaching, reworked existing resources or remix materials with others in LORO, and how they shared (or not) their new versions of the resources. The study also sought to understand the role of professional knowledge in the use and reuse of OER, and to explore the extent to which working with OER results in the adoption of other Open Educational Practices (OEP).

The study stresses the importance of using innovative qualitative methods alongside evidence from quantitative data in order to understand teacher engagement in OER reuse, and that this understanding is one of the key elements needed to "build on the last ten years of OER development, and move towards the creation of a virtuous circle of open educational practice".

Keywords

OEP, teachers, qualitative methods, staff development

Qualitative methods for researching teachers' (re)use of OER

Researching OER use and reuse

The literature on Open Educational Resources (OER) points to a need to further research how best to foster teachers' reuse of OER (Masterman and Wild, 2011), and how best to enable the infrastructure for sharing OER to appropriately support the needs of teachers (Davis et al., 2010). Whilst analytics provide useful quantitative data about OER use and, to a lesser extent, reuse (see for instance MIT, 2011), little research has so far been published on how individual teachers use and adapt OER.

This article reports on the methodology used in two qualitative studies on the use and reuse of OER by language teachers at the Department of Languages in the Open University UK conducted in 2011-12 and 2012-13. The teachers, who work part-time, use LORO (Language Open Resources Online, loro.open.ac.uk), an open repository of OER for language teaching, to select the teaching resources they use for their classes with students, using a blended approach

that combines Elluminate, a online audiographic conference tool, and face-to-face teaching (Comas-Quinn et al., 2011).

Although Google analytics and other statistical packages embedded in the LORO repository provide data about the numbers of users, resource views and downloads, etc., these provide little evidence, for instance, of whether teachers adapt or remix resources, or if they share these with others. Indeed, if looking only at the quantitative data available, one might be lead to believe only minimal reuse and sharing take place. This study set out to investigate precisely what the analytics did not show: how teachers used the OER from the repository, reworked them or remixed them in their teaching, and whether and how they shared them again with colleagues. This paper explains the qualitative methods that were used in the study, and argues that if, as Beetham has pointed out, the open is the enemy of the knowable (Beetham, 2011), analytics will not provide all the data needed to understand use and reuse of OER, and that researching OER and OEP can benefit from qualitative approaches such as the ones described here, which are more aligned to researching individual practice (Masterman & Wild, 2011).

Peer Observation of Teaching

One of the tools often used in teachers' professional development (and in initial teacher training) is peer observation of teaching (POT) (Bell and Mladenovic, 2008). Peer observation is a collaborative activity (Bell, 2005), and is a way of focussing on ordinary practices; at the same time, by developing good working hypotheses or foreshadowing problems that 'make the familiar strange' (Delamont et al., 2010), practitioners can turn the observation of personal experience into something that has "the potential to revise collective practice, ideas and lifeworlds, and to provide professional voice" (Peel, 2005, p.491). POT can also play an important part in ensuring that teachers don't become "isolated and routinized", enabling teachers to gain exposure to other teaching styles and approaches (Cosh, 1998).

POT is a tool that is often used in face to face teaching. However, in the context of blended teaching and learning, some have argued that the concept of POT needs to be extended to other media where teaching takes place. Thus, it should be broadened to cover areas such as curriculum design, the creation of teaching materials, online teaching, and the whole range of what teachers do to support learners (Hatzipanagos and Lygo-Baker 2006, Bennett and Barp, 2008, Swinglehurst et al., 2008). In the context of LORO, the Department of Languages at the OU has been developing ways to extend the concept of peer observation to OER, by promoting collaborative writing and peer review of OER (see, for instance, Alvarez et al., 2013).

Since the aim of this study was to describe and analyse the use and reuse of OER from LORO by OU language teachers, and the role of their professional knowledge in making sense of those resources and being able to adapt them if needed, it was important to understand phenomena in their setting, and to be able to capture and describe the phenomena from the perspectives of those involved. It was also important to look at specific instances of OER use, rather than gather data that was more general or abstract; for this reason, the principles of POT were applied to two aspects of teaching practice that are seldom shared with others, or indeed researched: lesson preparation, and reflection after the lesson, especially on resources used. It was felt that, in the process of preparing the lesson, teachers would be engaging directly with OER, and adapting them if necessary; in the act of reflection after the lesson, they might engage with issues of adaptation and the possibility of sharing their insights into OER use, or indeed, their resources.

Professional conversations

When planning the data collection, however, it was also important to account for or at least acknowledge the possible effects that the discussion about OER might have on the teachers' practice, not so much in terms of reactivity, although this was something that warranted attention, but in terms of how the researcher's interests as a practitioner in moving the Department of Languages towards adopting educational practices that are more open might affect the research. As Robson reminds us, one of the issues about carrying out practitioner research in the context of one's own work is that it becomes almost impossible to separate any changes from the research itself (Robson, 2011, p.7).

For this reason, POT was used in conjunction with another tool which sometimes is used after an observation: professional conversations. As Senge (1990) explains, these are 'learningful conversations [which] balance inquiry and advocacy' and provide opportunities for people to 'expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others'. In professional conversations, the role of the interlocutor is to ask questions, seek clarification (Schuck et al., 2008), and move the conversation beyond the teacher providing a mere rationalisation of their current practice in order to "maximize thoughtfulness on the part of the teacher" and explore, where relevant, alternative courses of action (Danielson, 2009).

The observations/professional conversations took place on Elluminate, which is also the platform currently used by teachers for their online lessons. The platform allows the facilitator to share resources with participants (in the form of whiteboards, for instance), very much as a slides might be used in a face-to-face setting, so that teachers were able to share with the researcher the slides they would use in their lessons. It also allows for the session to be recorded in order to be subsequently transcribed and analyses. An observation/professional conversation was carried out with each AL before and after a specific lesson in the case of the first study and, in the case of the second study, observations/professional conversations were carried out before and after two lessons. In the session before their lesson, the teachers shared the resources they were planning to use in the lesson with the researcher, explaining where the resources were from (LORO, the teacher's own, or from other sources) and if the resources had been/would be adapted at all for the class, and explained how they would use them. This first conversation shed light on the specific context of the lesson (timing within the course, assumed knowledge by students, aims) and on a number of aspects related to the teacher's practice, including how they perceived their role as teachers, the perceived role of materials creation in their teaching, and their experience of, and attitudes towards, sharing their resources. The second conversation, after the lesson, enabled the teachers to show the resources as they had actually used them in class, and included any changes made to the resources after our initial conversation and any changes made during the class itself (additional explanations or examples added to the resources, for instance). This also enabled us to discuss other ways in which resources had been changed, i.e. adapting the pedagogical pattern rather than the resource itself, for instance. In this second conversation, we also discussed further the usefulness or otherwise of sharing one's resources, or one's insights into resource use, with colleagues. In the second study, a second set of observations/professional conversations was conducted around a second tutorial, which enabled the triangulation of some of the data collected in the previous meetings, and further probing into some of the issues that had come up so far in the conversations.

Preliminary findings

The data of the first study was transcribed and analysed, using a categorising strategy and a thematic analysis. Some of the findings of the first study have been reported elsewhere (Beaven, 2013), and the data of the second study is still being analysed. However, the picture

that emerges from the observations and conversations with teachers about their use and reuse of OER in this particular setting is that teachers do indeed regularly make changes to the OER they take form the LORO repository, and that those changes are very personal, and are related to meeting the perceived needs of their learners, to making the OER fit their own teaching styles and preferences, and to making the resources their own. That, of course, is also why they are seldom shared again via the LORO repository. Also, the study revealed important issues about self-confidence and vulnerability, and it seems that some teachers are more comfortable sharing their resources, or discussing issues related to them, in the Departmental tutor forums, which operate like a virtual staffroom restricted to the teacher son that course, as this is a more private setting than the very public repository.

Conclusion

Although these are only preliminary findings, the aim of the current paper was to explain the importance of using qualitative methods that focus on specific instances of OER use and adaptation alongside evidence from quantitative data in order to understand teacher engagement in OER reuse, as this understanding is one of the key elements needed to "build on the last ten years of OER development, and move towards the creation of a virtuous circle of open educational practice".

References

Alvarez, I. Beaven, T. & Comas-Quinn, A. (2013). Performing languages: an example of integrating open practices in staff development for language teachers. Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society, 9(1), 85–92. (from: *http://oro.open.ac.uk/36101/*).

Beaven, T. (2013). Use and Reuse of OER: professional conversations with language teachers. *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society*, 9(1), 59–71 (from: *http://oro.open.ac.uk/36500/*).

Beetham, H. (2011). Impact model Diagram, JISC OER Synthesis and Evaluation project blog, from *http://oersynthesis.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2011/05/17/impact-model-diagram/* .

Bell, A. & Mladenovic, R. (2008). The benefits of peer observation of teaching for tutor development, *Higher Education,* 55(6), 735-752.

Bell, M. (2005). *Peer observation partnerships in higher education*. NSW, Australia: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc.

Bennett, S. & Barp, D. (2008). Peer observation - a case for doing it online, *Teaching in Higher Education,* 13(5), 559-570.

Comas-Quinn, A.; Beaven, T.; Pleines, C.; Pulker, H. & de los Arcos, B. (2011). Languages Open Resources Online (LORO): fostering a culture of collaboration and sharing. *The EuroCALL Review* (18) (from: *http://oro.open.ac.uk/31504/*)

Cosh, J. (1998). 'Peer Observation in Higher Education - A Reflective Approach', *Innovations in Education & Training International,* 35(2), 171-176.

Danielson, C. (2009). *Talk About Teaching! Leading Professional Conversations,* Corwin Press (SAGE), Thousand Oaks, Califormia.

Davis, H.C., Carr, L., Hey, J.M.N., Howard, Y., Millard, D., Morris, D. & White, S. (2010). Bootstrapping a Culture of Sharing to Facilitate Open Educational Resources, *Learning Technologies, IEEE Transactions on,* 3(2), 96-109.

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P. & Pugsley, L. (2010). The concept smacks of magic: Fighting familiarity today', *Teaching and Teacher Education,* vol. 26 (1), 3-10.

Hatzipanagos, S. & Lygo-Baker, S. (2006). Teaching observations: promoting development through critical reflection, *Journal of Further & Higher Education,* 30(4), 421-431.

Masterman, L. & Wild, J. (2011). *JISC-funded OER Impact Study*, JISC, from: *http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/elearning/oer/JISCOERImpactStudy ResearchReportv1-0.pdf*.

MIT, (2011). 2011 Program Evaluation Findings Summary, from: *http://ocw.mit.edu/about/site-statistics/11_Eval_Summary_112311_MITOCW.pdf* .

Peel, D. (2005). Peer observation as a transformatory tool?, *Teaching in Higher Education,* 10(4), 489-504.

Robson, C. (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers,* 2nd ed., Blackwell, Oxford.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline. The art and practice of learning organizations.* New York: Doubleday.

Swinglehurst, D., Russell, J. & Greenhalgh, T. (2008). Peer observation of teaching in the online environment: an action research approach, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning,* 24(5), 383-393.

License and Citation