Leveraging passion for open practice

Anna Comas-Quinn, The Open University

Joanna Wild, University of Oxford

Jackie Carter, University of Manchester

Anna.Comas-Quinn@open.ac.uk, Joanna.Wild@it.ox.ac.uk, Jackie.Carter@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

The 'OER Engagement Ladder' developed in a SCORE-funded study by Wild (2012) is a descriptive framework that models progression stages in lecturers' engagement with use of Open Educational Resources (OER). The framework captures 1) how engagement with OER manifests itself in people's behaviours and attitudes in various stages of progression from novice to expert users and 2) what factors impinge on a person's engagement with OER. In this paper we apply the framework retrospectively to the disciplinary context of language teaching. This exercise has two aims. First, we use the framework to assess the degree to which teachers at the Department of Languages, The Open University, UK, have engaged with OER reuse following the introduction of LORO, a departmental open repository of teaching materials for languages. We also reflect on the appropriateness of the support offered to teachers along the way. Second, we assess the usefulness of the framework itself for similar applications in the future.

Keywords

OER use; benefits; OER framework; OER repositories

Introduction

OER initiatives have attracted significant attention in the last decade, and underpin the practice of open scholarship (see Weller, 2011). OER sit well alongside the growing open access policy initiatives that are supporting the freeing up of publicly funded research and knowledge. The OER Impact Study (Masterman & Wild, 2011; White & Manton, 2011) explored, in the UK, the impact of releasing content as OER. Wild & Masterman identified benefits of using OER in teaching in Higher Education and listed factors conducive to the uptake of OER. The importance of institutional support in raising lecturers' engagement with OER and open educational practices was acknowledged, with the study recommending that institutions "capitalise on existing professional development activities in order to foster a voluntary culture of sharing and reuse."

The framework

Building on the findings from the OER Impact Study, Wild (2012) investigated how UK institutions promote OER among lecturers and how lecturers progress from novice to expert OER users. A framework developed as a result of the study (Figure 1) models progression stages in lecturers' engagement with OER reuse. The four stages: 'no engagement', 'piecemeal', 'strategic' and 'embedded' describe lecturers' behaviours in using OER. The three steps: 'understanding', 'need' and 'reflection' each represent a change in lecturers' awareness with regards to OER, which, in turns, triggers a change in behaviour and takes a person from one stage to another.

Figure 1: The OER Engagement Ladder (Wild, 2012; CC BY).
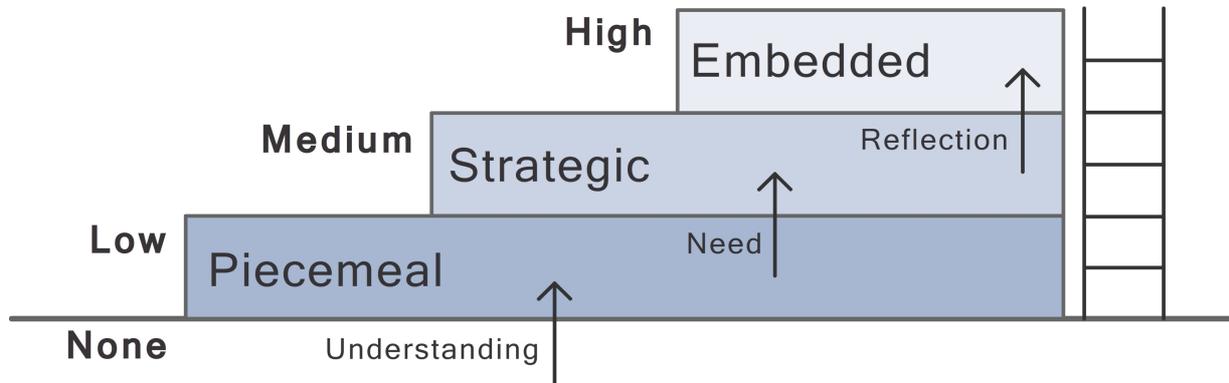
LORO: Languages Open Resources Online[1]

LORO is a repository of language teaching resources developed at the Department of Languages, Open University, UK, in 2009. It allowed materials for online teaching developed by the Department to be stored and accessed by its 300+ teachers, and for them to share their own materials with colleagues and the language community. The implementation of LORO was planned in two stages: first, creating and populating it with a large collection of resources developed by the department, and second, a programme of user engagement activities to embed its use (see Comas-Quinn et al, 2011, and Comas-Quinn, 2012). At the end of 2012, LORO contained over 2000 resources for seven languages.

In the 'supported open learning' system used at the Open University, learning design and materials development is undertaken by lecturers, whilst 'associate lecturers' (here referred to as 'teachers') deal with delivery and learner support. LORO was developed to enable teachers to access and share teaching materials more efficiently.

Retrospective application of the framework to a disciplinary context: Languages

In the following sub-sections, we discuss user engagement activities undertaken as part of LORO implementation and map them to the stages of the OER Engagement Ladder. Each sub-section provides a brief description of a particular stage in the framework, followed by details on the engagement activities that support this stage. This mapping took place after the implementation of LORO and provides a good case study of how the OER Engagement Ladder framework can be applied.

> **1. No engagement:** At this level lecturers are not conscious of OER but they use non-OER digital resources to enhance teaching and learning; they share and reuse educational resources with their colleagues, and often direct students to online resources as supplementary materials.

Before LORO, teaching resources at the Department of Languages were made available to teachers through a Moodle page for each course. This largely restricted sharing, as teachers could not easily see or download resources for other courses. There was a limited amount of informal sharing amongst colleagues who taught the same course or between novice teachers and their mentors. There were also some partial solutions, encouraged by local staff managers,

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[1] http://loro.open.ac.uk/

to facilitate sharing on a more systematic basis (e.g. uploading materials onto a website or distributing materials in a CD format), but a need for a dedicated solution for the whole department was becoming obvious.

> **A. Understanding:** Lecturers are introduced to the concept of OER and open licensing. They begin to distinguish between 'free stuff on the web' and OER in terms of what they can/ cannot do with the resources they find. They are reassured that senior management in their institution encourages sharing and reuse of OER.

Reusing material created by others was already part of teachers' practice, so the added value of LORO and open licensing needed to be communicated clearly. The key arguments included: being able to access a much larger pool of materials, and the possibility to share one's own material with other teachers in a more efficient and sustainable manner. As the department itself owned the project, it was clear to teachers that the institution supported this new way of working.

Dedicated workshops, which built on existing staff development opportunities, ran throughout 2010-12 to highlight the benefits of OER sharing and reuse, give teachers opportunity to voice their concerns, and encourage discussion about this new form of practice.

For those less interested in LORO and OER, a different approach was trialled. The focus was placed on a substantive project with open practice being of a secondary nature, but with an expectation that resources created during the project would be contributed to LORO as OER. Necessary aspects of writing for open publication were, therefore, covered in the project.

> **2. Piecemeal**: Lecturers start searching for OER alongside other resources available on the Web; they explore what is available 'out there' OER-wise in their own discipline. They continue to use what they find mainly as supplementary materials for students to use in their own time. Lecturers are generally more likely to reuse OER if it is produced locally, deposited in institutional repositories or recommended by trusted people (e.g. learning technologists, librarians).

LORO was designed to provide a local solution relevant to the needs of language teachers at the OU; hence teachers' expectations were collected in a user requirements analysis at the start of the project. A good number of teachers were directly involved in project activities, which created a sense of ownership and investment in the project and also gave teachers an insight into what sharing and reuse of OER might mean for their own practice.

Training on the use of LORO became part of the online teaching training program and reference materials were created for users to access at the point of need. Additionally, a 'LORO champion' for each course was appointed to support colleagues. This ensured that all teachers received information on 1) where to find relevant resources, 2) how to search, browse and download them and 3) how to upload their own resources, if they so wished.

The approach to introducing LORO proved successful as evidenced in the data (Comas-Quinn, 2012). Six months after the launch of LORO, a survey (n=173) revealed that 87% of respondents were using LORO to find and download materials for the module they taught, and 33% to look at materials for other modules, languages and levels. A year later the figures (n=161) changed to 77% and 37% respectively. This seemed to indicate that while fewer teachers were using LORO there was an increase in those who were venturing beyond their own module and browsing other materials to get inspiration or to adapt them to their needs.

> **B. Need**: Engagement with OER reuse is reinforced at the point of designing a course, especially if the course is to be delivered online or in a blended mode as this requires a considerable amount of digital resources.

This stage of the framework doesn't map directly into the context of language teaching at the OU. As explained earlier in the paper, OU teachers are not directly involved in the process of course design. They use LORO at the course delivery stage to find materials to support their online teaching sessions. However, there are indications that the increased awareness of OER in the department in general led to some changes in the practice of course designers, who now make more extensive use of CC-licensed images and adapt and reuse existing resources across courses.

> **3. Strategic**: Lecturers' searches for OER become more strategic and often move outside the comfort zone of an institutional repository; hence support in locating relevant sources of OER should be provided. Lecturers start to incorporate OER into their core teaching materials, reusing resources either 'as they are' or with minimal adaptations (e.g. changes to the format, wording, labelling of images). Support should be offered to lecturers with respect to double-checking licensing terms of resources they want to reuse and attribution of resources to their original authors (e.g. through librarians, learning technologists).

Generally, teachers seem to fall into three categories: 1) those who do not engage with LORO (a minority), 2) those who use LORO to find materials for their teaching (the majority), and 3) those who are more active in their use of LORO (a minority) by uploading own materials, searching for open content outside LORO or seeking further information about OER. In order to capitalise on this enthusiasm, a newsletter is published regularly, pointing teachers to relevant seminars, conferences and training opportunities. To our knowledge some teachers, for example, took part in a short fellowship programme on OER offered by SCORE[2]. For these more advanced users, further support, especially with respect to copyright and attribution, would be desirable but is not yet formally established.

> **C. Reflection**: Lecturers' reflect upon their use of OER and how it benefited them and their students. If outcomes of this reflective process are positive, lecturers are more likely to continue reusing OER or even start sharing their own resources openly. Sharing one's own materials publicly triggers, in turns, legitimate use of all third party content in the resources to be shared i.e. lectures start giving preference to OER over 'free stuff on the Web'.

Qualitative data gathered from LORO users (Comas-Quinn, 2012) reveals increased awareness of the benefits of sharing and reusing resources, with motivations ranging from the utilitarian (time-saving: "I check what other teachers have done to teach the same topic or a similar structure"; or inspirational "even if I don't find anything I can use, it starts the ideas flowing in my head") to the developmental (validating one's own practice: "Seeing other work enables you to judge your own, and reassures you that you are doing the right thing" or sharing as a driver for quality: "LORO really pushes me to produce better materials").

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[2] http://www.open.ac.uk/score/

> **4. Embedded**: OER are fully embedded into lecturers' practice. Lecturers not only reuse OER in their teaching but also re-share resources they adapt and / or provide feedback on a resource to their original authors. Lecturers also share their own resources under open licenses and seek feedback from others. Some become themselves advocates of open practices. Sharing, re-sharing, aggregation of, and discussion around resources happens mainly within smaller, discipline-specific networks and communities supported by dynamic and committed stewards.

A minority of LORO users have moved from consuming content in LORO to sharing their own content openly. The possibility of sharing was presented to users from the start of the project, and some have availed themselves of the opportunities to take part in professional development activities around sharing and peer review of resources. It can be argued that those who make more use of the tool are more invested and therefore more eager to see it succeed, even though their reasons for sharing might vary considerably.

There are isolated examples of sharing back a resource that has been adapted back to the repository. Although commenting on resources within LORO is not frequent, conversations around shared materials and pedagogy take place elsewhere, for example in a teacher forum dedicated to a particular course.

Some of the most enthusiastic LORO users have become OER advocates, and have either written training materials for other teachers at the institution or volunteered to take part in dissemination activities, including writing papers or presenting their OER-related experiences at teaching events and conferences.

Discussion

This exercise allowed us to assess how language teachers at the OU have engaged with OER reuse following the introduction of LORO. During this process, we have reflected on the appropriateness and completeness of the support offered.

The main strengths identified include: 1) incorporating training on LORO and OER into professional development activities, 2) promoting investment from users by providing opportunities for them to be involved in the project, 3) providing information about LORO and OER through multiple channels, 4) incorporating the development of open practices into projects that are not primarily about OER and 5) providing personal and professional development opportunities for active users who can progress to become trainers, author academic publications or present their work on OER at teaching and research events.

We also identified a couple of areas for improvement: 1) available library support needs to be incorporated into the processes associated with reuse and sharing of OER by teachers, and 2) formalising a stewarding role is necessary to sustain teachers' engagement with LORO.

Three further considerations have emerged during this exercise, one related to the progression in engagement and the other two to the framework itself.

First, support around LORO has focused mainly on raising teachers' understanding of OER and encouraging piecemeal reuse of resources produced locally. It would be interesting to investigate whether OER practices developed by teachers in this local context, have transferred to other contexts in which teachers work (most associate teachers also work in other educational institutions).

Second, although the framework presents a linear progression along the ladder, teachers will respond differently to the same support and training depending on their individual dispositions, personal histories (Billet and Somerville, 2004 cited in Comas-Quinn, 2011), and beliefs about

teaching and learning. Some will quickly move up to the top of the ladder, maybe even skipping a step, whilst others will critique and reject the idea of OER reuse. Most will probably find themselves at some times nearer the 'low', at other times closer to the 'medium' or the 'high' on the ladder, depending largely on a context in which they operate, a particular teaching situation, or a stage in their own professional development.

Third, the framework deals only with reuse and not sharing of OER. Most of the institutional training and support, however, will have both of these aspects in focus. Therefore the framework itself would benefit from complementing it with the aspects related to OER sharing.

Future work

This paper has focused on the retrospective application of the framework to a single disciplinary context (language teaching) at a single organisation (the Open University), a relatively straightforward teaching context and community. There is scope however for applying it to more complex teaching scenarios.

There is currently a 'skills deficit' (MacInnes, 2009) in Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences and Nuffield (2013) will be supporting the discipline over the next five years through its Centres of Excellence in Quantitative Methods, whose aim is to develop and deliver a wide range of training activities to embed quantitative skills training. Early feedback from this developing community shows that sharing is not yet widespread, and the institutions involved are reluctant to be fully open as they will also be competing for students. Nonetheless there is an understanding that a shared approach would be beneficial, and sharing through OERs is already starting to happen (see quantitativemethods.ac.uk).

The framework presented in this paper could be applied to this growing community as it develops its practices, although there would be specific challenges: dealing with a large number of organisations, managing the diversity of the OER created, and dealing with the collaboration versus competition conundrum. Nevertheless, a systematic approach to identifying and developing support structures and activities could help fast-track open practice for this community and allow them to benefit significantly from the experience acquired through recent OER programmes.

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