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The Open Translation MOOC: creating online communities to transcend linguistic barriers

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Abstract

Language can be a barrier to the reuse of Open Educational Resources (OER), so translation and localization might be a way to facilitate reuse or even a necessary preliminary step. One obvious solution to the considerable effort required to translate OER is to use crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing translation is already an established and successful solution to making content more accessible in some large-scale, high profile open projects such as Wikipedia (*Wikipedia Translation*) or TED talks (*Ted Open Translation Project*). In this paper we describe a MOOC in Open Translation Tools and Practices that was offered by the Department of Languages at the Open University UK in 2012. We examine participant expectations and outcomes, and consider the suitability of a MOOC for bringing together distributed communities around a common endeavor, in this instance, the translation of open content.

Keywords

MOOCs, OER, Open Translation

Introduction

This paper describes a MOOC in Open Translation Tools and Practices offered in 2012 by the Department of Languages at the Open University, UK, and considers the role that this type of open course can play in bringing together volunteers interested in contributing to the translation of educational open content. The first part highlights the need to translate and localize open educational content, presents some examples of OER translation initiatives, and makes the case for crowdsourcing and an open translation approach as a viable solution to this challenge. After describing the Open Translation MOOC and the expectations and experiences of its participants, the paper concludes with some reflections on the suitability of MOOCs as community forming tools around OER projects.

The language barrier

Language is one of the main barriers to the reuse of Open Educational Resources (OLNet, 2009), although this problem is often underestimated, particularly by speakers of English, a so-called global language. There is a tacit, though false, assumption when publishing openly in English that the rest of the world is able to access the materials. However, we know that English is the main language only for around 375 million people, whilst another billion approximately use it, with different degrees of proficiency, as a second or foreign language (Graddol, 2000). And whilst speakers of English as a second or foreign language might be able to read text-based OER, audio-visual materials such as recorded lectures or webinars can be considerably harder to understand. That still leaves around 80% of the world's population unable to access

educational content published in English.

Thus, if OER are available in a different language from that spoken by potential users, a preliminary step to reuse might have to be their translation or localization (i.e. adapting the content to a particular region). The following are some examples of different initiatives that have sought to tackle the issue of translating OER for reuse.

MIT has partnered with different organisations to translate its OpenCourseware (OCW) materials into Spanish and Portuguese (with *Universia*), Simplified Chinese (with China Open Resources for Education, CORE, a consortium of Chinese universities), Traditional Chinese (see below), Thai, Persian, Turkish and Korean. The Creative Commons license used allows translation into another language as long as the license's requirements (BY-NC-SA) are met, and MIT has made it a prerequisite that a disclaimer is added to the translation to guard against legal challenges in case of translation inaccuracies.

In the case of Chinese, it was the enthusiasm of Lucifer Chu, Chinese translator of *The Lord of the Rings*, that led to the creation in Taiwan in 2004 of the Opensource OpenCourseware Prototype System (*OOPS*), a volunteer organization which set out to translate the MIT OCW materials into Chinese. Through online contacts and media coverage the organization attracted volunteer translators and extended its work to resources from other institutions, which led to a two year grant from the Hewlett Foundation in 2006. By 2007 more than 2200 translators from over 22 countries had completed the translation of over 500 of MIT's courses (Lee, Lin and Bonk, 2007).

Another example is UnisulVirtual, the distance education campus of UNISUL, a Brazilian university that started collaborating with the Open University (OU)/UK in 2007 to increase the number of courses that were offered openly in Brazilian Portuguese (Lane, McAndrew and Santos, 2009). UnisulVirtual translated a number of business and management, IT and digital multimedia courses from the OU's OpenLearn from English into Brazilian Portuguese, and also translated some of their own courses into English, which were then made available openly through LabSpace (see *UnisulVirtual courses*).

More recently, *open.michigan* at the University of Michigan, US has called on the languages community worldwide to translate a number of microbiology and disaster management video resources created by the institution in collaboration with institutions in Ghana and East Africa respectively. The call for help points out that 'the [disaster management] lectures were designed to be used across the East Africa region, but their current English-only captions and narration make them largely inaccessible to regional French- and Swahili- speaking countries' (Ludewig Omollo, 2013). The campaign makes use of open tools such as Google Translate, YouTube and *Amara* to speed up the process, and plans to engage local participants through a marathon translation competition or *Translate-A-Bowl*.

Open Translation

Open translation describes the practice or discipline that develops at the intersection between open content, open source software and open production models (Hyde, 2009). It makes use of free/open software and open collaboration to engage a distributed volunteer workforce in the translation of resources that have been published openly on the web. The aim of open translation is to make resources available to the widest possible audience and to do it through the use of open source tools, thus avoiding the creation of 'a critical bottleneck in the open

knowledge ecosystem' (Hyde, 2009) that the use of proprietary software might impose. Its open production model encourages peer participation and draws on collective expertise and thus crowdsourcing, similar to the way in which Wikipedia has led to a reevaluation of the role of the expert or Global Voices, a citizen media project, has turned citizens into journalists.

Crowdsourcing translation is already an established and successful solution to making content more accessible in some large-scale, high profile open projects such as Wikipedia (*Wikipedia Translation*) or TED talks (*Ted Open Translation Project*). In the project that forms the backdrop to this contribution we set out to assess whether

- a. an online community of volunteer translators could be assembled around the exploration of open translation tools for the translation of open educational resources, and
- b. a MOOC, an open online course providing a timeframe and structure could act as a catalyst for bringing interested individuals together.

In the following section we describe the Open Translation MOOC (OT12) and present some data on participants, their expectations and their evaluation of the experience.

OT12

OT12 was conceived as a MOOC, or open online course, and was developed and presented by the Department of Languages at the OU UK, in the autumn of 2012. It lasted eight weeks and was organized as a traditional online course, with stated aims, weekly tasks and readings, webinars led by experts, and online discussion forums where participants could exchange ideas, support each other and seek help from the facilitators. Although there was the option of obtaining a certificate of participation (linked to the participant's online contributions), none of the activities were assessed formally.

The course tried to stay true to the openness in its title by using an open platform, LabSpace, part of the OU's OpenLearn site and published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license. The resources used as background reading and for the translation tasks were OER, an approach that was guided both by practical considerations (copyright) and by the fact that one of the aims of the course was to introduce participants to open resources and open practices. The main aim of the course was to introduce participants to open translation and to some of the open tools that can be used to facilitate the open translation process, such as [Google translation toolkit](#), translation workflow tools such as [Transifex](#), and the video subtitling platform [Amara](#).

Using Lane's tripartite classification of MOOCs (Lane, 2012) it is easy to decide that OT12 was primarily a task-based MOOC (rather than a network-based/cMOOC, or a content-based/xMOOC), with an emphasis on skills acquisition based on the completion of a series of tasks. The network aspect was also salient but for most participants interaction took second place to trying out the tools and engaging in task execution. The facilitators were upfront about the exploratory character of the course, and the 'learning by doing' approach that underpinned OT12.

Participants: expectations and experiences

There were around 300 active students in the first week of the course, although nearly 600 had registered and received biweekly digests and updates from the facilitators.

A language profile questionnaire completed by 196 participants in the first week of the course provided the following data: the majority of participants had Spanish (32%) or English (22%) as their main language, with other sizeable linguistic minorities present (Brazilian Portuguese, 11%; Greek, 9%; French, 7% and Italian, 6%). Most participants were expecting to translate into either English (59%) or Spanish (24%), and almost 70% of them claimed to be highly proficient in their second language. In terms of their familiarity with translation, almost all respondents claimed to have experience of translation, either professionally (43%) or informally (48%), with only 8% of respondents having no previous experience of translation.

Participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire during week one stating their expectations for the course and providing some information about their motivation and previous experience of online learning. According to the survey data (n=56 with a response rate of 19%) the majority of respondents (73%) joined the course to learn more about translation. Only a minority had a specific interest in open tools and resources or in second language learning. Most had never taken part in a MOOC and in fact over half of respondents had not come across the term before they engaged with OT12. Only 3 respondents had previous experience of online learning. Nearly two thirds of respondents saw managing their time or their workload as the main obstacle to participation in the course. For a fifth of respondents the main challenge envisaged was the technology and for six of them, it was working collaboratively, either because of a preference for working individually or because of anxiety caused by lack of knowledge of the topic. Asked to identify what would be a successful outcome of their participation in the MOOC, most respondents mentioned gains in knowledge related to translation, although some were more specific and hoped that completing OT12 would enhance their professional profile. For a few the main benefit was in the connections and networks that could be forged through participation in the course. A large percentage of respondents were vague in their answers, mentioning 'completion of the course' and 'learning' as satisfactory indicators of success.

During the last week of the course participants were directed to a short evaluation questionnaire, which 35 of them completed. Most respondents felt their expectations for the course had been fully (46%) or partly (51%) met. The additional comments were divided between those who felt they had had insufficient time to dedicate to the course and those who were not entirely satisfied with some aspect of the course such as level of guidance, lack of support from peers, or more emphasis than expected on the 'openness' aspect. Respondents had enjoyed learning about open tools and resources, taking part in the webinars and sharing and networking with others. They had been less happy with their own lack of time to work on the course and, in some cases, with particular aspects of the course like length of tasks or lack of personalized feedback. In spite of the initial anxieties, only one respondent mentioned problems with the technology. And paradoxically when asked to suggest improvements to the course, many respondents wanted more content and tasks, in spite of recognizing time pressures as one of the biggest challenges.

Although the overwhelming majority of respondents (85%) considered the need to collaborate online as a positive aspect of the course, many acknowledged that participants could have been more proactive in this respect. Yet, for many this was their first experience of online learning. The main comment in relation to collaboration was that sharing ideas and benefitting from the knowledge of others was positive.

When asked what they had gained most from the course, 82% and 76% respectively selected 'awareness of open educational resources' and 'better understanding of translation tools'. The chance to translate and network with like-minded people was also appreciated by about half of respondents.

Discussion

We understand MOOCs as events (Cormier, 2010) or, following the principles of connectivism, catalysts for starting conversations within a network (Downes, 2011), and therefore felt that a MOOC might be a suitable way of engaging online communities of translators, language teachers and learners, and those interested in OER, in the crowdsourcing of translations for OER.

Our MOOC proved that it was possible to bring together a community interested in finding out more about open translation and to use the MOOC as a way of widening the reach of that community. Balch (2013) hypothesizes that people are more likely to enroll in a MOOC than in a comparable university course, simply because there is no cost associated and no changes required to their lifestyle. Equally, they are more likely to withdraw from the course or to follow it only partially precisely because their economic and personal investment is so much lower. This is reflected in our MOOC, where the level of involvement from each of those who registered their interest varies considerably from those who participated actively throughout, to those who signed up and received the biweekly digest but did not take part in the activities (it is interesting that only one request to unsubscribe from the digests was received from the 600 people in the mailing list). The level of participant investment varied considerably and participants chose their own paths, more or less visible, through the MOOC.

Whilst the MOOC did, to some extent, fulfill its role of bringing a community together, effective collaboration was not consistently achieved so the outcomes in terms of translation output were variable. Collaboration in the Portuguese team was particularly effective due to the high digital literacy skills shown by some of the members of the Portuguese community and the leading role taken by a couple of its most active members (“Hi everyone on the Portuguese team (...) so happy to see that we have finished the translation! Well done everyone!”). In other teams, particularly those with fewer members, collaboration was less smooth and fruitful.

However, in the evaluation of the MOOC, participants commented on how it had helped them discover volunteer translating projects, which some had joined or were thinking of joining (‘I was impressed by the idea of Global Voices, and I plan to investigate that further’), and how they had gained an understanding about OER, Creative Commons, and the open translation ‘movement’ (‘[it was surprising] that this sort of thing was going on in such a wide scale.’). In that sense, a MOOC such as OT12 might have a role to play in bringing together professional or new translators so they can find out about the opportunities to volunteer as translators of open resources. Indeed, since the end of the MOOC, we have used the mailing list to contact the community about open translation opportunities such as the *video translation challenge* recently announced by *open.michigan* at the University of Michigan, US.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that translation and localization are important to increase the portability, visibility and reach of OER. However, establishing the scope of translation in terms of suitability for different contexts and quality assurance is one of the challenges. For example, localization, or adaptation to a context, is often required to make a resource usable for different countries or areas. This was the case with the adaptation of the OpenLearn module *Succeed with Math* adapted for use in US community colleges as part of the *Bridge to Success* project – even in the same language length and weight measurements had to be adapted to the US system from the British system for example.

We have provided some insights into how the world of open education can harness existing open translation models and learning based on the use of social media, such as it happens in MOOCs, to further the openness agenda. MOOCs can be used as tools to raise awareness about open translation and the need to transcend linguistic barriers, but ultimately systems need to be put in place to enable the work of volunteer communities and help them prioritise translations according to different criteria: need, preference, popularity... A translation hub for OER, along the lines of some of the well-established crowdsourced translation projects (Wikipedia, TEDTalks, Global Voices), would help achieve such a result.

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