Editorial: The potential of openness for engaging communities

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Abstract: This special issue is the fourth devoted to Open Educational Resources (OER) and the third to be drawn from papers presented at the main annual UK-based OER conference. For this special issue, the editors selected papers from the OER13 conference, held in Nottingham in March 2013. The main conference themes were Evidence, Experiences and Expectations, and the chosen papers exemplified some of the ways in which OER can link communities both inside and beyond Higher Education.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources

Introduction

Open Educational Resources (OER) have firmly entered the discourse around Higher Education (HE) (and education in general) but, as a relatively new phenomenon, there are still many who question what value they bring and to whom. The OER13 conference held in Nottingham in March 2013 proposed the themes of Evidence, Experiences and Expectations with the aim of bringing together current work on OER and assessing progress in the journey towards openness in education. From the many contributions that addressed those themes, the editors have selected six papers for this special issue as examples of how OER can provide value to a wide range of contexts and communities. This may go some way to answering those doubters, although expectations are still varied.

The special issue starts with a perspective piece from Martin Weller, who makes

a wider argument about the consequences of openness (in HE at least). He examines many forms of openness across all parts of the academic endeavour that Universities pursue, and then contrasts the tensions between openness as providing public goods and the use of openness as a means to support commercial business models (likened to 'openwashing' at its extremes). He then compares this global battle of ideas and practices around openness to other debates, for example those around 'green' ideas and practices ('greenwashing' at its extremes). While optimistic that openness will prevail he is also realistic in assuming that there are many more battles to be fought over many more years and that 'success' cannot be taken for granted.

The six papers from OER13 included in this special issue address open ideas and practices at a local rather than global level but equally reflect some of the same tensions. They all highlight the ways in which openness can connect individuals, communities and organisations in new and varied ways. The first three papers largely deal with initiatives generated and carried out within HE institutions while the last three exemplify how connections can be established between HE institutions and individuals, communities and organisations outside of education.

The paper by Inma Alvarez looks at how embarking on the creation of OER spurred and supported new pedagogical approaches for dance education within one university. By sharing digital objects and developing digital literacies to capture aspects of a practical, performance-based discipline, this project allowed students to experience the role of content producers as well as users of such resources. In contrast the paper by Beck Pitt, Tim Coughlan, Nassim Ebrahimi and Patrick McAndrew looks at the consequences of adapting OER produced by one university in the UK for use by many community colleges within the USA. In particular they provide hard evidence of the impact of using the adapted OER on learner performance in standard tests. The authors consider several methods of gathering evidence to support the beneficial impact of OER and also discuss the difficulties encountered in securing hard evidence due to the complexities of designing and running 'experiments' within real settings. The third paper, by Tita Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn, Mirjam Hauck, Bea de la Arcos and Timothy Lewis, explores the experiences and impact of a community of practice gathered around a MOOC on Open Translation. The paper deals with a major issue for OER - the way in which educational content could be translated and adapted for local linguistic and cultural purposes, and in particular how voluntary community effort, or crowd sourcing, might make the task tractable.

In the second group of papers, the case study by John Lanham, Yvonne Howard, Ben Drew and Dan Johns relates the experiences of using OER as a bridge between the classroom and a real live engineering project - the creation of a car to break the land speed record. As with the dance education paper, students and teachers were able to become producers as well as consumers of OER that influenced and were influenced by the work of the professional project engineers. This case study also highlights the tensions and expectations of working with a live project where the pressures of delivering the product and the commercial interests of some of the partners often clash with the openness and educational agendas. The next paper by Ronald Macintyre evidences the experiences and consequences of a University working on co-developing OER with a third sector organisation and highlights the many issues surrounding such an open partnership, particularly how the relationship and working practices need to be constantly discussed and reaffirmed for the partnership to work. The final paper by Leigh-Anne Perryman and Tony Coughlan also explores this theme by looking at the idea of a public-facing open scholar who connects to existing online communities, in their case, those within the Voluntary or Third Sector. In spite of the challenges, they conclude that this is a viable and worthwhile role for academics, one that needs to be recognised by any institution that strives to operate as "a benevolent academy that takes seriously

its responsibilities to civic society".

In reviewing these six papers from OER13 we agree with Martin Weller's views, expressed in his perspective paper, that the benefits of openness to HE are real, and fit well with the academic endeavour that Universities aspire to follow. We also agree that the benefits of openness can extend to other individuals, communities and organisations beyond HE, as demonstrated in a variety of ways within these papers. Still, these are but small steps on a much longer journey of gathering evidence, sharing experiences and changing expectations.