



Developing Open Educational Practices to Support Transitions

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ABSTRACT: Open Educational Resources (OER) are free online materials that are openly licensed. OER are frequently heralded as opening up new possibilities for widening access to education, however, the evidence to date is that this has not been achieved at any significant scale. Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS) is a new three-year project funded by the Scottish Funding Council. The project is intended to involve the whole Scottish higher education sector and has a focus on developing effective practices that can support widening participation and transitions between different phases of the learning journey. In this paper we look at how developing the concept of Open Educational Practice to encompass learning design, pedagogy and critically, social and situational factors, can support transitions into work and education and between traditional educational sectors. The paper draws on examples of the creation and use of OER in widening participation partnerships in Scotland. We suggest that, supported by appropriate practices, OERs have the potential to provide pathways from informal to formal learning; provide opportunities for learners to access a broader curriculum and relevant skills development; and reduce duplication and costs through creating a culture of collaborative development and reuse across the sector.

1 Introduction – open education and widening participation

The transition from informal to formal learning forms an important strand of the theory and practice of widening participation (for example O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Field (2009), Gorard et al 2004). This paper argues that supporting digital participation, in the context of the increased availability of good quality online courses and the growth of personal ownership of digital devices able to access these resources, makes it worth revisiting well established practice and looking anew at the way in which the higher education (HE) sector engages with and supports transition. The discussion draws on experience of working with part-time and adult learners. More generally we will argue that transitions are best seen in the context of lifelong learner journeys.

There has been a huge increase in the availability of free online educational material, which can be accessed through a variety of digital devices. Students beginning their careers in higher education will, whatever their age have had some exposure to this world. Much of this engagement is informal and is viewed as being quite separate from formal education.

Google and YouTube are usually the first port of call when looking for information or accessing support to develop new skills. When individuals become students they tend to take these practices with them. None of this is unproblematic for educators and learners but the significant issues of provenance, copyright and quality in this new world lie outside the remit of this paper. In discussing transitions it is important to understand the complex and under-theorised connections between informal and formal learning mediated through the digital world.

Open education is often confused or conflated with online learning and distance learning which has a long and significant history (Peters, 2001). In the context of this discussion, however, open education is a more recent phenomena with roots that are conceptually close to debates around open source software, open scholarship and open publishing (Atkins et al, 2007; Weller, 2014). Critical events in the evolution of open education include the launch of the OpenCourseWare initiative at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2002, the Cape Town Declaration (2007) and the Paris OER Declaration (UNESCO, 2012). Open education is concerned with the use of Open Educational Resources (OER). Typically these resources are free to access online although they may also take the form of physical artefacts such as textbooks. Their defining feature is the licensing associated with their use. We define OER as educational material that allows users the option to reuse, revise, remix, redistribute and retain; these freedoms are often known as the 5Rs of OER. Worldwide there is rapid growth in the availability of material licensed under Creative Commons licenses that afford these freedoms (see www.creativecommons.org).

Advocates of open education have suggested that OER have the potential to widen participation at all levels of education (Welsh Government, 2014; D'Antoni, 2013). However, the evidence suggests that the impact of open education on widening participation has been limited (Falconer et al, 2013). This is also the case with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Haber, 2014), which are free and online but in many cases do not meet the strict definition of OER. Consistently, across platforms and courses, MOOC enrolment tends to be dominated by those who have already had some significant engagement with higher education (Edinburgh University, 2013; OBHE, 2013). Thus if open education is to support widening participation there remains a significant challenge to be overcome.

2 OEPS and its origins

Opening Educational Practices in Scotland is a cross-sector open education project funded by the Scottish Funding Council as part of the Open University in Scotland's (OUIs) Outcome Agreement. It aims to tackle the gap between the promise of open education to widening participation and the current reality of engagement with OER by a relatively privileged demographic. The project has an explicit focus on increasing the effective use of open education across Scotland while widening participation and facilitating transitions between informal and formal learning and between different parts of the education system (see www.oepscotland.org). The project is tasked to work with the whole sector to increase capacity for the use of OER in Scotland and to increase the level of awareness and understanding.

OEPS and the approaches which it has adopted stems from two developments over the last decade. The first was the Open University's OpenLearn website (www.open.edu/openlearn/) which provided access to high quality OER across the curriculum. OpenLearn's sister site LabSpace included tools to enable the reversioning of content by any user. LabSpace has since become OpenLearnWorks (OLW) (www.open.edu/openlearnworks/), an open site which allows organisations and individuals to exercise the freedoms of the 5Rs. The OpenLearn initiative supported by the Hewlett Foundation developed alongside the growth of other OER repositories such as Jorum, which has a dedicated sub site for the college sector in Scotland known as Re:Source

([www.http://resource.blogs.scotcol.ac.uk](http://resource.blogs.scotcol.ac.uk)). There are now over eight hundred free courses on OpenLearn and thousands of items on Jorum. The second was a long-term strategy by the Open University in Scotland (OUiS) of working through widening participation partnerships (Cannell and Hewitt, 2010). These partnerships involve active engagement with third sector organisations, unions, schools, colleges and employers.

The two streams of activity began to come together around 2009 as widening participation partners became interested in the new resources on OpenLearn. Some of the interest was pragmatic. Since part-time higher education incurs fees in Scotland, the cost of courses is often a barrier for individuals and organisations. The range of courses available and the quality of the material also attracted partners. Generally, however, despite initial interest there was no systematic take up, although there is evidence that some highly motivated individuals did study courses. At an organisational level, however, a small number of opportunities opened up for the OUiS to work with partners to produce new OER that met a specific need. Some of these examples are explored in more detail in an overview paper (Cannell, 2013). These new developments opened up study options at HE level for groups and individuals that would not normally access university material. Although the new courses covered a wide range of contexts and partners common themes pertaining to participation and transition began to emerge and these are explored in more detail in subsequent sections of this paper. Crucially we found that while good quality educational content is important, an emphasis on educational practice and pedagogy that builds on social dimensions of learning are the key to engagement.

3 Opening Educational Practices

The open education movement began with a focus on educational technology and in the UK activity was skewed towards the development of learning objects that could be reused and reversioned by educators. The limitations of a technologically determined approach to access are outlined by Knox (2013) who argues for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between technology and practice. The Cape Town Declaration (2007) marked a significant shift from OER to Open Educational Practices (OEP) in which OEP is concerned with pedagogical approaches and the design of the learning materials.

The new OER developed in partnership by the OUiS was informed by pedagogical approaches more commonly found in community based widening participation work. It became clear that simply offering well-designed free online materials was not sufficient to engage partners and their clients. In the widening participation field the affective barriers to engagement and reengagement with education are well recognised (McGivney, 1993; Lane, 2013). Potential participants are typically tentative and easily deterred. All of these factors are also present when the learning materials take the form of OER. In addition, even where learners have experience in using digital devices, they may not have developed skills for effective learning online and moving in to a digital world, with large numbers of options presented in a bewildering landscape of opportunity, can be a real obstacle to engagement. Simply offering material through a repository of multiple courses at different levels offers a bewildering and alienating level of choice to such learners. However, reflecting on the experience of developing new materials and practices in a widening participation context in Scotland suggested that some of these barriers can be overcome by understanding learner context and designing in possibilities for peer support. There are elements of this approach in some of the early MOOCS, often known as c-MOOCS, which adopted a connectivist pedagogy (Siemens, 2013). In OEPS however, we have extended the concept of practice to include not only the social connections between learners that are enabled by the course design but also building existing relationships and networks developed through collaborative work with partners.

4 Findings

Partnership is at the core of the OEPS approach. In the first nine months of the project the team has worked with almost fifty organisations across Scotland. These include universities, colleges, third sector organisations, unions, employers and non-departmental government organisations with national reach. Activity has been developed in response to demand and proactively in alignment with the designated project objectives (Cannell, 2015). In engaging with such a wide range of partners we have established dialogue across a wide spectrum of educational and user communities. This dialogue has helped to scope what already exists in terms of practice and understanding, to analyse and understand existing practice and to begin to disseminate good practice. The key issue in Scotland at present is to tackle how OER can be used at significant scale. While the ability to reversion material is recognised as having huge potential with significant use there is no appetite for engaging with this. Responses from partners have informed the design and functionality of a dedicated Scottish 'hub' for OEP, which should be available in the summer of 2015.

The hub is being developed as a community based resource aimed at supporting organisations and particularly individuals within those organisations who play roles as trusted 'gatekeepers' for those of their colleagues, clients or workmates who are interested in learning through open education. Important features include a search function that will identify OER courses across a range of repositories, filtering out openly licensed learning objects that are often of use to academics but not to learners. The hub will include exemplars of OER and OEP, a short open introductory course on OER and OEP, generic advice and guidance and examples of good practice. It will also support discrete communities of users who will have access to their own dedicated community area with tools for sharing and communicating good practice.

One such community is emerging from collaboration between OEPS and Scottish Union Learning (SUL), the learning arm of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC). SUL has a strong interest in the use of OEP to support learning in the workplace. It works with the unions affiliated to the STUC to support union learning representatives (ULRs) in workplaces across Scotland. ULRs have a remit to support their colleagues in finding informal and formal learning opportunities. OEPS is working on a two-year plan to develop around a hundred union learning representatives as 'open learning champions'. The hub community will offer peer support to ULRs, links to carefully curated starter resources and advice on learning pathways. While union learners have diverse backgrounds and motivations those supported by ULRs are typically non-traditional learners who are engaged with transitions into HE level study and between informal and formal resources.

The exemplars and other resources on the hub are designed to provide a compelling rationale for OEP development and move organisations on in the direction of further interest in developing the capacity to reversion and create material. In coordination with this development we are improving the usability and functionality of OpenLearnWorks. Over the course of the project we aim to shift the emphasis from raising understanding of OEP, primarily centred on the hub towards active involvement in creation, mediated by the hub and supported by the enhanced functionality of OLW.

In developing practice to support widening participation and transitions OEPS is able to build on rich experience gleaned from the development of OER developed in partnership in Scotland. Two particular instances that have influenced our approach are 'The Reflection Toolkit' and 'Caring Counts', which were designed to support transitions. The former supports refugees seeking access to education and employment, the latter is designed for individuals with caring responsibilities who, as a group, face significant barriers to access conventional education and training opportunities. Both these resources were developed in partnership with community-based organisations. Essentially the creation of the resources

involved collaboration between students, professionals from the community organisation and university staff; an example of co-creation of curriculum in an adult education context.

The different experiences that users, practitioners and educationalists bring to the creation of the OER support pedagogical approaches that value learner context. We are accumulating evidence across a diverse range of initiatives that practices designed to encourage peer engagement and peer support have a powerful impact on student engagement and persistence. Dialogue and trust is important in developing practice through partnership. Frequently, partners and learners have high levels of motivation but are easily deterred by the idea that online study is intrinsically individualised and isolated. In the design process there is a renegotiation of the interface between the university, the partner and the student. Effective partnership involves both partners contributing their expertise but also requires that power be shared. None of this will be new to community educators but it resonates in new ways in educational initiatives with OER where the relative weight of content and course material versus support and pedagogy is different than in conventional approaches. The university contributes expertise in educational design and in the provision of educational technology and high quality content; the development of practice is shared and the responsibility for support moves towards the partner. In the process each learns.

The media prominence of MOOCS in 2012 and 2013 stimulated interest among a number of Scottish universities and several now offer MOOCS on the FutureLearn site with Edinburgh University also using Coursera. Policy and practice around OER and OEP is developing but is much more limited. The Scottish Open Education Declaration (www.declaration.openscot.net/) has been developed by the Open Scotland community and provides a comprehensive set of principles to inform development. Currently the open education and widening participation communities have very little contact and one of the priorities of OEPS is to create spaces where they can come together. In part this is also happening through forums, events and seminars. However, the project is also exploring how new OER in the form of short online access courses might be used to facilitate transitions. These new OERs known as Badged Online Courses (BOCs) are located on OpenLearn and they allow students to develop skills for HE study in a variety of subject areas. Since they are openly licensed, institutions may use and reuse them in their original form but they can also revise and reversion to make them more appropriate for specific contexts. OEPS is committed to working with institutions to pilot these approaches. Potentially there are advantages for institutions in sharing high quality resources and for potential students in terms of contextualised and accessible material. On successful completion of a BOC students are able to claim an open badge. These are essentially digital certificates which record achievement, that can be stored online and presented as evidence to employers or educational institutions and which contain metadata which stores information about course content, assessment and achievement. Badges present a new challenge for the education sector's understanding of assessment and accreditation. OEPS is actively investigating the issues that they raise and their relevance to non-traditional learners. Alongside the BOCS there is an emerging family of open badges associated with the OEPS project. For example Caring Counts now has alternative assessments with associated badges aimed at carers and also at professionals working with carers who are using the same material for continuing professional development.

5 Conclusions

At the recent OER15 Conference in Cardiff there was considerable discussion about moving open education into the mainstream. Open education involves emergent practices that have had significant impact internationally, particularly in the US and the global south where much of the focus has been on openly licensed textbooks (for example Garcia et al, 2014). In Scotland activity and discussion remains largely restricted to the educational technology community. The initiatives discussed in this paper are arguably also on the edges of the

mainstream in as much as part-time and adult education and the contribution it makes to society and economy is often absent from policy discussion. The conjunction of open education with more traditional widening participation practices could therefore be seen as peripheral to wider concerns about widening participation and transitions. However, we would argue that there are number of reasons why some of the early findings from the OEPS project should be of broader significance. Universities and their students occupy a digital world where access to information and means of communication through digital devices has been transformed in a relatively short period. In dialogue with project partners we are uncovering evidence that supports the contention of Goodfellow and Lea (2013) that there are disconnects between university approaches to learning and teaching in a digital world and the lived experience of their students. There are many options for institutions in how they might engage with open education but it seems clear that not engaging at all is not an option.

Efforts to tackle widening participation have struggled to overcome persistent and deep-rooted inequalities in access. We would not argue for one moment that open education is a magic bullet, but OEPS is beginning to assemble evidence that suggests that the wealth of online educational resources can be used to enhance the experience and support transitions for non-traditional learners. Collaboration between institutions to share practice and resources has the potential to have a significant impact on widening participation. Effective partnerships with organisations outwith the academy not only serve to meet the needs of the community partner but also enable use of OER in the much wider networks that the partner inhabits and which are often very distant from the university. At the same time deep engagement in co-creation of resources and practices enhances the knowledge base and the scholarship of the university.

There may be lessons to learn from previous periods of technological change. Lower cost printing led in the nineteenth century to mass readership of newspapers and the advent of free public libraries. Free content is not new but the freedoms associated with open licenses go beyond the simple freedom to use. Combined with scale and accessibility of open resources it is likely that the balance between educators as creators of content and educators as designers of practice, curators of content and facilitators of learning will continue to shift.

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