Introduction to JIME Special Issue on Open Educational Resources (OER)

Tom Boyle

Learning Technology Research Institute
London Metropolitan University
Shoreditch Building
35 Kingsland Road
Shoreditch
London E2 8AA
http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ltri/staff/boyle/boylecv.htm

The OER10 Conference at the University of Cambridge in March 2010 brought together many leading researchers and developers of open educational resources. This special edition of JIME presents selected papers from that conference. All the papers were extended after the conference and subject to review by two reviewers. The five papers, selected for the special edition, address a number of significant challenges in the design, use and embedding of OERs.

The conference had three main themes: Content, Communities and Design. These themes are richly reflected in the selected papers. The focus on the human and design issues are strong in most, if not all, the papers. What emerges is that OER is much more complex than is often assumed. If we fail to tackle the design and human issues then OER may well be condemned to the hype/disappointment cycle of so many other initiatives. OER has the potential to revolutionise the conduct of education. However, a range of demanding issues need to be addressed if that potential is to be achieved. The papers in this special edition both highlight the major challenges and point to potential ways forward.

The fact that there may be major design challenges in developing OERs has not been sufficiently foregrounded. The article by Andy Lane is thus very timely. Lane focuses on "*Designing for innovation around OER*". He argues that open educational resources require different design approaches from that traditionally employed with 'closed' education resources. He argues that it is necessary to design for greater flexibility to enable the users to adapt and structure the use of the resources to meet their own particular requirements. These ideas are explored through a major case study – the OpenLearn initiative at the UK Open University. It is interesting to note that Lane's argument potentially challenges the utility of the mass release of traditional resources that were developed mainly for classroom use with specific cohorts of students. In the six stages of OER development, quoted from McAndrew (2010), pedagogic issues only come fourth. This seems to reflect accurately the situation in which legal, practical and technical issues have all had precedence of attention. The foregrounding of design and pedagogic issues in this paper is thus very welcome.

The article by Tom Browne and colleagues at Exeter University on "*The challenges of OER to Academic Practice*" provides a reflective and thought provoking case study. The article is a rich, engaging narrative about the establishment of an OER project in a traditional, research oriented University. It sets the international OER background scene clearly and concisely. The article then discusses the many challenges in setting up an institutional OER initiative. The issue of institutional clarity about the reasons for engaging with OER is raised. Is the aim primarily the more limited ambition of institutional promotion, or is there a wider ambition to contribute towards substantial reuse of learning resources? The 'debilitating impact' of IPR issues is described, with illuminating examples. It also discusses how to achieve academic buy-in, illustrating that there is, all-too-often in higher education, a gap between aspiration and the reality of staff reward on the ground. This article provides a rich, grounded narrative that should be invaluable to others seeking to set up large OER projects in their own institutions.

The article by Windle et al. on "*Sharing and reuse in OER: experiences gained from open reusable learning objects in health*" raises a number of issues for successful OER deployment and reuse, based on extensive experience in developing and sharing open educational resources in health science education. This is a particularly sensitive area for the accuracy and quality of resources. The paper indicates that successful reuse arises from a number of factors. Two cases studies are used to illustrate several of these points. The issue of quality is discussed in some detail. Should quality be assured before release of the resources or do we leave it to the 'market' to sort out successful resources? The authors argue strongly for an integrated approach where quality is checked before release of the resources. This paper provides a rich set of insights based on extensive experience that provide important input to the OER debate.

A key issue for the success of OERs is effective embedding in academic practice. The paper by Greaves et al. "*Repurposing with a purpose: A story with a happy ending*" reports impressive results in improving pass rates and attainment in modules concerned with academic skills, especially in essay writing. The study reused a number of learning objects released as OERs. These were adapted and embedded in the modules. Reports from both students and tutors are positive about the reuse and embedding of the resources. As in all action research, it is difficult to delineate the influence of one factor when many interrelated changes are made. The ability to implement the changes in the modules, however, was clearly strongly affected by the availability of the reusable resources. The improvements in attainment, which seem to arise from good design linked to reusable resources, make this a stimulating and thought provoking article.

Although OERs are meant to be 'open', comparatively little attention has been directed to the issue of cultural differences. The paper by Qi and Boyle discusses "*Dimensions of Culturally Sensitive Factors in the Design and Development of Learning Objects*". It outlines a framework for understanding culturally sensitive dimensions and factors that influence (explicitly or implicitly) OER design. The article describes four main dimensions that bear on cultural influences on learning resource design. This article aims to inform both developers and adaptors of reusable learning resources of how to be more sensitive to the issue of cultural influences on learning.

Concluding Comment

In the mid nineties, when CD ROMs became widely available, producers suddenly had (by historical standards) a vast amount of memory to store and deliver material. In order to meet the imperative of using this space, quantity rather than quality became the dominant feature of too many offerings. This led to the introduction of a new term into the language: "shovelware". The Internet dwarfs CD ROMs in its storage and delivery capacity. This raises the danger that OER, at its worst, deteriorates into educational shovelware – where the driving mantra is "never mind the quality feel the width". The problem may arise because of inadequacies in the resources in the beginning. However, even good resources delivered in a traditional face-to-face environment 'dumped' into repositories with minimal re-design for the nature of the new medium may sit as indigestible offerings that students, and most teachers, will simply ignore. Such a perception would undermine the real and substantial potential of OER in transforming Education in terms of both access and quality. The papers in this special edition point to real achievements based on careful planning and reflective practice. It is vital that we approach OERs in this more scholarly and reflective manner if their true potential is to be achieved.

Tom Boyle: Editor of JIME Special Edition on Open Educational Resources (OERs)

Reference

McAndrew (2010) *Researching open content – experiences from the OpenLearn initiative*. Available online at: http://kn.open.ac.uk/public/document.cfm?docid=13201