

Open Educational Resources at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Like many things, Open Educational Resources (OER) are not new. Think of the schools broadcasting service available on BBC television in the 1960s and 1970s and, subsequently, the Open University radio and TV programmes broadcast again through the BBC. The leading Spanish distance learning institution, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), founded in 1973 and partly inspired by the British open model, is no exception, with a well-established practice in providing media support for its degrees through course-related programmes broadcast through Radio Televisión Española. In 21st century Britain, Spain and elsewhere, however, the single driving element that *is* new in OER as in almost everything else – and even that is fast losing its novelty – is the internet. Given our web-driven context, it would, in practice, be extremely difficult if not impossible to halt the free availability of information or open resources. Indeed, on what grounds would one oppose such access? Put another way, what is the role of Open Educational Resources, on the one hand, and that of the UNED, on the other, in a country such as Spain?

Recent statistics show that while Spain has a relatively low percentage of internet users (38.4% as of November 2006), 72.6% of those are connected from home and an overwhelming 94.5%¹ prefer the world wide web to other internet-based services (e-mail and online chats come in second and third, respectively). The most efficient way therefore to make open resources available is through the internet. To all intents and purposes, in fact, OER and the internet are inextricably linked.

As a distance education provider and as much a part of the web-driven knowledge society as any other institution, the UNED thus recognizes the need to enhance its OER profile. It faces challenges such as creating a viable business model, quality assurance, incentivizing OER authors and dealing with Intellectual Property Rights and software issues, among others. While OER have been part of the UNED profile for some time, they have emerged more as a result of individual, departmental, or other partial initiatives. For the first time, however, its Strategic Plan (2006-2009) declares a commitment to developing and promoting free access to educational resources, including the creating of an institutional repository of learning materials and taking part in international OER projects. The UNED has created the Centre for Technological Innovation and Development (CINDETEC) to provide digital support for the creation of online material, including open resources. Another example is *e-Spacio*, set up by the UNED Biblioteca Central, which stores, organizes and disseminates research and teaching material created by UNED professors. UNED further is a participating member of the Multilingual Open Resources for Independent Learning (MORIL) project directed by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), a project which has received funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Traditionally, study in Spain has been seen as a way of gaining qualifications, and those qualifications have been seen as a way of finding employment. In other words, learning for learning's sake – a conceptual corner-stone of the OER movement – would, in principle, appear to hold little potential appeal. Additionally, Spain has long held one of the highest levels of unemployment in European Union member countries, reinforcing

¹ Source: Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación. <http://www.aimc.es/aimc.php>

the conviction that study must be linked to job-prospects. Fortunately, unemployment levels are falling (they currently stand at just over 8% compared to an EU average of 7.7%)² and there is forward-looking legislation in the matter of recognising and validating learning acquired in informal situations. The two laws which directly concern the importance of recognising such learning, irrespective of where, when and how it was acquired, are Law 5/2002 of 19 June and Law 2/2006 of 3 May. This legislation, which should ensure that the learning acquired through OER can result in desired qualifications, is already being implemented by the UNED, which has nearly 200,000 students. The UNED's Centro Universitario de Idiomas (CUID), for example, has recently established a new suite of exams mapped against the Common European Framework that will enable students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who have acquired their knowledge of English in informal and/or open contexts to gain a valuable qualification which will improve their job prospects.

The UNED is committed to providing the requisite OER which will help unaffiliated students to reach the level of proficiency required by these examinations. That is, the UNED intends to provide freely available, high quality materials which will enable EFL students at beginner or elementary level to progress from level A1 of the Common European Framework through A2, B1 and B2, to the advanced levels of C1 and C2. The prizes for providing such OER are enormous: the prospect arises of ordinary working people who find it difficult to attend or pay for classes now being able to learn English, to obtain a qualification as proof of that learning, and so improve their prospects. The benefits for the Spanish economy are potentially very important.

The UNED is also uniquely positioned with regard to a vast potential market of Spanish speakers, a market which extends beyond Europe and Latin America to the nearly 30 million³ speakers of Spanish in the United States. The UNED already has a regional presence through local study and support centres in places such as Buenos Aires, Caracas and New York. The positive consequences of the enhancement of human potential in Latin America through openly available UNED-produced OER – which would also drastically reduce costs related to student-mobility – are clear.

Given that there is already a great deal of material available via internet purporting to provide educational resources – the Massachusetts Institution of Technology Open Course Ware initiative, jointly funded by the Hewlett and Mellon Foundations, is just one of the best-known and most influential – it might be thought that acceptable OER already exist. Careful analysis of such materials reveals, however, that while they are abundant in quantity they frequently fail to meet the needs of distance learners at best (MIT materials, for example, are for traditional classroom use), and are seriously deficient in quality at worst. Many of the materials for example require students to read extended pieces of text and would be more naturally offered in book format than on the computer screen. Moreover, many are in reality merely testing students not teaching them. In the classroom such materials, while far from ideal, may be of some use since

² Source: Eurostat.

http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/PGP_PRD_CAT_PREREL/PGE_CAT_PREREL_YEAR_AR_2006/PGE_CAT_PREREL_YEAR_2006_MONTH_12/3-01122006-EN-AP.PDF

³ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 gives a figure of 28.1 million speakers of Spanish in the United States. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>

they help the teacher to discover what the student cannot do and what therefore needs to be taught. For students in a distance-learning situation however such materials are often a source of frustration.

The matter of quality assurance and materials pedagogically appropriate to the distance learning environment is crucial. Materials that promise a lot but deliver little may endanger the future of OER by bringing the concept into disrepute. The UNED therefore is committed to participating in the movement only through materials of high quality and a recently created task-force has identified the following criteria:

- a) The materials should focus on content of central not marginal relevance; that is, they must be core material, the study of which is essential for passing important examinations in key areas. The material would be not only subject-related, but skills-related also, with a strong emphasis on distance methodology – something the MIT initiative lacks.
- b) At least in part, the materials should be of a nature which only the new technologies can offer. That is, they should not try to deliver learning experiences which are better delivered through a book or in a conventional classroom, but instead take advantage of the unique interactive possibilities of the new technologies.

An example of such materials will make the UNED's intentions in the field of OER clearer. A team in the Facultad de Filología at the UNED is developing a grammar checking programme, called *e-gramm*, which enables students of English as a foreign language to correct the mistakes they make when they write in English. The computer programme highlights in colour sequences words in which it has detected a mistake and provides on-screen feedback which explains the mistakes, offering examples of correct usage and explaining how they differ from what the student has written. With *e-gramm* correction is not automatic but instead requires students to understand the grammatical and lexical explanations and then write the correct version themselves. *E-gramm* is free, easy to install via internet, and user-friendly. It centres on a core skill, writing, in the key area of EFL. It is also designed to offer valuable learning experiences that neither a textbook nor a classroom can easily offer:

- a) *E-gramm* provides students with feedback on their mistakes whenever they wish, a feedback that is generous, explicit and detailed.
- b) *E-gramm* fosters 'just-in-time' learning in a way that is not possible in the classroom. That is, it provides the student with the required information to determine if a phrase is right or not at the most opportune moment; just when the student is most interested and receptive.
- c) *E-gramm* provides students with highly motivating and useful work because they are working on their own written production. The time invested in correcting their own writing will be time well-spent because while evaluating each phrase of their written work with the help of *e-gramm* they are learning to use correctly words they have chosen to use. By assuming responsibility for correcting their own writing, students become more autonomous.
- d) *E-gramm* not only allows students to work on their own (rather than other people's) mistakes, but also to progress at their own speed. Unlike conventional classrooms, where it is assumed that all students need to learn the same thing at

the same time, *e-gramm* makes the most of one of the key advantages of learning in non-formal contexts.

- e) Many students prefer to be ‘corrected’ in privacy by a machine rather than in public by a teacher. When interacting with *e-gramm* they feel less time pressure than when required to answer in front of a class.

E-gramm and other similar UNED projects are reflective of the UNED’s commitment to offering only innovative, high quality OER. The UNED sees OER as central to the development of distance learning in particular, and more broadly to Spain’s development as a fully fledged participant in the knowledge society. In no sense should OER be seen as second-class alternatives to textbooks and classrooms; OER delivered through the new technologies offer the possibility of far better learning experiences than were available to previous generations.