

Collaborative design of Open Educational Practices: An Assets based approach

Kate Helen Miller 
University of the West of Scotland (United Kingdom)
kate.miller@uws.ac.uk

Ronald McIntyre
The Open University (United Kingdom)
ronald.macintyre@open.ac.uk

Gary McKenna
University of the West of Scotland (United Kingdom)
gary.mckenna@uws.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper outlines a collaborative approach to the design of open educational resources (OER) with community stakeholders so they can be shared with other community practitioners openly, online and repurposed for other contexts. We view curriculum not as something that educationalists provide but rather something that emerges as learners engage with an educational context. We draw on a Project consisting of a partnership between five European Institutions of Higher Education and a range of community stakeholder groups. The partnership will develop a suite of OER for community workers who are implementing assets based approaches in different contexts. We argue that these approaches are negotiated in that one cannot decide how they might operate in a given context without engaging in deliberative discussion. The challenge for us as open education practitioners is how to turn those deliberations into OER and to highlight the important pedagogical aspect of the design process.

Keywords: Collaboration; Design; Assets based Approaches; Open Educational Practice; Collaborative Open Educational Resources

Introduction

The paper draws on research carried out for the Erasmus+ funded project 'Designing Collaborative Educational Resources (COERS) for Assets Based Community Participation (ABCP) across Europe' (Assets Com) (ref. 2016-1-UK01-KA203-024403). The project commenced in January 2017 and is funded for two years. This paper focuses on the question posed by a collaborative approach to the design of Open Educational Resources (OER): how to design open educational resources (OER) with community stakeholder groups so they can be shared with other community practitioners openly, online and repurposed for other contexts. Central to this question is one of practice: what makes our educational practice open? As educational practitioners in academia, who focus on social justice and community development, engaging with community stakeholder groups to conduct research, shape curriculum development and pedagogic practice is familiar. As in many practice-based disciplines, curriculum is developed and emerges from and through a deeper understanding of context (Illeris, 2011), and is developed *in, for* and *through* practice. The focus *in, for* and *through* is important as it surfaces an underlying pedagogic assumption within practice-based learning, learning arises from, takes place in, and is for practice (Evans, Hodgkinson, Rainbird & Unwin, 2006). The paper looks at

how this approach might be applied to the development of OER. Using our work on a cross European project, it teases out some of the challenges, principally focusing on how to ensure the OER draw from and speak to practice, through the development of what we term 'Collaborative Open Educational Resources' (COERs). As open education practitioners we look to address two challenges. The first is concerned with contextualisation, with taking learning arising from a deep examination of practice in a particular context, and design something that speaks to practitioners across a range of contexts. The second challenge arises from our solution to the first. Our work underlines the importance of not conceptualising learning contexts as containers primarily consisting of content but rather as relational and fluid effects of practice (Edwards & Miller, 2007). As educational designers we need to attend to *how* learning takes place across a range of learning contexts. So we ask how can we as educators facilitate the recontextualisation of learning? To understand context in relational terms has effects on how we conceptualise the mobilizing of learning and associated pedagogic practices. For the project team one way this has occurred is through deliberative reflective discussion, and therefore we propose that the COERs need to foster a similar deliberative reflection *in* and *on* practice (Dewey [1910] 2012) both for the design team and for those using and repurposing the COERs for different contexts.

Before addressing these challenges, the paper provides a short overview of the transnational partnership on which the paper is based and an introduction to assets based approaches to community development. It then explores the approach to design of educational resources that is being taken and the associated challenges. We illustrate these first with a discussion on how the project team has used assets based deliberative processes in our approach to research and design followed by an example of how this approach is extended to working with one of the community stakeholder groups in Scotland. Through these examples we explore the deliberative process in which we engaged with our partners in Higher Education and our community stakeholders and what this means for the development of collaborative and open educational resources.

Background and Context

The purpose of the research and the larger project is to share innovation in practice and generate new knowledge in relation to both the implementation of assets based approaches to working with communities and the design of open educational resources. Asset based approaches are based on a set of assumptions about the self and community which have implications for educational practice, therefore before looking at an example, it is worth saying a little about the transnational partnership, assets based approaches and the way curriculum is developed in our discipline.

Transnational Partnership

The Assets Com project is based on a transnational partnership which was developed with the specific intention of sharing innovative practice and generating new knowledge. The partnership consists of five Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): The University of the West of Scotland in Scotland, the University of Maribor in Slovenia, the University of Bologna in Italy, the University of Laurea in Finland and the University of Southern Denmark in Denmark. Each HEI is working with a range of community stakeholder groups in their geographical locals. The project is funded under the Erasmus+ programme. The Key action is to develop strategic partnerships for cooperation, innovation and the exchange of good practices. The priorities of the project are to develop innovative and open inter-professional educational resources that can be used in the further training of public

sector practitioners and a range of community focused practitioners. The resources should provide a means of equipping practitioners with the inter-professional skills needed to foster inter-agency and inter-generational connectivity, mobilise existing community assets and engage in pioneering forms of collaboration. In so doing practitioners will become able to nurture increased participation and social capital and reduce levels of fear and distrust in the most disadvantaged communities across Europe. Importantly the proposed project will address the implementation of the 2013 Communication on *Opening up Education* (European Commission, 2013) by helping learning institutions, teachers and learners to acquire digital skills and learning methods and supporting the development and availability of open educational resources.

Assets Based Approaches and Community Development

The 'Asset-Based Community Development' (ABCD) approach was developed for the sustainable development of communities based on their strengths and focuses on 'potential' and not the 'deficits' of an individual or community – with the aim of empowering both individuals and communities to take full control of their lives (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The ABCD framework consists of four community-led building processes which are as follows:

- 1 *mapping assets* – realising individual and community capacities;
- 2 *building relationships* – strengthening links among local assets for mutually beneficial problem-solving within the community;
- 3 *mobilising* – for economic development and information sharing;
- 4 *convening* – assembling the community to develop a vision and a plan – bring together as broadly a representative group as possible to embody the will and wishes of the community.

As an approach it has varying political support in different countries and also varying recognition as a distinct approach to working with communities. Research in diverse parts of the world reports some of the positive impacts of these approaches. Assets based approaches have been implemented in 'Community Integration Initiatives' (CII) in Scottish and Danish locations to help build local capacity for action and collective action (Deuchar & Bone, 2015). The capacity of ABCD; how it operates in practice; and the types of outcomes that result from its use, indicate that, when implemented within different communities in the Philippines, Ethiopia and South Africa, ABCD harnessed: (1) '*power within*' through reversing internalised powerlessness; (2) '*power with*' by strengthening opportunities for collective action; and (3) '*power to*' by emphasising and building local capacity for action successfully (Mathie, Cameron & Gibson, 2017).

However, with assets based approaches roots in bottom up activism and alongside increasingly top down policy initiatives, community workers can find themselves in the middle with little support. Our project aimed to look at how to support these workers through the collaborative development of OER. We started by investigating what the challenges were across the partner countries with regard to the professional development of community workers who are implementing assets based approaches in their work with communities. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a key method with in assets based approaches used in action research to highlight positive aspects of practice. The founding concept of AI is to be inclusive and collaborative and to focus on building on the positive. Through this identifying of 'good practice' in communities it soon became clear that there is no simple and straightforward translation of this concept or 'good practice' across national and professional contexts. It should not come as a surprise that an approach that asks practitioners to attend carefully to their context articulates theory and practice differently across different contexts.

Indeed the value of a comparative analysis comes from these differences. However, these differences also provide a significant design challenge for us as open educational practitioners, how to create a resource that draws on the deep understanding from a particular context while speaking to practitioners across contexts. Before addressing this challenge directly we look at how this in depth engagement has arisen.

Designing with Stakeholders

Our approach to designing OEP draws together established practices in community development around the inclusion of practitioners and learners in the development of curriculum with work in participatory design (Macintyre 2016; Macintyre 2014a). For us the P in OEP means thinking about how our educational practice is shaped by openness. However, it also means thinking through how P for pedagogy and participation, in particular how disciplinary values around pedagogy and participation then shape and reshape openness. For example just as ABCD emphasises people's capacity, so participatory approaches in design emphasise the need to work *with* people, whether they are practitioners, learners, or clients. This is more than surveying needs; the focus is on using the strengths and assets of individuals and communities and bringing them together to instigate positive change. In the case of participatory design it typically involves working directly with people to develop educational content throughout the process. Participatory approaches recognise people as experts in their own lives. This means the role of the designer or academic is not as 'expert', but as a facilitator of a process to help translate those insights into education material (Malpass, 2017). Engagement may vary through the design process, this approach is time consuming and challenging for all those taking part and previous work with marginalised groups found much of our time was spent building confidence amongst participants and establishing their right to participate (Macintyre, 2014b). This is where the element of appreciative enquiry can make a big difference to how readily the participants feel able to contribute their expertise from their own lived experiences.

Even when expert practitioners feel confident to talk about their 'good practice', their expert status is often based on a set of routines and tacit assumptions which can be difficult to articulate. It is difficult because knowing is *in, for* and *through* practice, it is about process, with each process of knowing apparently locked into a particular context. However, working with practice focused academics, and community workers deeply embedded in practice networks, does provide an opportunity to look inside those contexts. Allowing us to engage practitioners in deliberative discussions to share and develop critical questions about practice as part of shared sense making. Drawing together insights from across contexts we employed a cross case comparative and analytical process to surface these tacit assumptions and interrogate them through the lens of assets based approaches.

Addressing our first challenge, to develop an approach which allows us see deeply into practice in and between particular contexts is useful to us as researchers, but how does this researchers' way of knowing become an educational resource. As researchers often we look to create a coherent and closed narrative, as open education practitioners our challenge is to design and develop an OER that allows practitioners to use these in depth case studies generated from one context to shape their learning *in, for* and *through* practice in other spaces. Through engaging with our partners and stakeholders in a collaborative curriculum design process we started to understand the design of educational resources as being about much more than

designing content. We realised the core of ABCD approaches was how people engage, our role was to be open about what was learnt but to focus on capturing the detail of learning processes and understanding *what* practitioners value and *how* they learn. Using examples from the project cross national partnership and the Scottish context we explore this in more detail in the next section.

Collaborative Open Educational Resources in Practice

Any question about what to do requires a sense of the “right thing to do”, and “how we know what we know”. Just as design researchers interrogate their own practice, probing “what works”, the tacit routines and assumptions based on past success (Corbett, 2005) or indeed failure (Cope, 2011). As researchers we are used to the idea of being reflexive, attending to our place in “the field” and how we are placed by others. Our identity as research practitioners means we also tend to follow particular norms, sharing these norms with the expert practitioners (Whitehead & McNiff 2006), framing issues in similar ways. This framing and reframing often involves complex reasoning, as Dewey ([1910] 2012) notes the “double movement” of reaching down into the everyday detail, while also reaching out, and it is vital that we attend to how all actors, including ourselves, move between those positions. Therefore through the research and development processes of the Assets com project we have been paying attention to our own learning journey and the deliberative processes of reaching down into the everyday detail of practice and the collaborative reaching out across our varying partner community contexts to make sense of our own and each other’s practices. In essence, we have been modeling assets based approaches through our own practice in order to notice and take note of our own deliberative processes and their outcomes.

Through the timeline of the project (Figure 1) there are a range of collaborative practices and deliberative processes through which we are engaging our academic partners and our community stakeholder groups. To date (month 15 of the project) we have worked through the first three intellectual outputs to identify gaps/challenges in the professional development of community workers who are implementing assets based approaches and developed detailed case studies across our partners national contexts collaboratively with our community stakeholders. We have also carried out a critical review of case based learning and produced a learning and facilitation framework. We are now at the stage of planning our COERs. As the partners worked with the community stakeholder groups on the various outputs required for the project the relationships and collaborative processes of building shared understanding and insights were developed. As well as attending to the content and themes it became apparent that context was far more than a container of content but importantly is shaped and formed through the practices and process which constitute it. In case based learning we have tension around how to draw on the detailed insights from particular contexts while also leaving enough space for practitioners to see themselves in the context and how it might apply to their own practice. Through engaging with partners our speculations about use of the COERS started to focus on how we might use the case study to open up the process of how the practitioners know what to do when certain situations arise. Through sharing the case studies and generating the critical questions that arose through our own sense making processes we were able to start to make the tacit knowledge embedded in practice more explicit. In addition we are beginning to uncover some of the often unnoticed practices of knowledge making across the different community stakeholder groups.

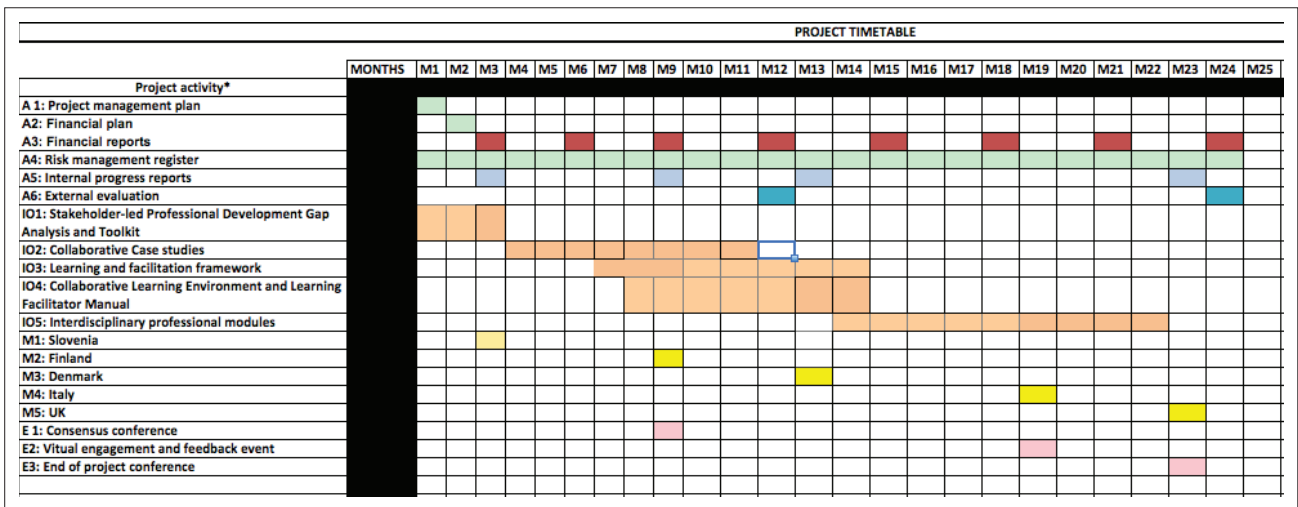


Figure 1: Timeline of the Assets Com project

Next we describe an example from Scotland where the researchers have been working closely with an arts based community stakeholder group to illustrate how this action research is moving forward and addressing the challenges identified above.

The example group is a social enterprise in the South West of Scotland that is firmly founded on an assets based approach in all the work it does with its local communities, and in terms of developing the organisation and their staff. Through the research process we used an appreciative enquiry model. We asked staff about their practice, we watched them work with the young people, we asked the young people about what they were doing and what they made of it. We asked the managers about how the organisation was managed and how staff were trained and developed as assets based practitioners. We asked what the challenges were and how they addressed them. Relationships were established between the researchers, the staff and the young people. We explained what the Assets Com project was trying to do in terms of sharing innovation and generating new knowledge. We negotiated how the project could benefit the organisation and how the organisation could help the project achieve its aims and objectives and at the same time further the aims and objectives of their organisation.

Through this engagement over a period of time we moved beyond passive observation of the use of ABCD, and became directly involved in the process. During an observed session one of the managers demonstrated an approach he used when working with the young people to explore issues of self-identity, family identity and community identity. A process that enabled young people to view themselves as creative people that were able to express themselves through the medium of art and develop positive views about themselves, their families and their communities. Intrigued by the exercise, we asked the partner if this same approach could be used as a tool for professional development of the practitioners who are working with the young people, and whether they would work with us to adapt the approach for this purpose. The partner agreed and the facilitator captured the process on film and wrote up an account of the process and the critical questions that arose from it. This was then presented to the trans national partnership and used as a tool to generate further critical questions about what was happening in that context and what could be learnt from that and used in other contexts across professional and national boundaries.

The processes of working with the community group to produce the educational resource for the purpose of professional development and piloting it with the staff of that organisation, and then capturing that process to share with the project partners, involved a certain amount of stepping into and out of the learning context physically and intellectually. It also involved moving elements generated in one context to another through video capture and through descriptions provided by the researchers. Moving from particular sets of social and situated practices to the general requires you to speculate, to imagine how and what is useful in one place could be useful for others in other places with different personal, family, community, professional and national contexts. Of course we could have relied on our own professional judgement, however this seemed at odds with ABCD. This process of attempting to align our design process with the ABCD values pushed us to think about who and what are the important actors that constitute a learning context and how we might work with these through the design process to maximise learning from the COERs.

So in keeping with participatory approaches and ABCD we facilitated a series of events through our partner project meetings in the various national and community contexts, where research practitioners worked with the community practitioners. The aim was to draw on embodied theoretical and practice knowledge from across the academic and practice spectrum as a way to sense check our speculations about what was useful. However, we found participants used the practice knowledge embedded in the context to generate new practices and new theoretical insights which we believe will be useful to a broad audience of community practitioners working with assets based approaches. The collaborative approach to designing the OERs acted as a stimulus for all these learning processes to occur and worked as a pedagogical tool to stimulate the learning and knowledge creation process. It allowed us to see into and then beyond the context to trace the contextualising actors, and in doing so made us realise that in ABCD approaches the important questions are about process and about how people learn together. Our approach to research is based on those same values, and so it follows that these values also inform our approach to the development of educational resources.

Moving between these positions involves us thinking about the past and our experiences and speculating about the future (Di Salvo, 2012). In that sense the challenge faced by expert practitioners is the same one faced by designers of educational resources. Imagining what happens once an OER is “out in the wild” who will use it and how it will be used is often speculative. You make judgements on how to structure the course based on your experience, and on noticing what practices constitute your context and the contexts of others. We have done this through working collaboratively cultivating open educational practices that are underlined by an assets based approach, providing opportunities across the partnership for us to speculate on the future use of these resources and working collaboratively to design them based on those imagined uses.

Conclusion

We still have a lot of work to do. However, we can draw out some important insights about the development of COERs based on the work we have done already. By employing an assets based approach to our research, using it as a lens through which to diffract multiple cross cultural practices, and then letting them flow through our development of COERs we start to see the spectrum and varying tones of these practices, and discern appropriate pedagogic practices. This approach to open educational practice focuses on the participatory and pedagogic component of openness, and the role of assets based approaches in this process. We propose that by using an appreciative enquiry approach throughout from the research, through the project partnership, and the design process, we are able to promote an openness to knowledge generation and knowledge

sharing that holds potential for future directions in open education. While we have individually written about the participatory element of open educational practice (e.g. Macintyre 2016) we have not, so far, woven our work on pedagogy (e.g. Mannion, Miller, Gibb & Goodman, 2009) and the pedagogical challenge of identifying resonance across practice contexts into the established OER/OEP literature. In part this relates to the stage of the work. However, it also relates to the challenge of articulating what an open pedagogy is, and what freedoms it might afford (Lane & Van Drop 2011).

In considering the freedoms afforded by an openness and the pedagogic implications that flow from this we have drawn on work around OER and Widening Participation, in particular action research into the social, structural and situational barriers to learning suggests a focus on partnerships and participatory approaches helps situate practice and understand the place of openness in peoples learning journey (Cannell & Macintyre 2017). From this we learnt a great deal about how the freedoms of OER have been and continue to be constrained, but not necessarily what we needed to do to deal with those barriers. Our approach in this work has been to use assets based approach to inform our work with communities and practitioners in a way that moves beyond collaborative content production into working with partners to develop appropriate pedagogic practices or *open educational practices*.

However, we have also drawn on our discipline, exploring pedagogic practice, and the values central to ABCD. We found an assets based approach to exploring the *how* fosters an open approach to learning for all involved in the journey. As researchers and open education practitioners it meant allowing those to flow through research into learning design, and led to us finding common ground with practitioners. From this developed a deeper understanding of practitioners' experience. However, the deliberative processes that occurred across practice, academic and national boundaries enabled the processes of recontextualisation to unfold. The recontextualisation of learning across these variously bounded spaces occurred through a choreography of project wide encounters that brought together various different groups of people, ideas, and artefacts through a range of virtual and face to face deliberative encounters. While this approach worked for us we are not suggesting assets based approaches as a model or set of values that apply universally, we understand the particularity of our experience. We simply suggest that applying them as professional and personal values fosters a certain openness to practice. Through engaging in a deliberative discourse with practice and practitioners we have underlined the importance of conceiving of context not as a container for content but as a relational effect of practices, it is not just about *what*, the *how* matters as we explore how to use the freedoms afforded by OER to share learning across and between different contexts and shape new open educational practices.

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