The Continued Importance of Open Educational Resources (OER)

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Abstract

The longevity of educational delivery using Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Education Practices (OEP) highlights the ongoing importance of open resources. Open Educational Resources are teaching and learning materials that are created and licensed as either in the public domain or as free, able to be shared, and able to be modified. During the massive uptake of online learning practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, the uptake of OER resources and practices showed only modest growth. Now that the pressure for delivering Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is off, it's time to look again at OER as a cost-effective and sustainable way to resource and deliver education practices. McGreal, Macintosh, and Lane continue the OER story from previous articles in this journal, looking specifically at OER-based online micro-courses supporting the UNESCO Strategic Development Goal 4: Education for All. The issue is rounded off with four articles highlighting other areas of flexible learning including learning support, learning satisfaction, learner retention, and learner experience.

Keywords: OER; Open Education Resources; Open Educational Practices; distance learning; online learning

Continuing the OER story

Educational provision across most of the globe is back to some kind of normality post-COVID. Campuses have reopened and students are attending schools and universities in person. The long-term impact on cognitive and social functions among the youngest of our citizens will be the subject of ongoing research for years to come, but the attention paid to open, distance, and flexible learning approaches during COVID has lessened. The initial rush towards remote emergency teaching shone a light on institutional preparedness and internal capacity to design, deliver, and support learning at a distance. It wouldn't have been considered radical to assume that, given the need to create virtual opportunities for learners at short notice, there would have been significant uptake in the use of existing Open Educational Resources (OER). The picture here is somewhat mixed. As McGreal et al. identify in this issue's invited article ("OER-based Online Micro-courses: Supporting UNESCO Strategic Development Goal 4: Education for All") there is evidence to suggest that a flexible system of accredited learning units built from OER has made some impact, certainly on the 200,000 learners in over 100 countries who have engaged with the OER universitas (OERu). The OERu was established in 2011 to offer learning opportunities to individuals worldwide and to enable them to earn official recognition or credit, creating an approach for awarding transnational micro-credentials that are recognised by universities. The universitas, which is a group of over 30 higher education institutions spread across five continents, keeps its costs low and provides a sustainable learning environment by expanding its infrastructure capacity gradually and as necessary. In creating a worldwide digital

system that enables access to micro-courses on the internet from anywhere in the world, this Next Generation Digital Learning Environment (NGDLE) is built on free and open source software (FOSS). This is a rare example of a sustainable OER project.

There appears to be a degree of sustained engagement with OER in the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* (JOFDL) community. An article by Ulf-Danieal Ehlers published in 2011 and titled "Extending the Territory: From Open Educational Resources to Open Educational Practices" remains the second-highest accessed article since 2016 and the sixth highest since January 2020. In the same special issue (which focused on Open Educational Practices [OEP]) Coughlan and Perryman explored different discipline approaches to OER, adapting Becher's typology to 21st-century higher education in their piece, "Something for Everyone? The Different Approaches of Academic Disciplines to OER Resources and the Impact on Widening Participation". Reputational factors are explored by Highton et al. in their article, "Making Academic OER Easy: Reflections on Technology and Openness at Oxford University", which explores Oxford University's move towards sharing much of its educational content. Public and institutional policy contexts in Australia are also explored by Bossu et al. in this issue in "Playing Catch-up: Investigating Public and Institutional Policies for OER Practices in Australia". Ben Kehrwald's editorial for this special issue identifies an important transition from open resources to open practice being evidenced among those significant users of OER.

Some misapprehension appears to remain on the part of academics and course designers as to the protocols and processes for reusing existing learning. This is remarkable given the vast majority of learning material is built on existing content. Year after year, course creators regularly and routinely use the same illustrations, charts, graphs, quotes, examples, and any number of resources that they have not created. Yet Google searches from the start of the COVID pandemic suggest very little variation in the attention being paid to OER. This is true in New Zealand, Australia, and globally.

It's conceivable that the term "OER" is too broad and all-encompassing and, therefore, individual academic practitioners will have searched using other parameters. It's also conceivable that individuals, when faced with a sudden shift in mode, were simply too preoccupied to investigate anything that may be conceived of as new or a departure from existing practice. If OERs weren't currently in use, why would someone consider deploying them—despite the evidence of potential cost savings? A review of existing postgraduate qualifications in teaching and learning for university teachers suggests very little attention is paid to close design. There are ordinarily modules that explore foundational theory of learning and teaching, and assessment and feedback. If no one has shown new faculty how to construct learning and reuse existing content, it's not surprising that the emphasis is still on homespun contact.

Papers in this issue

This issue contains an editorial, an invited article by McGreal, et al. (described above) and four primary articles described below.

Brice et al. explore the need to design services for students that are fit for purpose. In their article they share insights gained from the discovery, design, and delivery phases of creating a three-tiered model of non-academic learning support in open, distance, and flexible learning in the context of New Zealand's leading vocational distance provider. Their case study discusses the early vision of the model, Learner Engagement and Success Services (LESS), and the successes and challenges faced in bringing this vision to reality. It focuses on their experience of learning analytics in identifying "exception" learners, issues of its ethical use, and the implications of technological choices. As a tiered model it describes a blend of human- and technology-enabled

interventions and services that are intended to be scalable and use the values of agency and equity.

A practice-based study shared by Rucker reflects on the recent technological changes in education since the advent of the world wide web. Although online learning has gained immense popularity among learners, educators, and university administrators, the challenge of adapting to best practice, pedagogies, tools, and technologies has been met unevenly. Rucker suggests that when educators discover strategies that enhance learner satisfaction, it becomes imperative to share this knowledge with other professionals. In this case study he examines five strategies that he suggests have effectively improved learner satisfaction in computer programming and information technology courses. These strategies encompass providing personalised video feedback, integrating simulation products, incorporating real-world projects, facilitating conversations with industry experts, and ensuring prompt learner engagement.

Another confirmatory piece by Ratnaningsih appears in this issue. This study is from Universitas Terbuka (UT), which operates as Indonesia's Open University. Reflecting on national policy priorities, namely the Long-Term Higher Education Strategy, the author identifies a requirement for being able to reliably model the quality and success criteria expected by their government. The author uses an approach popularised in human geography research. This "frailty approach" is a statistical modelling concept that seeks to account for heterogeneity caused by otherwise apparently unmeasured factors or covariates. A frailty model is a random effect model for time-to-event data, exploring a given random effect (the frailty) and its multiplicative effect on the baseline data. This article outlines a frailty extension to the Cox proportional hazard model which is referred to as the "mixed effect model of non-proportional hazard". The application of this model assesses the chances of distance learners persisting in their studies using "survival analysis". A range of factors were accounted for in the modelling, including educational background, age, existing educational performance, marital status, financial circumstances, learning culture, credits, and courses being undertaken. The model suggests that frailty does indeed have a major impact on student retention. The author suggests institutions need to be aware of, and prioritise appropriately, these frailties when designing their learning services.

One institution's innovation might be seen as business as usual in another. Case studies sometimes serve to confirm existing suppositions. In the post-COVID era there is value in reasserting what has not changed, and it is important to always bear in mind the context in which practice is being undertaken. Sarma et al., in responding in part to the "back to normal" pressure in their institution in Greece, have researched how the technology is used to support trainee teachers in their context of Microsoft Teams. This work also provides a framework for reflecting on mode and approaches to learning. They reconfirm that the advantage of asynchronous facilitation is how it allows flexibility of time for both students and staff, and that the disadvantages include the impersonal nature of the interaction. They conclude that, in their context, there remains a need for ongoing research and reflection.

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