

## Fostering Open Educational Practices

### Author

**Patrick McAndrew,**  
Associate Director (Learning  
& Teaching) Institute of  
Educational Technology  
The Open University  
[p.mcandrew@open.ac.uk](mailto:p.mcandrew@open.ac.uk)

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OER are becoming accepted as part of the range of materials that learners and educators can use. However, the methods and practices that enable learners, teachers and institutions to best engage with OER are not yet established and may well be more important in enabling change in education systems than the availability of the resources themselves. By looking at the experiences that The Open University in the UK has in direct provision of OER and the broader research carried out by the Open Learning Network (OLnet) initiative, several factors and related practices can be identified that should help encourage openness and engagement with OER.

### Experiences from The Open University

The Open University in the UK has direct *experience* working with OER through OpenLearn, *research* into the impact of OER through the OLnet initiative, and *understanding* as an institute of how OER can influence future options. We see OER as having the potential to change the practice of learners, educators and organisations in a profound way. The *learner* is given choice by OER of ways to learn, either as existing courses make use of the resources or much less formally through individual or group learning around and with the open resources. The practice of learning in this open way does not come naturally to everyone and methods that link together individual experiences need to be developed. For the *educator* this means thinking through the design and operation of an open approach to education. A key element is the release of resources with a licence that allows change and reuse leading to new forms of course based on paths, guidance and ways to learn. *Institutions* can evolve by offering the missing elements of support, assessment and accreditation to link the non-formal to the formal. However, there are also more radical options where new practices are needed.

This paper builds on the experience we have had at The Open University in Open Educational resources. First in OpenLearn where we released content to the world for free. And then in the OLnet initiative which has a research focus that looks much more outside the Open University to find evidence. The Open University has always been open in various ways (McAndrew, 2010) and so there is an interest in new ways to make use of openness. OpenLearn provided an experiment in opening up content that had previously only been available for those paying fees. The evaluation of OpenLearn (McAndrew et al, 2009) found there were several benefits. These included accelerating innovation, establishing collaborations, and attracting new students to the University. In contrast to the inward looking work on OpenLearn, OLnet is considering the developments across all of those involved in OER. For example part of the work has been examining more than 100 reported results from OER project funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The Hewlett Foundation has been a major catalyst for the adoption of more open approaches. Analysis of the projects over time shows a move from initial work on the concept of open content, to supporting the open provision of existing content to now work on advocacy and models of use. The concept of resources them-

selves as the core of openness is gradually being augmented with the concept of Open Educational Practices (OEP), notably through the work of the EU funded Opal project (Ehlers, 2011). In other words; how does the presence of approved and free resources change the operation of individuals and institutions?

### Elements of practice

In OLnet our analysis has picked out five factors

**1 Infrastructure:** the tools that are needed for sharing of content, but also of practice and experiences. Such infrastructure includes the software basis that is becoming well established as free and open systems underlie much of the Internet, but also the infrastructure of legal elements, such as copyright and process models. The models are changing from producer-led such as OpenCourseWare (Carson, 2007) to more open approaches where all may share content. Each approach offers different advantages with the more formal having clearer messages of quality and expectation, while the latter has greater potential for diversity.

**2 Use:** with the greater availability of content there is more opportunity for use and to recognise the way in which OER can act as an attractor for communities of learners. Social spaces can be established on top of content. so even in a move towards greater value in social learning and the gaining of “21st Century Skills” (ref) the role of content as a way to bring people together and allow self-directed learning is a great enabler of learning.

**3 Design:** designing for openness both in terms of the content itself, but also the models for use of educational contents. Research has shown (Dimitriadis et al, 2009) that considering designing for use of the content and establishing patterns around free and open content may bring benefits more quickly than embedding the design in the materials.

**4 Adoption:** how to make use of OER as the basis for the practice of institutions and individuals. This places content as only part of the function of learning. To complete the learning experience other elements such as management, support, assessment and accreditation all have roles to play. Content can be seen as part of a disaggregation of each of these components allowing institutions to build revised models around bringing together free content alongside other services. However there can also be more radical models demonstrated by initiative such as P2PU (<http://p2pu.org/>), OpenSE (<http://opense.net/>), OpenEd 2.0 (<http://www.open-ed.eu/>) that are each offering open courses

based on open content or rethinking of the value of education and the more personal control summarised as “Do-It-Yourself University” (Kamenetz, 2010).

**5 Policy:** an increasingly important aspect of OER is the recognition that they have characteristics to support change at many levels, including institutional and national policies. Adjusting the copyright and permissions to content may seem like a minor change. However the use of openness has enabled the crossing of barriers and an easy path for sharing experiences without having to establish all agreements and components.

### Contexts

The context provides a further underlying factor. Contextual matters include the country, culture, level, organisation and other special aspects of each situation. The OLnet fellowship programme illustrates the way in which OER can both adjust and apply in different contexts. The fellowship programme will support at least 24 fellows over the 3-year period of OLnet. So far 15 fellowships have taken place or are underway. These can be loosely characterised as “expert fellowships”, where the recipient is bringing in their specialist knowledge and being given the space and direction to apply that expertise to OER research and as “open fellowships”, which are more developmental in nature and focussed on solving particular problems using OER.

Each fellow brings their own experiences and situation. Being able to work across these contexts has given an important pointer to how to operate in a more open future. This work has helped us share and reflect on approaches already identified but more importantly we have also been able to bring in new lessons in each case. Examples of contexts that the fellows have brought from different countries and cultures include: In China (<http://olnet.org/node/485>), to share teaching methods as much as teaching resources and to bring in use of open environments alongside the programme of national courses linked to the use of the open environment of OpenLearn. In Brazil OER (<http://slidesha.re/eZLgpa>) are being used to support outreach by institutions. In Turkey (<http://olnet.org/node/195>) to support the expansion of tertiary education. Working with UNESCO in Russia and CIS (<http://olnet.org/node/422>) to help set up a study of the readiness for OER in that part of the world.

### Conclusion

The greater spread and availability of Open Educational Resources has given a platform for change and adoption of Open Educational Practice. These require a process of change and development if they are to give the greatest benefit. The evidence that is emerging is that embracing openness can provide many opportunities. The first recognised moves to open content took place approximately 10 years ago with the 10th anniversary of OpenCourseWare about to be marked in 2011 (OCWC conference). The level of maturity of the field means that there are chance for new innovations but also lessons that should be taken as involvement continues to grow. The five factors outlined above can be treated as the basis for recommendations such as:

1. Infrastructure: an open approach needs to be transportable and so there is no need to develop new systems. Legal problems solved in one context often can be adopted for other contexts.
2. Use: there is greater opportunity in making use of the thousands of free open resources than in focussing on production
3. Design: focus on the way in which a learner may work with a variety of content rather than specific content.
4. Adoption: content is only part of the answer, the role for support and accreditation remains but there may also be a chance for innovation.
5. Policy: governments often appear to seek the impossible of an expanding education system that costs less. Openness is one of the few approaches that may be able to achieve this aim.

Open approaches continue to develop and it remains clear that there is much to learn from new contexts and systems in this period of change. The role for international bodies such as UNESCO in encouraging awareness of the approaches and developing two way communication can help to improve communication and provide a catalyst to taking up the chances that are available.

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