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Fulfilling the Promise of Open Content

By Lisa Petrides

The concept of aggregating, sharing, and collaboratively enriching free educational materials over the Internet has been emerging over the past several years. The movement has been led by faculty members and content specialists who believe that making lesson plans, training modules and full courses freely available can help improve teaching and make educational resources more dynamic through a cross-pollination of ideas and expertise. The Hewlett Foundation-funded OpenCourseWare initiative and the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education's OER Commons offer a glimpse of the potential for open content in higher education.

Unfortunately, the movement to use open educational resources in higher education hasn't yet realized the full impact that its founders anticipated. Open content is still in its infancy and faces some technical and cultural challenges that affect its widespread adoption.

Interoperability — the ability of multiple initiatives on different technology platforms to seamlessly share metadata and resources—is at the root of the technical challenge for open education resources. Like many initiatives in education, there is a tangled web of entry. People in higher education are accessing OER using numerous technologies, software applications, and Web sites. Content can be found in dozens and dozens of different formats. Meanwhile, some content is behind firewalls, while other content simply requires the user to create a free account, and some is truly open — like Wikipedia.

While the present lack of interoperability is a challenge, it is also the nature of innovation. For example, there used to be dozens of search engines, each of which produced varying results with different methods. Now there are a few major ones that produce similar results. We can expect that several major open content initiatives will survive on the basis of merit and that this diversity will strengthen the movement as a whole.

An even greater challenge may be the cultural resistance to open educational resources, including the closed-door, "this is mine" mentality and pride of ownership over content that pervades college teaching. Many college faculty members hold on tightly to their syllabi, readings, and lecture notes because this material closely follows a book or article idea that they are in the midst of writing. Or they fear that their ideas will be appropriated by others. Or there may be promotion review on the horizon, and this original scholarship might be their ticket to success.

Or they may simply be reluctant to allow people they don't know and to whom they haven't given explicit permission to use and share the content of their course materials.

Issues of ownership and intellectual property rights are a related cultural – and legal – challenge. For example, it is unclear in many institutions who really owns faculty-produced content in the first place. Do faculty have the right to give away something that a university has already bought and paid for as part of their salary? Or does intellectual freedom and expression entitle faculty to freely own and license their ideas to others?

Ironically, a countervailing trend – toward openness and collaboration – also inhabits higher education, where the spirit of open educational resources has been prevalent for centuries. An individual instructor might create a syllabus and lecture notes that are then passed along to a group of instructors for a class that is then taught by 10 different people over five years. These economies of scale emerge to increase efficiency, which allows more time for research and professional service. Professors also may gravitate to syllabi and reading lists that elicit the best results from their specific students. In other cases, new faculty will take an old syllabus for a specific course and reshape it to match their own interests, research, or philosophies.

Recently, experts in education, open content– along with alternative-copyright advocates and Internet innovators – gathered in Cape Town to explore how to spark a global revolution in teaching and learning in which educators and students could be much more actively engaged as creators, users, and adapters of content. In their Cape Town declaration, they argued that this transformation can only occur if educators, authors, publishers, and higher education institutions make more materials available and accessible for public use. To speed acceptance of open content, the declaration calls on administrators to incorporate open education into policy decisions, making sharing of educational resources a new priority. The document emphasizes that open education is fundamentally about strengthening all scholarship and teaching through collaboration—and developing the technologies to make that happen. Open education should be a “win” for all faculty members and constitutes “a wise investment in teaching and learning for the 21st century.”

Points of debate at the Cape Town meeting focused on the value of licenses that allow for commercial or non-commercial use of content, and on the importance of enabling the modification and adaptation of the content. Other questions arose regarding the messages we were sending: Is the open education movement about practitioners or policies? How “disruptive” should the call to action be? Is this document for teachers and faculty or for others? The Declaration was not designed to articulate consensus. Rather, it communicates a common core of commitments that form the starting point for the worldwide OER movement.

The Cape Town meeting identified OER as a linchpin to a basic right. Just like food, shelter, and clean drinking water, everybody deserves access to education and knowledge.

While many may agree with this sentiment today, for the OER movement to have greater impact on higher education, colleges and universities need to create incentives to reward faculty for sharing their content. This might include developing new types of sabbaticals focused on

creating the first generation of open educational resources. Foundations could even fund “remixing communities” focused on expanding and refining open educational resources.

In addition to faculty, whose scholarship can advance immeasurably faster with broad adoption of OER, students stand to benefit enormously. Open education holds the promise of opening the door of higher education to millions. For example, open content can reduce the need to purchase expensive textbooks, which can constitute up to three-fourths of community-college students’ spending. But even these benefits are not the final yield of the OER movement, which holds the promise of nothing less than finally ensuring that access to the highest-quality education is a right of all people, everywhere.

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