

Something Open This Way Comes

Prepare for Disruption

In 1995 Harvard Business School professor Clayton M. Christensen coined the phrase 'disruptive technology' referring to technologies that take the market by surprise and overturn established business models and methods [1]. Both the motorcar and the telephone started in this way, as fringe technologies that eventually changed the world.

The Internet is the greatest modern source of disruptive technology, and yet it is consistently underestimated as an agent of change. Online shopping, digital music and massive public projects like Wikipedia have revolutionized retail, music and the publishing industries. TV-on-demand and file sharing now threaten the TV industry.

So why is it that Higher Education still sees the Internet as a fringe technology?

Sure, we market our institutions via websites, and talk to our students with email and through the VLE, but in what ways are we truly embracing the Internet, might it fundamentally change what we do? Will it change education?

The World Wide Web in particular is transforming the way that our society operates. The Web abhors control, and instead rewards openness. We are already seeing students escaping the confines of their University IT systems for the vast public spaces of Wikipedia, YouTube and Facebook. You may have escaped yourself. Teachers are increasingly using sites like iTunesU and SlideShare to share their materials.

It seems that the Web is changing the balance of power; in the future Universities will no longer be seen as the primary custodians of public wisdom, there is a need for us to reinvent ourselves as voices of authority in a more open information world.

The growing movement for Open Education Resources (OER) is one attempt to rise to this challenge [2]. OERs are teaching materials that have been released into the public domain, normally through one of the Creative Commons licenses that makes it free for public or educational use as long as the original author is acknowledged.

The argument is simple, by developing OERs Higher Education Institutions are able to contribute to the public information space, share new ideas, raise the profile of teaching, and give individual academics a more public voice.

Several high profile institutions are already embracing OER. MIT has made great swaths of its course and lecture material available, making a clear statement about its position on the academic landscape. National bodies are also beginning to promote OER. The JISC recently launched a £2m OER program to support

institutions in publishing course materials, and are preparing JorumOpen¹, an open national resource bank of teaching materials. There are also well-established commercial sites for helping groups develop open teaching materials, for example Connexions², which allows users to assemble bespoke chapters and exercises from its collection and can even supply them as printed books at a fraction of the price of a traditional textbook.

In our own work at the University of Southampton's Learning Societies Lab, we have been exploring how we can reinvent teaching and learning repositories to help teachers and students share their everyday materials. Working with the teaching languages community we have developed a community repository site, called the Language Box [3], which aims to learn from recent Web 2.0 sites like YouTube, and enables users to easily put all sorts of multimedia content online.

Barriers to OER

Working closely with the community on the Language Box has also given us an insight into the fears that people have about OER. There seem to be three major issues: Quality, Competitiveness and Copyright.

The concern about quality is double-edged; teachers are concerned about the quality of materials that their students might find online, but they are also concerned that their own materials might not be good enough. The Web contains a lot of material – some of it junk - but we have become familiar with a number of ways of filtering it out, such as using comments, hit counters, ratings and author identity. These are used by visitors to make judgments about the value of resources, and can also be used by system software like recommenders that steer visitors towards higher quality materials. As teachers we should have more confidence in our ability to stand out from the rest, this may mean becoming less self-consciousness and accepting that our materials may be judged by others, but in the positive context of sharing.

The worry about competitiveness is actually a fear about giving away what are seen as valuable resources. Our teaching resources do represent a substantial personal and institutional investment, but did any of your students choose your institution because of the quality of your notes? I would argue that teaching resources are the least valuable of our teaching assets, coming a long way behind staff, facilities and reputation. By sharing our resources we draw attention to the excellence of these other factors, and help to distinguish ourselves in the eyes of potential students who routinely search the web in search of guidance.

Of all the factors that teachers have voiced to us during the development of the Language Box it is copyright that is the main reason that users are unprepared to share. There is uncertainty about what copyright laws apply with online materials, and this isn't helped by institutional rules that are vague or untested. This is a difficult fear for individual academics to overcome, institutions need to be much more supportive of staff who want to use OER. Hopefully in the UK the JISC initiative will help with cultural change, and the positive experiences of

¹ JorumOpen website: <http://www.jorum.ac.uk/>

² Connexions website: <http://cnx.org/>

other institutions (like MIT) will set a good example. In the meantime common sense will steer us well, we should respect other people's work, not knowingly break copyright restrictions, and always give attribution so that the right people get credit for their work. And we mustn't forget that copyright also protects us; even free and open licenses like Creative Commons protect our status as authors, and can restrict the ways that others use our resources (for example, by declaring whether they can alter them, or use them for commercial purposes).

Is this a Fad?

It is easy to dismissive fashionable technologies as a fad, but this is to miss the underlying reasons that are driving the trends. OER needs to be understood in the broader context of Higher Education Institutions re-aligning themselves with the way that society views knowledge and community. Individual tools will come and go, YouTube will not last forever, but we have passed a point where it is easy for anybody to create and distribute multimedia content and there is no going back - podcasting is not just for Christmas.

The Web is a disruptive technology because it changes the value of information. What was once scarce is now common, what was once expensive is now cheap. OER is a good approach because it allows Higher Education Institutions to begin the process of opening up, and gives them a way to participate in the public information space as contributors and curators (rather than the custodians) of knowledge.

First Footsteps

Of course OER raises personal challenges for all of us who are involved in teaching – we can't all be digital natives, and most of us don't have the time to experiment with new technology. But there are ways we can contribute, and baby steps that we can take that will add up to make a difference.

By incorporating good web materials into our own teaching we will not only reduce our own overheads, but also begin to teach our students about quality sources of information on the web. We can participate by leaving feedback for authors, and use comments or email to thank them or tell them how we have used their materials. It is a wonderful feeling to receive a thank you from a distant colleague or from a stranger who has enjoyed your work.

We can also better manage our own digital materials and try to use them as effectively as we can. This doesn't necessarily mean changing our workflows, it could be as simple as sharing the original Word or Powerpoint files that we have developed. Where we can we should be generous with these assets by putting them on sites like SlideShare or adding them to community sites like the Language Box. If there is a decision that needs to be made at a Departmental or Institutional level for this to happen then we should start the discussion.

There is a good reason that the impact of the Web is often compared to the printing press – both technologies democratized information, the printing press brought reading to the masses, the Web is doing the same with writing. Adapting our teaching to these new technologies through initiatives like OER is not about staying cool with the kids, it is about adjusting education to a new landscape, and making it relevant – not to new technology – but to a changing society.

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[1] Bower, Joseph L. & Christensen, Clayton M. (1995). "Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave" Harvard Business Review, January-February 1995

[2] Caswell T, Henson S, Jenson M, Wiley D. Open educational resources: Enabling universal education. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (2008) vol. 9 (1)

[3] Millard, D., Howard, Y., McSweeney, P., Borthwick, K., Arrebola, M. and Watson, J. (2009) The Language Box: Re-imagining Teaching and Learning Repositories. In: International Conference on Advanced Learning Technologies, July 14-18, 2009, Riga, Latvia.