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One Size Doesn't Fit All: Contrasting Approaches to Building Communities of OER Users Amongst the Language Teaching Community

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Abstract. The LLAS Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, at the University of Southampton, UK, has led a number of projects aimed at creating and building communities of sharers and users of open educational resources (OERs). We have worked with very different groups within the language teaching community to raise awareness about OERs, encourage practical engagement with OERs, and foster good practice in the use and re-use of open content. All of our projects sustain continuing community activity. We have found that a 'one size fits all' approach is often offered by institutions to those wishing to engage with open practice, but that it is unlikely to be as effective as a more direct, personalised approach. Through an analysis of the needs and challenges of different groups of language teachers we have worked with, we will show that a flexible approach, which takes into consideration existing practice and indicates how OERs relate to this, ensures a greater chance of OER uptake and use, and increases the likelihood of open practice sustaining in the longer term.

Keywords: open educational resources, language teaching, professional development, technology.

1. Introduction

The LLAS Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies**, at the University of Southampton, UK, has led a number of projects aimed at creating and building communities of creators and users of open educational resources. Projects such as JISC*** – funded HumBox (Dickens et al, 2010) and Community Café (Borthwick & Dickens, 2011) have worked with very different groups within the language

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** A research and enterprise group which promotes the study and teaching of languages, www.llas.ac.uk

*** UK funding body, the Joint Information Systems Committee, www.jisc.ac.uk

teaching community to raise awareness about open educational resources, encourage practical engagement with OERs, and foster good practice in the use and re-use of open content. Activity within these communities of open practice continues beyond the life of the projects which created them and LLAS is now working with a new group of language teachers, within the higher education sector, on the FAVOR (JISC) project. We are applying the knowledge and experience gained on previous projects to this new community group within the Languages discipline areas. Our experience indicates that the most effective method to encourage actual sharing and resource re-use is to use direct and personalised approaches which take into consideration existing practice, understand where OERs may meet a need, and weave OERs into the web of everyday professional activity.

2. Background

OERs are “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others” (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007, p. 4). In recent years, the UK government has devoted large amounts of funding, via the JISC (2012), to encouraging the publication of open educational resources by the academic community in the UK, and to exploring issues around the publication, creation and re-use of OERs. Nonetheless, the ‘adoption of open practice in UK higher education remains patchy,’ (Darby, 2012) and Comas-Quinn, Beaven, Pleines, Pulker, and Delos Arcos (2011) note that interest has increasingly begun to shift from the resources themselves (and the desire to simply put large amounts of open content on the web), to the communities that form around open repositories of content. However, they point out that ‘issues that enable or inhibit the use, reuse and remix of OERs’ by members of these communities are still emerging areas of research.

Our work with different groups of language educators sits within this context. We have found that while OERs are effective in increasing the pool of high quality resources available to all teachers and promoting individual work, there is a danger that individual users can be lost and alienated by a generic approach (for example the demand to share through institutional or national repositories, such as Jorum*) and do not feel ‘buy-in’ to sharing websites or even to the concept of sharing their resources. This is because they do not see this kind of activity as relevant to them or their professional practice. Our experience confirms the idea that while academics and teachers understand that OER sharing is of benefit in a general way to the whole education sector, many struggle to see how these benefits relate to their day-to-day teaching.

* www.jorum.ac.uk

3. Method

3.1. The HumBox project

The first of LLAS's two recent OER-related projects worked with language content specialists in higher education. The HumBox project ran from 2009-2010 and it sought to engage eleven higher education humanities practitioners in publishing their work as OERs. Language tutors from five universities participated in the project using the HumBox* website to publish their resources.

3.1.1. *The challenge*

The challenge for the HumBox project was to get humanities practitioners to share their existing teaching resources as open content. We found at the outset that amongst the project group there was a general inclination to share materials but that this usually happened informally and on a local basis. There was also a wide range of digital materials already in existence amongst their files ready for sharing online. It was also acknowledged that sharing content openly across humanities disciplines was desirable – particularly for language teaching, where there is a great need for adaptable, authentic and suitable materials on a range of topics. In addition, it was felt that excellence in teaching is often unrewarded and unrecognised, but that engaging with open practice may offer a way to showcase good work. This idea had particular resonance with language tutors, who are often on teaching-only contracts and are not engaged in research. Despite these positive attitudes towards sharing materials, there was a reticence to engage with online open practice and practitioners voiced concerns about quality, copyright, abuse of their materials and the time required to engage with OERs.

3.1.2. *Our approach*

Our approach was a practical one: we intended users to explore their concerns with open practice *while* actually doing it. We created a neutral online environment (the HumBox) which was initially closed to anyone outside the project, and this allowed practitioners to experiment straight away with publishing different resources and to discuss issues associated with quality and copyright in a collective way. This enabled participants to work through their concerns with the advice and support of the project group, and to focus on their teaching and their discipline rather than institutional differences or imperatives. This approach encouraged the general collegiate feeling of professional trust that exists between fellow practitioners to be extended to the online, open HumBox group.

We also engaged the project team in processes that were familiar to them: publishing work for others to view, offering work for peer review, and reflection on their pedagogical practice. All of these activities are part of everyday academic life

* www.humbox.ac.uk

and the project simply gave them a new twist by putting them 'out in the open.' This meant that rather than engaging with a totally new process in their professional lives, project participants were revising their understanding of existing processes – but in a new context.

At the close of the project, the HumBox had become open and all resources were available for others' to download and adapt. The community that had been seeded by the project had grown from 20 to 200 (registered users), and it continues to expand (Borthwick, 2012).

3.2. The Community Café project

The Community Café project ran from 2010-2011 and was a collaboration between the University of Southampton, Southampton City Council and Manchester Metropolitan University. Its aim was to create, publish online and share a collection of open access digital resources for community-based language teachers in the Southampton area.

3.2.1. The challenge

Community-based language teachers face different challenges from their colleagues in the higher education sector. They often teach 'out-of-hours,' in informal situations, and are reliant on creating their own materials due to a scarcity of relevant, up-to-date resources. They often work in isolation and do not have the opportunity to meet with other tutors to share ideas and practice, and there are only occasional opportunities for professional development. This was a group that could clearly benefit from sharing resources and ideas in an open way and they were willing – indeed, hungry to do so; however, they lacked the practical and pedagogical skills, training and equipment necessary to engage with open practice.

3.2.2. Our approach

Once again, our approach was a practical one. We held informal café-style meetings which enabled tutors to share practice and ideas across cultural and linguistic groups, and we complemented these sessions with training in the use of technology to create materials, and good practice for OER-sharing. The project ultimately became less about creating a bank of resources and more about using open practice as a vehicle to reflect on and enhance pedagogical practice. Tutors report an ongoing impact on their teaching as a result of work on the project.

3.3. The FAVOR project

FAVOR (Finding a Voice through Open Resources) runs until October 2012. It is working with hourly-paid language tutors across five different institutions to publish existing materials as OERs and create new OERs to support language learning in the UK. The challenge for such tutors is to receive recognition for the important role they

play in the academic life of their institutions, and so our approach in this case, is to highlight institutional affiliations as well as community identity (as language tutors).

4. Discussion

The benefits of engaging with OERs are, on the surface, similar for each group: increasing the pool of resources available; showcasing excellent teaching work; raising the profiles of creators, and enhancing professional practice, but each group has required a different approach in order to begin to realise these benefits.

For higher education language tutors, the principle obstacles to engaging with open practice were conceptual, e.g., fears around copyright and IPR or anxiety over peer reviews; but for community-based tutors, they were practical – e.g., how to create online materials or how to write effective metadata. The new group of FAVOR tutors are finding it more satisfying to realise benefits of open practice through a reconnection with their individual institutions alongside community sharing. The use of a flexible, web 2.0-style community-oriented website has been used for all projects and this also greatly assisted in seeding the online community in each case.

5. Conclusions

Our experience indicates that the nature and concerns of particular groups need to be taken into consideration and addressed directly, in order to best encourage the organic growth of a group of OER sharers and users. We have found that when this method is adopted, OERs have a greater chance of uptake and use. A ‘one size fits all’ approach to encouraging engagement with open practice does not convey the benefits to individuals of doing so, or how OERs can be contextualised within professional practice.

We have found that being part of an identified community provides reassurance in grappling with issues around open practice; however, the motivations of OER users need further research. The FAVOR project will report its findings later in the year and we hope it will contribute to a greater understanding of how and why OER communities grow and sustain themselves.

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