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Investigating Supported or Unsupported Individual and Group Work in Open Forums in an Open Educational Resources Repository

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Abstract

Open Educational Resources (OERs) can play a part in advancing the lifelong learning and social inclusion agendas (Geser, 2007). The focal point of this paper is on how learners of different ages will be encouraged to adopt OERs by their teachers and facilitators. The discussion starts by looking at how the facilitators will support their learners in an open arena. This is followed by the facilitators approach to individual and group work in an open access environment. The discourse then moves on to whether open forums attached to OERs will be used instead of closed and password protected areas. This paper gives initial feedback about the intended usage of OERs for co-operative and collaborative learning.

Keywords

Lifelong learning, Open Educational Resources, Open Education, online forums

Introduction

The availability of networked lifelong learning opportunities is becoming more important as parts of the world come to terms with the reality of an aging society. Lifelong learning needs to be actively supported through easy access to online educational resources (Geser, 2007). Once access to Open Educational Resources (OERs) is achieved, how will those teaching different age groups facilitate the learning experience? This paper investigates how an Open Educational Resources Repository could facilitate online activity between learners and teachers who are used to a closed (password protected) online environment. The eleven participants (from ten institutions) involved in this research are based internationally and their learners range from school age to later-life learners.

The origin and development of OERs is discussed in detail by a number of authors (Smith, and Casserly, 2006; Hylan, 2006; Geser, 2007). The initial advocates of OERs provided online course materials (Smith, and Casserly, 2006) and the OER movement has encouraged sharing of assets between individuals and organisations (Atkins et al. 2007). Today's entrants to this arena provide an environment, which includes complementary social networking tools. One of these new OER initiatives is from the United Kingdom (UK) Open University and is called OpenLearn (Open Content Initiative, 2006). This initiative is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and was launched on 25th October 2006.

One of OpenLearn's social networking tools is an open online forum attached to each 'unit' of Open Educational Resource. This paper focuses on the facilitators' perspective of how they would use OERs and forums with their learners in terms of:

- Supported and unsupported access,
- Individual or group work,
- Usage of an open forum or the institutions own communications facility.

The discussion is also supported by a short case study provided by the later-life learning organisation involved in this study.

OpenLearn

The UK Open University has been developing high quality distance learning courses for almost forty years. OpenLearn is adapting these high quality multiple media materials for delivery as OERs across eleven different topic areas. The units themselves vary in length between four hours and thirty hours of study time and are categorised within a particular level of study (Lane, 2006). The learner can interact on an individual basis with the material or choose to work with others within the open environment. Essentially OpenLearn is an Open Educational Resources (OERs) system based on a Moodle enhanced environment. It is designed to support group work through online forums, attached to each unit of material. OpenLearn is therefore an integrated OER system, which also provides unit reviews, unit rating and community building tools (all advocated by Smith, and Casserly, 2006). The community building features include video conferencing, synchronous messaging and mind mapping tools. To use the forums or other social networking tools the participants need to apply for free registration. See OpenLearn www.open.ac.uk/openlearn and (Wilson 2007; McAndrew and Hirst, 2007) for more information.

The study

This research is focused on how different institutions plan to discuss the OpenLearn units of material, as individuals, in groups and whether the forum associated with each unit of material will be used. This study involves eleven representatives from ten institutions' who are based nationally and internationally. The institutions learners include a variety of age groups. The respondents involved are based at institutions, which include a school, colleges, universities and a later-life non-accrediting learning organisation (for the latter see Wilson, 2007 also). Participants are based in the following countries: one in South Africa, one in Kenya, one in Germany and eight in the United Kingdom. To understand how OERs could be used by learners (under guidance from educators) the following questions are addressed:

- Would learners be directed to the OpenLearn website and/or supported by a tutor in their use of the OpenLearn material?
- Would learners be expected to work on the material on an individual basis or in groups?
- Would learners be encouraged to use the online forum provided in OpenLearn and/or an online area provided by the institution?

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews (as advocated by Preece et al., 1994; Zand, 1994; Fowler, 1993). Five were conducted face to face when distance was not an issue. Six personal on-line semi-structured interviews were conducted when the interviewer and interviewee were long distances apart. Debenham (2001) termed this technique the epistolary interview. The interviews took place between three and six months after OpenLearn was launched (15th January 2007 and 3rd April 2007). The findings are complemented by a short case study, provided by a member of the non-accrediting later-life learning organisation. The member visited the OpenLearn Website, reviewed its content and provided the short case study for the Languages topic area in February 2007.

The findings

As indicated earlier the interviews and the case study were undertaken between three and six months after the OpenLearn website was launched. This early collection of data was to provide feedback for the project and baseline data that could be used for comparison at a later date. In this paper the findings will be discussed under the following headings:

- How the ten institutions planned to support their students' usage of the OpenLearn OER units
- Planned proposals by the ten institutions to use OpenLearn OER units with groups of learners.
- Planned utilisation of the communication facilities for collaboration and cooperation by the ten institutions.
- A short case study example in the Languages topic area.

Now let us move on to discuss the actual results from the interviews and case study.

How the ten institutions planned to support their students' usage of the OpenLearn OER units

The opinions of the eleven participants were sought as to whether learners would be directed to the OpenLearn OER units or supported by a tutor in their use of the OpenLearn material. Seven out of the eleven respondents said that they would use both methods. Sometimes they would send their students directly to the OpenLearn website. On other occasions they would provide tutor support when they required their students to access the OpenLearn OER units, see figure 1. Not all interviewees agreed though that they would use both methods. Two subjects would send the students directly to the website without tutor support (a school in the UK and a study skills section of a university in the UK) and two subjects would not send students to the OpenLearn website without tutor support (two further education colleges in the UK). The reason for providing tutor support is explained more fully by one of the participants from one of the UK based further education colleges. His/her comment is as follows:

... we're exploring independent learning and the concept of 'WebQuesting' at the moment. My view is that learners would be guided towards OpenLearn and supported – I am keen that we don't lose sight of the learning objectives and guide our learners accordingly (particularly as many of them don't have the research skills expected of higher or more mature and motivated learners – as I guess is the case for the majority of Higher Education & Open University learners. This is not necessarily the case in Further Education where we have a wider spectrum of learners ranging from the very able to ... basic literacy learners'.

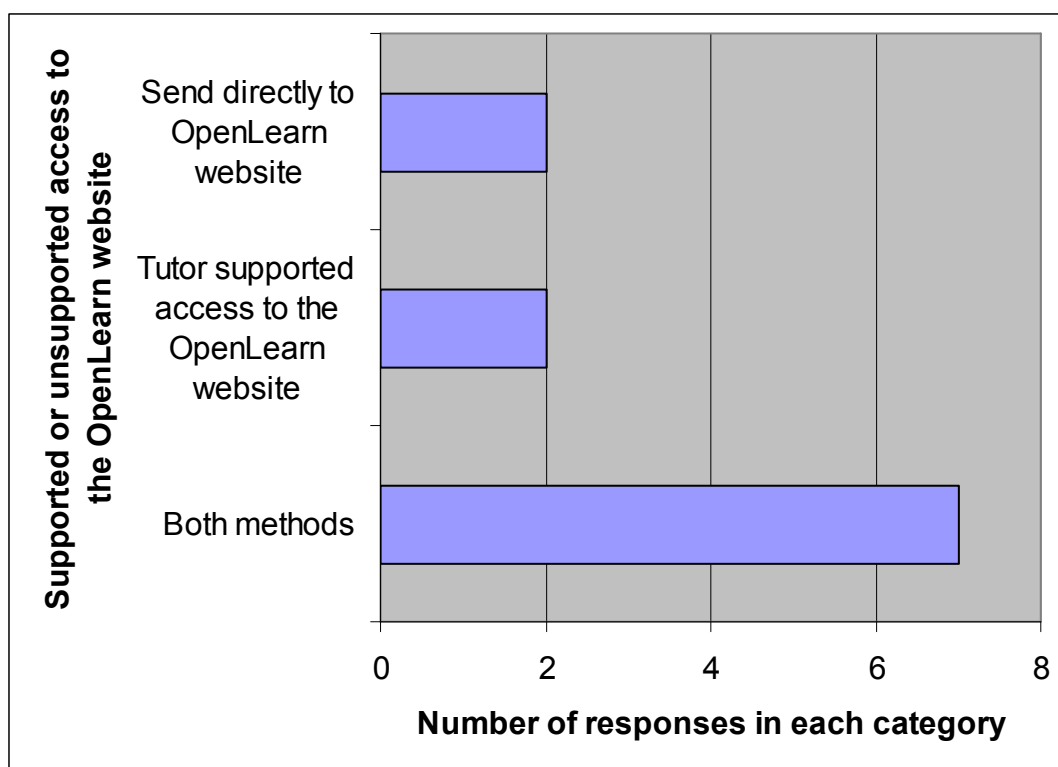


Figure 1: Whether learners would be directed to OpenLearn and/or supported by a tutor

The motivation for providing both supported and unsupported access to the OpenLearn material is clarified by a lecturer at a campus based university in the UK. She/he says:

If I was going to use what is on OpenLearn at the moment for something I was going to teach myself then for three quarters of the time I would be directing students to work on their own. If I was adapting material jointly with other universities then I would want to be

the tutor for the material. Perhaps this could be something like adapting the ‘Economist style quiz.

The need to not support students is expanded upon by a teacher at a school in the UK. He/she suggests that:

Students are quite autonomous in their learning at ‘A’ level. Certain teachers may suggest to their students that they might like to use OpenLearn when doing research.

All eleven respondents were keen for their learners to make use of the OpenLearn units. Seven of the eleven respondents reported that depending on the circumstances they would be happy to either direct their students learning within OpenLearn or to let the students discover information for themselves. These positive responses are perhaps an indication of the quality of the OpenLearn distance learning OERs. It is interesting that it is two further education colleges rather than the school who feel they need to support their students learning with the OERs.

Planned proposals by the ten institutions to use OpenLearn OER units with groups of learners

Openlearn provides opportunities for both individuals and groups to work through units. To find out which method would be preferred those participating from the institutions were asked for their opinions. They were invited to respond as to whether learners would be expected to work on the OpenLearn OER units on an individual basis or in groups.

Again seven of the eleven interviewees (though not the same set of seven) indicated that they would expect learners to work with the OpenLearn units individually and in groups (see figure 2). A requirement to work with the OpenLearn OER units on an individual basis only was an expectation of three of the eleven respondents (a distance learning college, a school and a university all based in the UK). Only one respondent thought that learners would only work with the materials in groups (a further education college in the UK).

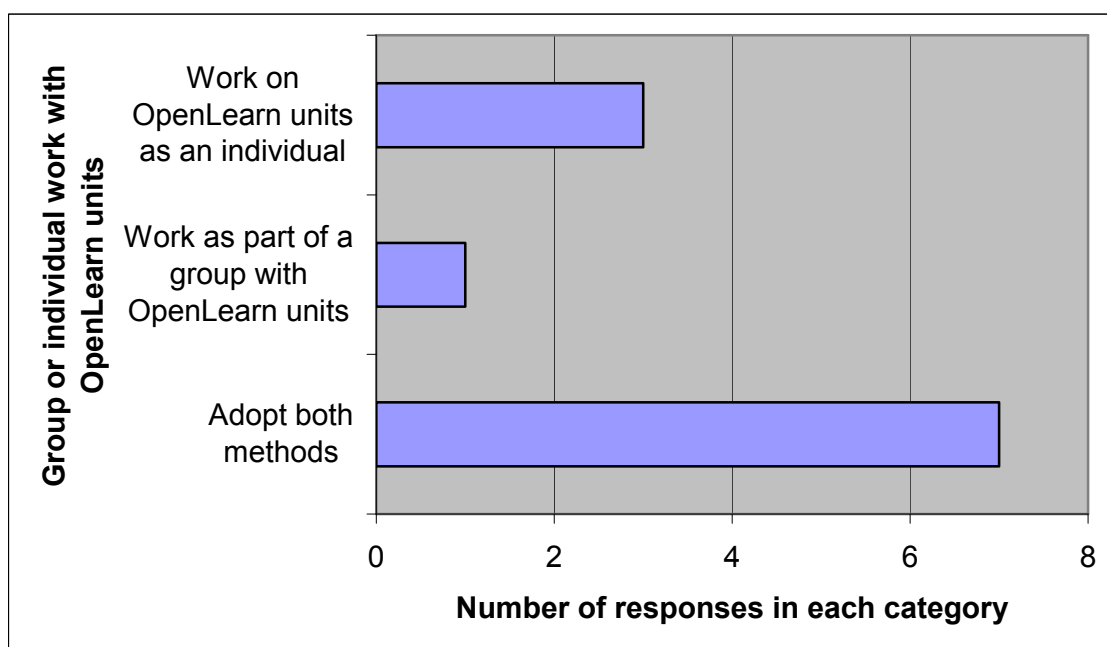


Figure 2: Whether learners are expected to work on the units of material as individual or in groups

The participant from a further education college expands upon the requirement for students to work with the OpenLearn units on both an individual basis and in groups. He/she says:

I firmly believe there's room for both strategies, dependent upon the learning outcomes and the course – collaboration stimulates co-operation but also debate. It can help students resolve problems for themselves and I'm very keen that we don't go down the straight jacket route of saying one method should preference the other.

A university lecturer explained the reason for encouraging students to work on the OpenLearn units on an individual basis, as 'group work is difficult to handle and to evaluate'. A lecturer from the further education college could only foresee the students working in groups rather than individually. He/she responded:

...with recruitment and selection for first years, I could start them working in groups in the class session. Then they could spend 1 hour accessing the material in the computer room working in groups of two.

The majority of respondents agreed that their learners would work both individually and in groups with the OpenLearn units. It is curious that the further education college lecturer can only envisage the students working in groups while the university lecturer would advocate working on an individual basis only. Perhaps the college is thinking in terms of informal working whereas the university lecturer appears to be thinking in terms of accreditation.

Planned utilisation of the communication facilities for collaboration and cooperation by the ten institutions

The representatives from the ten institutions were asked if they would encourage their learners to use the online forum provided in OpenLearn with each unit of material or whether they would expect their learners to use an area that the institution provided for them.

The responses to this question were much more varied. Usage of both the online forum provided with each unit in OpenLearn and a communications area provided by the institution would be recommended by four of the eleven interviewees. Another four of the eleven interviewees responded that they would encourage the institutions learners to use only the online forum whereas three participants preferred their learners to use only a communications area provided by the institution (see figure 3).

A lecturer at one of the universities in the UK was happy that his/her students used both systems. He/she expressed this as follows:

'I wouldn't mind either way. Our students are really bad at using forums. I would be happy if they did anything to gain experience of students at other universities. It would be a real help to link students across universities'.

One of the further education colleges and the school, both based in the UK were very enthusiastic about their students using the online forum provided with each unit. Both of these institutions envisaged their students contacting students around the world to ask questions related to their studies in certain subjects. The lecturer in the further education college said:

'This is an excellent idea. There are no forums yet at the college. If access were there we would use the forums. I have a lovely mix of nationalities among my students. The students are first generation from Samali, Liberia and Ghana. They are very hard working. I would get the students to use the online forum to ask questions about how the case studies they are studying are applicable to the situation in other countries such as America'.

The teacher in the school said that:

... students have email accounts with the school but not online conferences. Examples of forum use would be:

- Fair Trade awareness - students could contact other students in Tanzania
- Geography - students could contact students in other countries and ask them what it was like to live there.

These two institutions (the further education college and the school, both based in the UK) seem to be able to think in terms of group communication much more so than the other organisations. Though it should be said that the South African university highlighted ‘language barriers’ as a partial issue while another further education college in the UK expressed concerns, as some of the students are under sixteen years of age.

The response from the distance learning college in the UK was typical of those who would prefer their students to use the institutions communication area. ‘Our own area. Confusing to offer a range of forums – but we would note the existence of the OU forum as a facility for those who were interested’. Across the three responses there was a suggestion that learners may prefer to work in a closed area rather than an open forum.

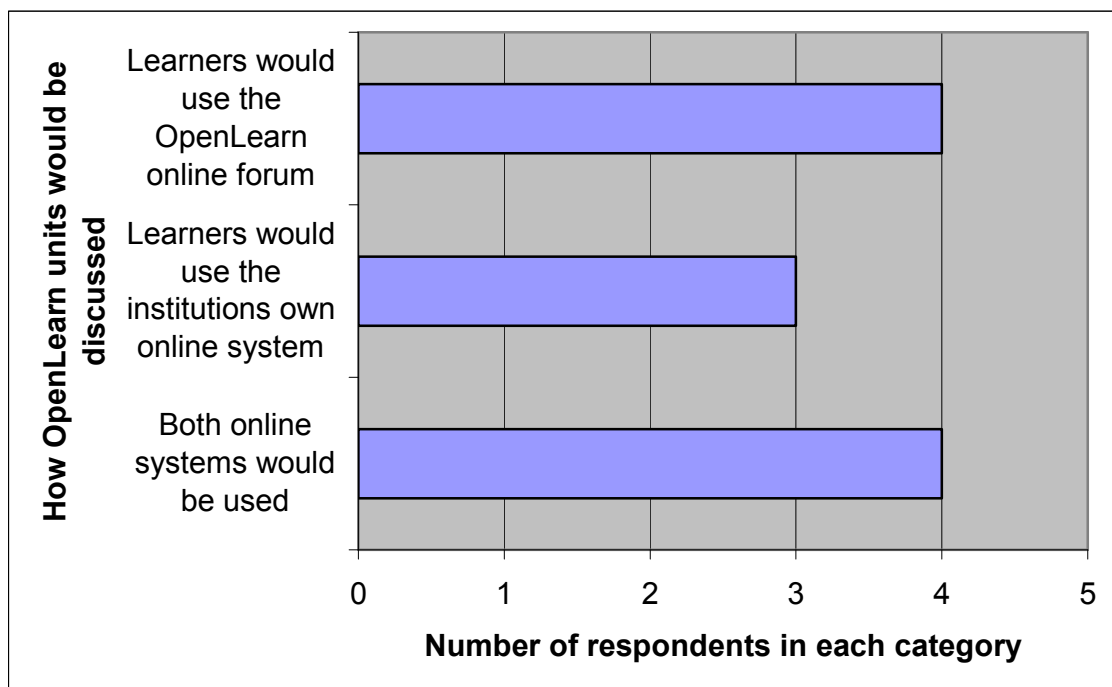


Figure 3: Whether learners would be encouraged to use the online forum associated with an OpenLearn unit or be expected to use an area provided by their own institution

Although the answers were more varied to this question, eight out of the eleven respondents would advise their student to use the OpenLearn online forum either on its own or in addition to using the communications facility provided by the institution. Only three subjects advised using the institutions facilities alone and this appeared to be for reasons of privacy and avoiding confusion.

A short case study example in the Languages topic area

Using its internal publicity, the non-accrediting institution asked its members, to view the OpenLearn website and provide feedback. A comment made by the interviewee from the later life-learning organisation helps to set the scene for the case study.

Other courses [in OpenLearn] provide material we cannot, such as the Maths units. Apart from pointing our members towards these units, we may also encourage them to download the material and to use it in a group of active learners in a learning circle. A third use may

be to use the ... material and encourage the development of online groups consulting one another as they work through it.

The following short case study indicates one member's reactions to a small number of the OpenLearn units. The units 'Ouverture' and 'Le Quatorze Juillet' are discussed in terms of how they could be used for group work.

Although these [OpenLearn] courses have no tutor, the accessible yet challenging level makes them suitable material for [our later-life] groups. Each course has a forum, which a group could be encouraged to join. Having all the units available would make it possible for a group convenor to select and adapt the materials to suit group needs.

1. Modern languages French L120_1 French Ouverture

Not for beginners but useful for updating old knowledge....

This course tackles basic communication in French through several themes relevant to our institution, eg Holidays, Hobbies and Food. The themes are illustrated with recorded video extracts with native speakers and audio tracks to teach new expressions. The vocabulary is colloquial and practical.

Grammar is clearly explained in each section and there is a wide variety of exercises, including recording your own voice. French is taught through listening, seeing, reading, writing and recording. The examples used are lively and varied.

Although this would be a useful revision course for an individual I think its main use in [our institution] would be with a group. Although the material would need to be carefully prepared and presented by the Convenor, this course would provide lively and useful material for a group.

2 Le Quatorze Juillet

This is a follow-on course from L'Ouverture. The same type of video clips with native speakers is used to introduce the themes of leisure time and holidays. Again the vocabulary and grammar are practical and useful.

The background of French life, its multicultural aspects and even a touch of history, widen the scope of this course.

Useful for a more advanced group (or individual) with an interesting range of exercises.

This short case study highlights the usefulness of the OpenLearn units and their applicability for both individual and group work. The importance of the Convenor and their presentation of the OpenLearn units to the cohesion of the group are also highlighted.

Summary of the findings and future work

This section discusses a summary of the institutions proposals around the OpenLearn units. Enthusiasm to adopt the OpenLearn units appears apparent with all participants eager for their learners to use the OpenLearn units in either a supported or unsupported way. The majority are also enthusiastic for their learners to work both individually and in groups around the OpenLearn units. When it comes to using the OpenLearn unit forum for group discussion, eight of the participants were in favour. However three of the participants would prefer their learners to use the communications facility provided by their own institution. It appeared that this latter group preferred private discussion areas.

The case study discussing the 'Ouverture' unit suggests that this material (including a variety of interactive exercises) would be best suited to group work. The unit is at an introductory level, nevertheless it would need careful presentation by a tutor. The unit 'Le Quatorze Juillet' is also described

as suitable for group work although for more advanced French speakers. Both units would appear to provide beneficial material to this organisation for group work.

The idea of sharing content is not new. MIT's course materials have been available to the world through its Open CourseWare (OCW) initiative since September 2002. What is novel is the availability of distance learning OERs themselves and complementary social networking tools. This paper is an initial attempt to find out how one of the networking tools (advocated by Smith and Casserly, 2006), the online forum can be used to support learners and teachers. Although these new communication tools are available, it remains to be seen how learners might actually interact in such open environments and what collaborative and cooperative learning experiences will be presented. The initial findings from this study which involves organisations who cater for different age groups suggests that different approaches are appropriate for different age ranges. The case study suggests that learners may need to have a Convenor and a group established before using an open environment to exchange learning experiences.

These results form a basis for more detailed research into the best ways to support communities of learners to collaborate and cooperate in an OER environment. Future work will investigate forum usage within the IT and Computing Topic area.

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