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Fostering communities of open educational practice: lessons from the Support Centre for Open Resources in Education

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Strand: Open Educational Resources

Abstract

The initial flush of interest in open educational resources *per se* has now moved on to discussions and actions that place open educational resources (OER) within a wider set of (open) educational practices (OEP). This new focus on educational practices has encompassed the drivers and barriers to the adoption of appropriate policies and practices within higher education institutions and how best practices within one institution may help foster enhanced practices in other institutions. This paper describes the activities and outcomes of one such funded initiative to use the expertise of an early adopter of OER and OEP (The Open University) to help foster HE sector wide communities and networks of practice within England in particular but across all of the United Kingdom. This initiative was the Support Centre for Open Resources in Education (<http://www8.open.ac.uk/score/>), which, over a three period, has initiated a series of activities and events that have involved several hundred educational practitioners from the majority of the HEIs in England. While this single institution-led initiative has benefitted from there being a companion sector wide initiative (UKOER) led by two national organisations SCORE has succeeded in raising the profile of OER and OEP within UK HEIs by assisting existing communities of practice and by creating new communities of practice that are forming a much larger network of practice that will be sustained into the future by many of its participants. We will set out the key lessons underlying this success.

Keywords: communities of practice, networks of practice, open educational resources. open educational practices, Higher Education, SCORE, The Open University

Introduction

Open educational resources (OER) have become a notable feature of worldwide debates in higher education ever since MIT launched their Open Courseware initiative in 2001¹. This has recently culminated in the 2012 World Congress on OER in Paris sponsored by UNESCO². However in more recent years there has been as much discussion of how OER are used rather than how they are published and that they are an enabler of a wide set of open educational practices³.

Another ever present feature of these debates and discussions is the sustainability of OER and OEP. While early debates focused on institutional business models (e.g. Wiley, 2007) there has been an equal level of interest in how educational practitioners would accept and embed open resources into their practices (Geser, 2007). While there may inevitably be tensions between the requirements of institutions and practitioners in being open and in

¹ <http://ocw.mit.edu/about/our-history/>

² <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/events/calendar-of-events/events-websites/World-Open-Educational-Resources-Congress>

³ <http://www.oer-quality.org/>

sharing the production, use and reuse of resources both groups need to be involved for significant progress to be made. Equally, since sharing is at the heart of the philosophy OER and probably OEP, collective and cooperative activities between people and institutions are likely to be a key factor in the sustainability of such practices. And one way to think about such collective and cooperative activity is as communities and/or networks of practice at the individual level (Lane et al. 2009) and in terms of open innovation at the institutional level (Van Dorp and Lane 2011; Lane 2012a) where as noted by Gassmann *et al* (2010) '*Institutional openness is becoming increasingly popular in practice and academia: open innovation, open R&D and open business models.*' Open innovation, as discussed by Enkel *et al* (2009) has three core processes:

1. The *outside-in process*, where the organisation enriches their own knowledge base through external knowledge sourcing – a process made easier for Universities with open access publishing;
2. The *inside-out process*, where the organisation gains revenue by bringing ideas to market and multiplying technology by transferring ideas to the outside environment – early adopters have benefitted from the release of OER through increased enrolments and new grants;
3. The *coupled process*, where there is co-creation with (mainly) complementary partners through alliances, cooperation, and joint ventures during which give and take are crucial for success – many ventures such as OCWC and OERu depend on this.

However the focus of this paper is on collaboration between individual educational practitioners more than between educational institutions.

Communities and networks of practice

In recent years there has been a growing interest in Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) and Networks of Practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001; 2002) in connection with informal knowledge gathering, notably in the fields of education and both knowledge management and innovation within organisations, but also in fields such as healthcare and computer science (Hildreth and Kimble, 2004). These concepts have been used both as an analytical framework and as an intervention tool (see, for example, Koliba and Gajda, 2009). Part of the appeal of these concepts is that they may also be viewed from a very practical viewpoint to think about 'real world' situations, rather than simply as academic devices.

Although the idea of communities of practice has been around for many years, it was first made explicit by Lave and Wenger in their work on apprenticeship and situated learning (1991). Around the same time the notion of networks of practice originated in the work of Brown and Duguid (2001), who applied the term to the relations among groups of people with looser connections than expected in a Community of Practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as "*a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential communities of practice*" (p. 98). In simple terms, communities of practice are groups of people who share a common pursuit, activity or concern. Members do not necessarily work together, but form a common identity and understanding through their common interests and interactions. Many different communities of practice exist and we may all be members of several, for example, through our work or hobbies. They are often informal and self-managed. For some communities of practice we may be a core member, whereas for others we may sit on the periphery. Communities of practice are repositories of explicit or formal knowledge as well as the less tangible tacit, informal knowledge, and hold the key to any form of change process (Brown and Duguid, 2001). They are inherently stable and it is this stability that allows learning within and around the community to take place. Wenger (1998) identifies three aspects of

communities of practice that work together and that may either hinder or enhance learning (Table 1):

Table 1 Three aspects of Communities of Practice

Aspect	Features
Mutual engagement	Members come together because they are engaged in actions whose meaning they negotiate with one another. They develop shared practices and are linked through their mutual engagement in such activities.
Joint enterprise	Members work together, explicitly or implicitly, to achieve a negotiated common goal, which may or may not be officially defined.
Shared repertoire	A common history and culture is generated over time by shared practices, stories, tools, concepts and repeated interactions. Writing, routines, rituals, ways of doing things and so on, become a common repository.

There has been a growing academic interest in what happens beyond communities of practice, in the informal or formal organisational networks within which a community of practice may sit. Podolny and Page (1998) define networks as *“any collection of actors that pursue repeated enduring exchange relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organisational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange”* (p. 59). Many networks are viewed as having a structure whereby at the core are those members who are closely tied to each other and at the periphery are members who have more ties to core members than to each other. The concept of networks of practice is distinctive in that it recognises that there may be people beyond an organisation within which an individual is situated, who share their practice or may influence that practice through their own practices.

Networks of practice have the same features as communities of practice (their subset) but may have weaker ties. What binds the network together is shared practice, and extensive shared practice leads to extensive shared know-how (Brown and Duguid, 2001, 2002), although some of that knowhow may come from exchanges with others outside the network. In relation to innovation, Deroian (2002) drawing on the work of others, argues that individuals (and potentially institutions) are embedded in a relational network and the opinion of potential innovation adopters is thus subjected to social influence. Through interactions with other potential adopters, opinions on new technologies are formed and shaped. Therefore, much more is involved than simple information transmission in the adoption of an innovation; it involves revisions of judgements, discussions in a wider practice related or socio-economic system, and an individual’s receptivity to influence.

It is with this theoretical perspective that we now examine a case study of a successful community/network of practice around open educational practices – The Support Centre for Open resources in Education – looking in turn at the context before it started, the work of the Centre over its 3 years funding and its continuing legacy.

The context: OER at The Open University and in the UK

The Open University in the United Kingdom (OUUK) was prompted by the MIT initiative to consider what OER meant for its mission and in 2006 launched OpenLearn the first and biggest of a number of OER projects (Gourley and Lane, 2008; Lane, 2012b). Through this wide range of projects the OUUK quickly became the major force in OER at HE level in the UK. This source of expertise was recognised by the Higher Education Funding Council for

England (Hefce)⁴ as was the need to pump prime OER activity across the sector. This Hefce, in 2009, funded two major initiatives. The first of these was the UKOER programme⁵, jointly run by the Joint Information Systems Committee⁶ and The Higher Education Academy⁷. This has gone through three phases and involved over xx individual, subject community focussed and institutionally based projects and over £13 million of funding. The second was the Support Centre for Open Resources in Education (SCORE)⁸ at the OUUK. Before 2009 there were only two UK universities with their own OER websites plus a small number of other initiatives and projects run under other grant schemes such as the Reusable Learning Object Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning⁹ and the Digital repositories programme. Furthermore the sector had had access to a national repository of (closed to HEIs) resources known as JORUM¹⁰ (this repository has since gone open to all and mainly accepts OER, partly in response to the success of OpenLearn).

The Support Centre for Open Resources in Education (SCORE)

SCORE was part of a wider OUUK National Role project whereby the University worked closely with other English Universities on issues of common interest. In terms of the OER part of this wider project the original business plan submitted to the Higher Education Funding Council for England noted:

SCORE will work to identify and promote good practice and effective strategies across the HE sector and within the OU. Central to the work of SCORE will be visiting fellows, drawn from existing or new OER projects across HE, who will work at the Centre on their OER projects, either full or half time, over periods of three to twelve months. [...].

There will be a vigorous programme to foster engagement and dissemination with events taking place in various parts of the country. Web 2.0 technologies will be used to build virtual communities and stimulate debate and exchange of ideas. The aim will be to support a community of practice at both an organisational level as an OER alliance and at an individual practitioner level, using networking to leverage the impact of the diverse set of activities. [...].

The funding for SCORE amounted to some £3 million over 3years from August 2009 to July 2012.

SCORE outputs

Over the three years of funding SCORE had three main strands: events and workshops; fellowship programmes; and OER publication.

Events and workshops

SCORE was the host for 21 one day dissemination events and workshops at which there were 280 participants present but, as many of the events were also recorded, there have been another 630 people viewing the recordings. In addition SCORE supported 15 training days in media use with 100 participants from twenty HEIs and SCORE staff also participated in many other events, sometimes as an invited speaker or workshop facilitator.

⁴ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/>

⁵ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/ukoer3.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/>

⁷ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>

⁸ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/score/>

⁹ <http://www.rlo-cetl.ac.uk/>

¹⁰ <http://www.jorum.ac.uk/>

As well as the one day workshops SCORE was also the sponsor for two major conferences – OER11 and Cambridge 2012 – building on OER10 which was the final major activity of the aforementioned RLO CETL. OER11 was held May 11-13 2011, in Manchester, UK with 130 attendees from 63 institutions. Cambridge 2012 was a joint conference, nominally both OER12 and the Global Meeting of the OpenCourseWare Consortium¹¹. This latter conference was held April 16-18 2012 in Cambridge, UK with 236 participants from 136 institutions. As well as organising these two conferences many of the SCORE fellows (see below) presented their work at these and other conferences.

Fellowship programme

The fellowship programme came in two parts. The first was what we termed full fellowships where an educational practitioner with some prior knowledge or experience of OER at an English HEI could apply to do an action research project involving OER lasting a few months. There were 31 such fellowships over the three years covering 24 HEIs. Details of their projects and all the publications that resulted are shown on SCORE's website. This includes most of them writing up a series of case studies on OER for the Higher Education Academy¹². The second was the short term fellowships whereby educational practitioners new to OER received a one week face to face residential course with preparation beforehand and further work to do in their institutions afterwards. There were 5 presentations of this course involving 58 participants from 32 HEIs.

OER publication

The final strand of SCORE work was the publication of further OUUK and other educational content of relevance to the sector through OpenLearn (amounting to some 1400 hours of OUUK and 960 hours from other sources). More specifically, a consortium of HEIs was involved in the development of two targeted websites called 'Ready for Research'¹³ and 'Digital Scholarship'¹⁴ based upon 115 and 27 hours worth of existing OER, that went live July 2012, and both of which were constructed from 80% OER and 20% 'free to view' materials in areas where no suitable OER could be found making totals of 140 and 40 hours.

Impact

Some quantitative impacts have already been noted but the depth of impact can also be seen in qualitative responses in terms of both solicited and unsolicited feedback on event and activities:

'The SCORE residential course was a brilliant, well organised and enlightening week'

'I thoroughly found the course interesting and engaging, it opened me up to the concept of OER; its benefits and potential integration within an institution, yet also the harsh downfalls and issues in the implementation of OER'

¹¹ <http://www.ocwconsortium.org/>

¹² <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/oer/oer-phase-3-case-studies>

¹³ <http://readytoresearch.ac.uk/>

¹⁴ <http://digitalscholarship.ac.uk/>

'A cross culture between different institutions. It reveals different and similar approaches of OER and Social Learning'

'Some really fruitful discussions around community building'

'The networking, the great quality of presentations and panels'

More people and institutions are active in OER than I thought'

'To mix metaphors: we've passed the inflection point; we've passed escape velocity; the movement cannot be stopped'

In addition to such internal evaluation there has also been an external evaluation of both SCORE alongside other HEFCE funded OER initiatives (largely the UKOER programme) which will be used to inform further policy and practice by all those involved. At the time of writing the full review had not been completed (expected completion October 2012) but in a draft interim report from June 2012 the evaluation and synthesis team noted:

'We anticipate significant cross-over between the various UKOER and SCORE communities and activities and expect final reports and documents from this review to reflect an holistic picture of the benefits of engaging with open practice and OERs across several sectors in the UK, including various educational sectors, NHS and government sectors, 3rd sector, public sector, and private sector (including publishers).'

Impact can take many years to fully work through although SCORE can be said to have been a qualified success in that it met or exceeded its set targets and worked well in concert with other projects and programmes. However impact can also be measured in part but what happens next and not just what has happened so far.

The sustainable legacy

It was made clear at the very beginning by HEFCE that the grant was pump priming money that would not be renewed. The Open University itself then had two long term options: to continue supporting SCORE if it could attract external revenue to cover its costs or to focus on a range of bilateral and multilateral OER projects rather than run abroad service for the sector. It also had to take account of how JISC and the HEA would continue to support OER and OEP beyond their HEFCE funding. However the changes to funding within the UKHE landscape in those three years has meant that HEFCE, JISC and HEA have all had their structures and remits revised while the HEIs themselves have had major adjustments to make as well. This was not a good time to launch a new fee paying service and so for the OUUK the decision has been to focus on the bilateral and multilateral grant funded efforts¹⁵.

However money is not everything. Having established many connections and having inducted many people into OER and OEP over its three years SCORE has facilitated a viable community of practice able to continue working together and seek new members. In particular an Open Education Special Interest Group¹⁶ has been established under the auspices of the Association for Learning Technology¹⁷, the UK's leading membership organization in the learning technology field with over 900 individual and 225 organizational

¹⁵ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/open-educational-resources/&samsredir=1343646168>

¹⁶ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/score/open-education-sig>

¹⁷ <http://www.alt.ac.uk/>

members. This Open Education Special Interest Groups thus benefits from being embedded in a wider network of practice but also provides a focused community of practice (131 members and rising) that aims to support and encourage OEP, represent OE practitioners, influence OE policy and connect with other OE initiatives worldwide. The first activity of the SIG was to promote a statement of commitment to open education¹⁸ and the second has been establishing a planning team to organize and run OER13¹⁹.

Conclusions

SCORE had three years to establish a community of practice. Table 2 provides our assessment of how that community matches up to Wenger's 3 main aspects of such communities outlined in Table 1. That this community will continue in the short term through the OESIG and OER13 with limited funding is not in doubt. Whether it will survive as is in the medium to long term is another matter which may be partly due to whether OER and OEP becomes mainstream rather than a specialist issue but there is little doubt that the nature and duration of the SCORE activities has provided the strongest possible base on which such a community can prosper. If it fails it will be yet another example of where initial investment is wasted because it takes more time to build communities as opposed to things.

Table 2. How SCORE activities related to the three aspects of Communities of Practice

Aspect	SCORE activities
Mutual engagement Members develop shared practices and are linked through their mutual engagement in such activities.	Both the short and full fellowship programmes have brought together a focused scholarship and teaching practice programme. This has not just been individual links but many people have been linked to each other through both SCORE and other projects or by having their SCORE projects linked within related clusters. Fellows met as a group every month while some also taught on the residential course. Some short term fellows came from outside the UK.
Joint enterprise Members work together, explicitly or implicitly, to achieve a negotiated common goal, which may or may not be officially defined	This was implicit throughout much of the three years through the shared activities and aims of SCORE but was made explicit through the statement of commitment
Shared repertoire A common history and culture is generated over time by shared practices, stories, tools, concepts and repeated interactions.	The wide variety of SCORE events and activities meant that many participants were involved in several of them and over long periods of time. Once a SCORE fellow always a SCORE fellow was one saying that is carrying forward into the OESIG. The strong focus on action research and the scholarship of teaching and learning has meant that a rich story and history is unfolding.

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¹⁸ <http://www8.open.ac.uk/score/make-commitment-open-education>

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