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HEA/JISC Open Educational Resources case study: pedagogical development from OER practice

Open engagement through open media

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JISC





Outline

This case study outlines and characterises the broad range of public engagement activities using media technologies undertaken by The Open University (OU) and in particular draws out how both open access and open licensing of content is influencing the ways in which a university can engage with various publics from around the world. It also discusses how different channels and social media technologies are shaping the way that such engagement happens and how it is necessary to think about 'learner journeys' through different media and different types of educational content. This is all placed in the strategic view of how open media is supporting the enduring social justice mission of The Open University.



Case study

The OU has a long history of using openly available educational content to engage with the public (Lane and Law, 2011; Anon, 2012) alongside more traditional place-based events. For 30 years this was primarily done through the medium of broadcast audio-visual content, sometimes supported by supplementary printed materials; for the past ten years this has also been done through medium of the web through a number of channels; for the last five years this has included openly licensed educational content through OU-based and proprietary channels. Throughout all this activity we have catered for a range of public users from those happy to sit back and be both informed and entertained through broadcast programmes such as *Coast*, through those more keen to both sit forward and take forward their interest by requesting supplementary materials such as a wallchart detailing the 'Tree of Life', to those wanting to get out of their seats and actively take part in follow on events or activities whether online as in the iSpot website or face to face at a literary festival or a Robotic Football event. In many of these cases there are also follow-on free courses on OpenLearn or for-fee taught ten-credit modules for the public to take their study yet further. Furthermore some of these activities contribute to research (Citizen Science) or are the basis of research activities to better understand how new technologies can impact on both open and distance teaching and on informal and formal learning, and help bridge the gap between them. The latest trend is how to utilise mobile technologies appropriately to enhance the interactivity and relevance of that engagement.

The next few pages expand on this brief summary by both charting the full history of the OU's open engagement with open media and how it has recently strengthened the way this set of technology mediated activities serves the OU's mission and strategic priorities.

The Open University is the UK's only dedicated distance teaching university and as such it has variously used new technologies to develop and deliver educational content for its registered students to learn from. However, since it started teaching students in 1971 some of that educational content has also been openly available and accessible to other people within the UK (although less so outside the UK). Many of its teaching texts are co-published with educational publishers and so available (at cost) in bookshops, or (at less cost or for free) from students who have completed the module and no longer want them, or (for free) in public libraries. More importantly, all the television and radio broadcasts, whether course related or of a wider nature, have been done through free-to-air public channels run by the BBC so that the UK public could both watch them for free and (later on) freely record them off air for personal viewing at a more convenient time (the relationship with the BBC has been very fruitful in driving innovation around open media and open engagement more generally). BBC surveys consistently showed there was a substantial drop-in viewing audience for even module-related programmes broadcast early in the morning, many of whom had no intention of studying the related modules but liked the programmes because they were educationally focused. The more recent non-module-related programming has gained even more substantial viewing audiences and, because of the relationship with the BBC, has been available for time limited viewing outside the broadcast slot (usually only in the UK) via its iPlayer platform.

To begin with the TV and radio programmes were devised as module-related materials that either substituted for the actual observation of laboratory experiments, field sites (e.g. factories, art galleries, nature reserves, museums), plays or other performances; provided interviews with key academics or professionals talking about particular topics; demonstrated principles through animations or models; or acted as studio- rather than classroom-based lectures. While these programmes were supplemental to the other module materials and varied in their centrality to the learning outcomes of the modules, their broadcasting had an important part to play in the University's Royal Charter obligation to "provide for the educational well being of the wider community". In the early days this was a serendipitous rather than planned benefit although it began to further shape the nature of the programmes that were produced as it was realised that there were multiple audiences for them and not just registered students, and as noted above these audiences were formally surveyed for their interests or they often offered unsolicited comments upon them.

While individuals could later on record these broadcast programmes for their personal use as video recorders became widely available it was illegal to show those recordings to a 'public audience'. This could even be the case where it was done for students at another university, but all UK universities were able to sign up for a general licence that enabled them to record and use as many OU/BBC programmes as they wished (no such licence was ever devised for the physical educational content, but they were available (at cost) to be recommended texts in other universities' modules, while many of the tutors were teachers at other universities and were very creative in reusing the course materials provided in their own courses). This open availability and accessibility of rich media (in this case radio and TV programmes) meant that 'use as is' has been happening quite a lot in the UK, which has been a good thing for all concerned, particularly as these resources have been produced to high academic quality (often involving academics from other universities as consultants) and high technical standards (drawing on BBC experience), both of which can make it a costly exercise. However, all this content was still only available under a full rights reserved licence so any user could not make alterations or repurpose these educational resources without first seeking permission (indeed internationally our OU Worldwide division has made revenue from the selling and licensing of some of this content).

The Open University has particularly benefited from its long-standing partnership with the BBC, who have helped both in the development of certain rich media, but also provided free-to-air broadcasting slots for radio and television programmes. As new media technologies have arrived so that relationship has developed, as has the capabilities of the OU itself to create rich media in other ways and with other partners. In 1999 the OU and the BBC collaborated on a UK-focused website (Open2.net) that supported the broadcast programmes. This jointly branded (BBC and OU) site had around two million visitors each year. During the initial period the majority of visitors to the site came directly through 'calls to actions' placed at the end of the BBC broadcast TV programmes. A 'call to action' meant that at the end of a broadcast programme the audience would be invited to follow their interests further by, for example, being invited to take part in a survey, engaging in an interactive game or simply finding out more about the ideas behind the programme in articles written by Open University academics. Initially this informal, specially commissioned introductory content on the Open2.net site was structured around the the OU output on the BBC TV schedules, each section of the site dedicated to a specific broadcast event. However, over time it became clear that the gradual accumulation of indexed content on scale was beginning to mean natural search (on keywords not associated with the TV programme) was delivering almost as many visitors to the site as the specific calls to action at the end of the programmes. At this point the team decided to start organising and providing navigation through the content by subject or theme (as well by broadcast event).

In 2006 the University entered the formal Open Educational Resources world with the launch of OpenLearn, which provided a home for the OU to initially release around 3% of its formal course curriculum into the public domain under a Creative Commons licence (although there were some earlier OER-based activities as noted in Lane, 2012). In 2008 it also began releasing audio-visual materials from its courses (in edited form) onto its iTunes U and YouTube channels (see below).

By 2008 the OU had a number of channels offering a range (in format, depth, style, formal and informal) of free and open learning experiences. These were distributed on third-party channels (such as TV or YouTube/iTunes U) or our own 'channels' (such as OpenLearn).

However, it was increasingly clear that in order to deliver meaningful learning journey paths for users, it would be necessary to better co-ordinate and maintain this quite wide and occasionally unconnected range of public education and engagement offers as different channels and links to wider public events offered different forms and types of engagement around particular themes.

In the period 2008-2010 some key changes have taken place. Much of the 'consumer facing', light informal learning materials of Open2.net have been migrated into a new OpenLearn site and in 2011 Open2.net was closed (with any broadcast, or other third-party 'calls to action', now pointing at OpenLearn). OpenLearn became a single, indexed destination for the OU's introductory informal materials (blogs, games, etc.) and its more formal study units from its existing modules (the original OpenLearn content). This is delivered through an integrated Drupal and Moodle platform and provides a more coherent and complete offer to the visitor under OU brand and with OU control.

In order to continue to exploit the advantages of natural search (where content must be indexed on the internet – not easy with iTunes U), the OU also began to ensure any content released onto iTunes U was also released onto YouTube and that it was also integrated within OpenLearn (to enrich and extend the informal and formal learning experience further).

In 2011-12 further work has been done in ensuring:

- a clear governance and management structure for delivering these services;
- a clear set of policies and operational guidelines and processes to improve efficiencies and effectiveness of OER production;

- an agreed set of key performance indicators (KPIs) against which success is measured and performance improved (and aligned with OU business and social mission);
- a data reporting site – available to all staff to indicate how OER activities are performing against KPIs;
- a greater degree of interoperability between the free and open systems and the core VLE system used by registered OU students in order to reduce overheads and increase the ease of flow of content between the formal, registered VLE domain and the OER domain (in both directions).

Through the extensive surveys of students and other learners the purpose of these openly available rich media has been guided by a model of engagement whereby the relationship someone has with the OU could go through four phases (and these correspond broadly to the required KPIs for OU OER) (see Figure 1):

- 1 awareness – of the University and its association with certain rich media;
- 2 interest – in using some of the media as a 'consumer';
- 3 engagement – by contacting the OU for further information or informal educational materials supporting the programmes (such as posters and leaflets);
- 4 commitment – to a formal offering from the OU, most usually signing up for a module or course, but could be another event or service.

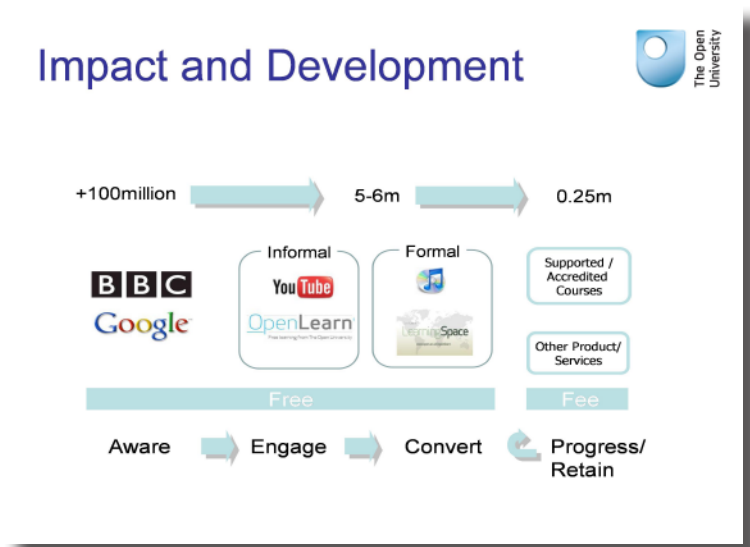


Figure 1: The broad strategy for open engagement with open media based on a learner journey

This learner journey can be very varied and occur over many years but recognises that, as lifelong learners, people are wanting a broader relationship with what the OU has to offer than just being a student (although they can also be students for many years as well since most study part-time and take several years to complete a qualification). It also acknowledges that people will want to move between informal and formal learning opportunities at different times or even at the same time and also to do that they will want interaction through a wide number of OU-hosted and proprietary channels.

The (literal) integration of Open2.net and OpenLearn and the increasingly co-ordinated management of iTunes U and YouTube now means the OU can offer this flexible, open, lifelong learning experience to the outside world, but ensure that it is connected to its formal, fee-based offer, as exemplified by the 2012 *Frozen Planet* campaign (Figure 2).



Figure 2: *Frozen Planet*: an example of the interrelated items of open engagement around a single open media campaign starting with the TV programmes

The level and sometimes depth of public engagement in just this one campaign around *Frozen Planet* is evident in that by March 2012 44% of the adult viewing population in the UK had watched at least one episode, 200,000 people requested the poster, 300,000 looked at the related materials on OpenLearn, 60,000 used the interactive item and 600 have gone on to register for the related module.

The registered OU student experience is highly rated as seen in the consistently high National Student Survey results. Part of this is due to the high quality of the published content (OU materials on iTunes U are highly rated both by the editors of the site and by the 'crowd', with content regularly appearing in the top three of the top downloads in many subject domains in the international listings).

However, alongside content, it has always been known an equally important part of the OU learning experience is the process of teaching and learning (partly embedded in the materials themselves), but also found in the the personal support and high levels of communication with and feedback provided to students. Some, but not all of this support is mediated digitally for our registered students (through the MoodleVLE and other digital online services).

Throughout its involvement with OER it has been a priority for the OU to try to find ways to ensure we could provide some levels of more meaningful two-way or multi-way communications with this wider community alongside those we have with students. Forums and even free videoconferencing have been made available from the initial launch of OpenLearn (and on Open2.net) in an attempt to provide space for simple group formation and communication. However, there are significant limits to the use of simple forums. In response to the need to provide a more flexible means of social interaction around OER content, during 2012 the OU will release SocialLearn, a new free social networking based 'Personal Learning Environment' (PLE) tool specifically designed to support more sophisticated group formation and management, networking, communication, and recommendation. It will be available independent of content (though is likely to be closely integrated with OpenLearn), and will allow users to exploit the PLE features with any OER content.

This sense of encouraging active community engagement has also been delivered in more specialist websites and projects such as iSpot and the Evolution Megalab (<http://www.evolutionmegalab.org/>), where it is possible for participants to both learn from each other and/or to contribute to research through a Citizen Science approach. iSpot provides novel features including highly mobile features (location-based geo-tagging). In addition iSpot (alongside SocialLearn) provides a space in which the OU is exploring the role of badging and reputation management, which we believe will become increasingly important across all OER activity.

The OU's current strategic approach to OER in general and open media in particular is one of aligning it with the major activities and functions of the University as guided by its mission. Thus open media are used: to provide the most appropriate and effective learning experience for registered students seeking qualifications; to enable a wider public set of audiences to have informal learning opportunities; to use both to showcase the University's teaching and outreach programmes and increasingly its research findings; and to be part of a multi-way communication network with a wide number of stakeholders through different channels and/or campaigns. Some brief facts and figures outlined below highlight the extent of primary and secondary engagement and value in reaching various audiences.

OU BBC partnership: The OU has had a partnership with the BBC for over 40 years and co-produces up to 25 TV and radio series a year with the BBC. Recent examples include: *Frozen Planet* with Sir David Attenborough, *Empire* with Jeremy Paxman, *Story of Wales* with Huw Edwards, *Hairy Bikers Bake-ation*, *Stargazing* and *Bang Goes the Theory*. In the six months up to March 2012 this led to 186 million views and listens of OU TV and radio programmes; 350,000 viewers have responded to our 'calls to action' by visiting OpenLearn and over 270,000 viewers have requested more information from the OU.

OpenLearn <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/>: The OU's own free learning resource website has had over 21.6 million visitors since its launch in 2006 from over 200 countries and territories (c. 50% from the UK). It contains around 8,000 hours of study materials in 12 subject areas; content includes: 628 active study units, educational interactives, topical videos, academic blogs, direct access to OU podcasts and opportunities to order free printed materials. From 1 August 2011 to 31 March 2012 OpenLearn generated 976 module registrations.

YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/ou>: The OU has a dedicated channel on YouTube EDU containing bite-sized learning from a wide range of subjects and an insight into studying with the OU. The OU has the largest presence on YouTube EDU in Europe; it has 1,400 videos that have received 9.8 million video views by 5.4 million visitors, and has 34,503 subscribers to our YouTube content, more than any other UK educational institution, with 86% of video views from outside the UK.

iTunes U <http://www.open.edu/itunes/>: In June 2008 the OU were invited to join iTunes U. We wanted to find new ways to reach new audiences. The OU is the first university in Europe to reach more than one million subscriptions through the iTunes app and over 50 million international downloads (only 10% from the UK). It has had over 50.7 million downloads by c. 6.1 million unique visitors, over one million subscriptions to OU content via the iTunes app, holds 392 collections containing 3,103 tracks and 422 eBooks representing over 5,000 hours of study, has 52 free courses on the iTunes app, with 70% of visitors now downloading straight to mobile devices.

iSpot <http://www.ispot.org.uk>: This is a social networking site for anyone interested in wildlife. It has had over 100,000 visits since its launch in June 2009, more than 41,000 of which were unique users. Users have made 8,781 observations on iSpot, submitting 15,036 images; while iSpot experts have made over 10,565 determinations on those observations (i.e. saying what the species seen in the observation is).

Much of what we have described above is about open engagement where it is 'open' educational content that is the key item. iSpot is a mix of user content and contributions for a specialist purpose where content is openly available if not openly licensed, but the OU also has a social media engagement strategy dealing with popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Flickr (see <http://www8.open.ac.uk/community/main/>). The Open University engages in social media in order to provide informational content or links to open educational content and help build a community for those who wish to engage with us in those environments. We use social media as a communications tool providing news about the University, helping students find peers to connect with, publicising OU/BBC co-productions, celebrating success, etc. As with OER and OpenLearn we also have our own 'social media channel' for our students. Platform, as the channel is known, first launched in December 2008 with the aim of providing an online community space that would be 'open to the world', but more specifically supports student retention and alumni engagement by offering some of the intellectual, social and peer support opportunities that are a key part of university life. It enables the community to engage with each other and with the University, both on this site and through its links with other online social and networking spaces, and provides a channel for the OU to listen to and respond to the community. We are also innovating with new forms of openness such as open linked data <http://data.open.ac.uk/>, whereby the public can access data about much of the open educational content and other things from the OU to reuse and re-present as they see fit.

Not all of the fans or followers of OU social media accounts are staff, students or alumni of the OU, however. A number are interested in the research and content (iTunes U, YouTube) that the OU makes available. Some of these individuals (via engagement with the OU community of staff, students and alumni in social media environments) will go on to become students. It is not, however, the purpose of the OU's engagement with social media to recruit students, rather the intention is to provide added value to our followers or fans and enrich the conversations, groups and relationships that users choose to form for themselves. In so doing it is hoped that the reputation of the University is enhanced and communicated and that new people are introduced to OU content on other sites. Currently the OU has the third highest number of Twitter followers and fourth highest number of Facebook fans of all European HE institutions.



Learning from OER

While The Open University has benefited from 40 years of investment in open media and the use of new technologies for teaching primarily through its relationship with the BBC, it is still possible for any educational institution to engage many people with open media at much lower costs now that much of that new technology is more readily available. While the OU employs skilled media and technology professionals for its institutional open media and open engagement, it is still possible to make significant impact through more modest and/or more individual activities. For instance, the OU has 'digital scholars' such as Martin Weller (<http://iet.open.ac.uk/people/m.j.weller>) and Tony Hirst (<http://blog.ouseful.info/>), who through their blogging and tweeting are engaging with a particular community of dedicated followers and dealing with very different aspects of open educational practices, including OER. Equally philosopher Nigel Warburton (<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/philosophy/warburton.shtml>) through his Philosophy Bites blog has done a lot of personal community engagement through openly available, if not openly licensed, resources. So while there are the many formal, co-ordinated activities for open engagement described above, the OU is also very happy for staff to do their own things as is appropriate to their wider research and scholarship activities. However, while individuals can reach large numbers through the internet it is our experience that co-ordinated and collective efforts can have even greater reach and impact. This is particularly so through adopting search engine optimisation practices and being associated with very popular channels such as iTunes U.

What this open approach to open engagement most requires is a rethinking of who you are engaging with, how you are engaging with them and why you are engaging with them. While content has proved to be very important in being the principle hook for attracting attention of most people (McAndrew *et al.*, 2009), the more in depth engagement comes through providing opportunities for interaction or for specific follow-on events. Thus it has been important to have an overarching conceptual model for that engagement (the learner journey in our case), which can then be applied differently to different people in different countries through different channels, whereby primary engagement is online and secondary engagement may also be online or off line through physical materials or face-to-face events. For other institutions there may be more of a focus on research-led topics, such as the University of Oxford has done, or working with local museums or focusing on specific specialisms such as Science and Engineering to support on-the-ground activities in schools where the primary engagement may be face to face and secondary engagement with the participants is online. In other words the OER activity needs to add value to your wider public engagement activity.



Conclusions

The key conclusion from this case study is that any open activity has to fit closely both with the values, mission and strategic priorities of the institution. Firstly because open media are a window into the work and activities of that institution and so need to reflect how that institution really is rather than some glossy brochure view. The OU's social mission requires it to ensure it is engaging the public, freely and openly in educational opportunity (whether they become a registered student or not). However, when pathways through OER are carefully managed and authentically represent key elements of the internal registered students experience they can become a powerful and confidence-building enticement to join the world of formal learning. When staff can see a direct link between organisational mission and OER activity (and can monitor the results) motivation to become involved increases. When production methodologies and delivery platforms of the organisation's fee-based activities and OER activities align production costs can be reduced along with management overheads. Second, open media enable there to be a two-way or even multi-way relationship with various stakeholders including the wider public and these conversations can enhance and sustain that institution's work. Understanding what is the most popular material on iTunes U, or what the most common incoming search terms are for OpenLearn, or what the most successful OER path to formal registrations is provides the OU with invaluable insights into how it might redesign its curriculum offer (to particular groups or in specific territories). A strong public presence also brings offers of new partnerships and collaborations and, of course, grant income based on research and delivery of major OER projects in the UK and elsewhere. Thirdly, OER readily transcend geographical and social barriers meaning the footprint of engagement can be literally worldwide. This allows the OU to extend its social mission, and possibly its business activities way beyond boundaries of those originally identified by those who first dreamt of the University of the Air.



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