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Reaching out with OER: the new role of public-facing open scholar

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Reaching Out with OER: The New Role of Public-Facing Open Scholar

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Tags

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Open educational resources (OER) and, more recently, open educational practices (OEP) have been widely promoted as a means of increasing openness in higher education (HE). Thus far, such openness has been limited by OER provision typically being supplier-driven and contained within the boundaries of HE. Seeking to explore ways in which OEP might become more needs-led we conceptualised a new 'public-facing open scholar' role involving academics working with online communities to source and develop OER to meet their needs.

To explore the scope for this role we focused on the voluntary sector, which we felt might particularly benefit from such collaboration. We evaluated four representative communities for evidence of their being self-educating (thereby offering the potential for academics to contribute) and for any existing learning dimension. We found that all four communities were self-educating and each included learning infrastructure elements, for example provision for web chats with 'experts', together with evidence of receptiveness to academic collaboration. This indicated that there was scope for the role of public-facing open scholar. We therefore developed detailed guidelines for performing the role, which has the potential to be applied beyond the voluntary sector and to greatly extend the beneficial impact of existing OER, prompting institutions to release new OER in response to the needs of people outside HE.

1. Introduction and background

Dialogues about the Internet's potential role in maximising 'openness' in education are frequently multi-faceted and far from homogeneous in terms of the values which inform them. In recent years, Open Educational Resources (OER) – teaching and learning materials that can be used, reused and often edited free of charge, having been created by an individual or organization who chooses to retain limited or no ownership rights (OER Commons, 2012) – have increasingly been the focus of discussions around openness in education. Indeed, the OER movement is now seen as an important influence on education globally. OER repositories and collections such as the UK's OpenLearn (www.openlearn.open.ac.uk), iTunesU (http://www.apple.com/uk/education/itunes-u/), Merlot (www.merlot.org) and Open-CourseWare Consortium (www.ocwconsortium.org) offer a plethora of free materials, from full courses through to bite-size resources such as videos, podcasts and images, and it is clear that OER can offer great benefits to individual learners, educators, and learning institutions. For example, OER can help increase participation in education by making high-quality learning materials available without cost to the user (Geser, 2007, p. 21) irrespective of the user's geographical location, financial status and educational background.

Arguably though, the OER movement is not yet achieving true openness in education as resources tend to be offered by Higher Education (HE) institutions on a top-down, supplier-led

basis (see Walsh, 2011), rather than in response to the needs of a broader range of potential end-users[1]. Guthrie *et al* (2008) confirm that 'understanding user needs is paramount but often neglected' within the OER movement. In addition, it is possible that people who could most benefit from OER are the least likely to encounter them, with awareness of OER being fairly limited outside HE. Even those 'in the know' about OER may find the process of searching for resources quite daunting. For example, Arendt and Shelton (2009, p. 1), surveying 750 residents of Utah about their attitudes towards MIT's OpenCourseWare repository noted that one of the main disincentives for using OER was a feeling that the amount of materials available to choose from is overwhelming. The lack of needs-led provision is beginning to be addressed through a shift of focus on the use and reuse (rather than provision) of OER (Cape Town Open Education Declaration, 2008; Guthrie et al., 2008), together with a shift of emphasis from OER production to Open Educational Practices (OEP) 'which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path' (Ehlers, 2011, p. 4). Seely-Brown and Adler (2008) suggest that OEP outside HE are best enacted in 'rich (sometimes virtual) learning communities' which may involve 'collaboration between newcomers and professional practitioners/scholars'. They make a distinction between a 'supply-push' mode of learning whereby 'an inventory of knowledge' is built up in students' heads through the actions of educators who identify what they think the students need to learn, and a 'demand-pull' mode of learning which 'shifts the focus to enabling participation' and is responsive to learners' needs and interests. They argue that demand-pull should replace supply-push, allowing people to learn throughout their lives, even where the subjects in which they are interested are very niche.

This article explores the potential for broadening access to OER through the revival of the age-old role of 'public academic' to include a new OER-disseminating function operating within online communities on a demand-pull basis. The role of 'public academic' became particularly prominent in 18th century England through scientist Humphry Davy's theatrical and engag-

ing lectures at London's Royal Institution of Great Britain. 21st century public academics including particle physicist Brian Cox, classicist Mary Beard, philosopher Michael Sandel and anatomist Alice Roberts have gained celebrity status by disseminating their work through mass communications technology such as radio, television and the Web. The power exercised by public academics has recently been recognised in Alice Roberts' appointment as 'Professor of Public Engagement in Science' at the University of Birmingham in the UK. However, even these celebrity public academics exert their influence on a top-down basis, giving the public knowledge that academics deem they need, rather than what they ask for. We therefore conceptualised a new role for a 'public-facing open scholar', involving scholars identifying online communities who might benefit from OER in their specialist area and becoming involved in those communities by identifying participants' expressed needs and sourcing OER to meet those needs.

The public-facing open scholar role is an extension of Weller's (2011) 'digital scholar' – 'someone who employs digital, networked and open approaches to demonstrate specialism in a field' (but 'need not be a recognised academic') (Weller, 2011, Chapter 1). The role builds on Weller's notion of the possibilities for public engagement offered by universities' 'long-tail' content production process. Weller argues that aside from the big courses produced by higher education institutions a plethora of small learning objects are generated by academics, for example videos, podcasts and articles, as part of the everyday function of universities. He identifies this as 'long tail content', suggesting that the resources are 'unlikely to attract large audiences, but…are capable of gathering niche audiences, which collectively would fulfil a large element of a university's public engagement function' (Weller, 2011, Chapter 7). Weller notes that while audiences for long-tail content are unpredictable and any individual resource may have just a few 'consumers', long-tail content tends to be quite cheap to produce, in contrast with more traditional public-engagement outputs such as television broadcasts, which rely on a predictable mass audience to justify their cost. Weller (2011, Chapter 7) cites the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) definition of public engagement as involving 'specialists in higher education listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with non-specialists' from the public' (HEFCE, 2007). The public-facing open scholar role takes this a step further in involving digital scholars in active engagement with online communities outside HE as a way of ensuring that long-tail content reaches people who really need it.

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1   Relevantly, Coughlan and Perryman (2011) identified a disparity across academic disciplines amongst the OER appearing in the UK's OpenLearn repository, with science and technology subjects being much better represented as OER than arts, social sciences and health and social care subjects, despite the fact that the latter are particularly popular subjects for new applications to HE.

2. Methods

Our study focused on answering the following broad research question: 'Are there any opportunities for a public-facing open scholar to extend their digital scholarship for public benefit?.' We began the research process by performing a scoping study intended to give an overview of the types of online communities who might benefit from the activities of a public-facing open scholar – a first step in the process of selecting four case study communities to evaluate in detail as the basis for conceptualising the public-facing open scholar role. We decided to focus on just one sector with which we were particularly familiar – the UK's voluntary sector, which variously uses online communities to support fundraising, disseminate information and promote discussion. We further narrowed our lens to cover just those voluntary sector communities where members of the public use discussion forums for peer-support and knowledge-sharing in connection with health and well-being issues. We revised our research question accordingly: 'Does the voluntary sector offer any opportunities for a public-facing open scholar to extend their digital scholarship for public benefit?'

The case study selection process was based on evaluating a shortlist of 25 communities against two criteria:

(1) The communities had to be open and accessible to all. This was important for several reasons. We wanted to ensure that our research findings would be easily available, allowing others to visit and further explore the case study communities. Also, we felt that using wholly open communities would be more congruent with our aims for this study. (Burgdorf (2011, p. 39), discussing carers' use of the Internet, points out that 'many carers avoid websites that require them to register before being given access to information and instead continue to search elsewhere'.)

(2) The communities had to have the capacity to be 'self-educating', i.e. to learn collaboratively through shared resources, rather than featuring a top-down professionalised transmission of information that might limit the possibilities for a public-facing open scholar to work with that community. Burbules (2006, p. 1) suggests that self-educating communities feature 'an overt commitment to sharing information, initiating newcomers, and extending their collective knowledge' and 'balance the respective values of internal and external expertise' on the basis that 'the wisdom of the whole can be more than the sum of its parts'.

We used Galley's (2010) 'Community Indicators Framework' (see Figure 1) to assess whether a given community was self-educating. Galley et al (2010) suggest that fully developed communities share four indicators – 'identity', 'participation', 'cohesion' and 'creative capability' – which develop in sequence and can therefore be used to evaluate a community's strength. They suggest that community 'identity' is manifest in group self-awareness and direct references made to the group as an entity, together with the use of shared language and vocabulary. 'Participation' is identifiable where user activity is repeated and sustained over time without encouragement of the community developers, where debate and discussion is vibrant, where core groups participate regularly and encourage others to join in, and where clear roles and hierarchy emerge with minimal moderator intervention. Community 'cohesion' is identifiable through evidence of mutual support, tolerance, politeness and humour, together with evidence of turn-taking and response, a willingness to listen and learn from others and a willingness to ask and answer questions. Finally, 'creative capability' is identifiable where multiple points of view are expressed and challenged in a way that leads to the collaborative creation of new meaning and understanding. The presence of all four indicators in a community suggests that the community is likely to have the capacity to be 'self-educating' and therefore would be receptive as a group to academics' interventions.
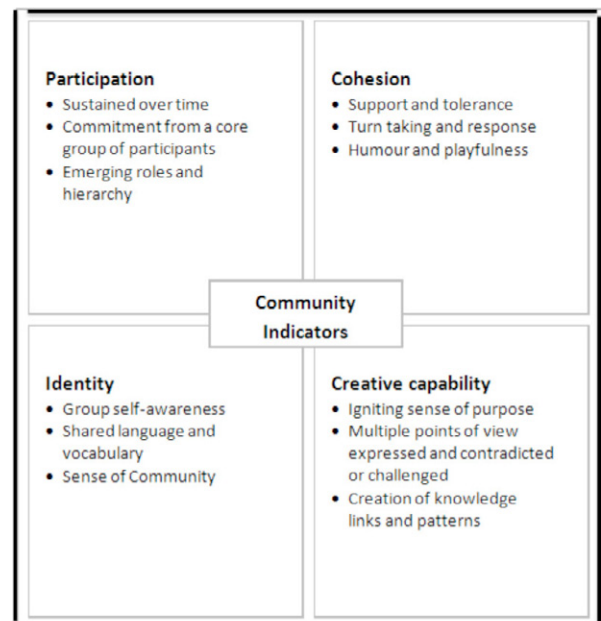

Figure 1: Galley's Community Indicators Framework (Galley *et al*, 2010)

On the basis of our scoping study we identified four representative communities to explore as case studies – two focused on specific conditions and two generic communities:

(1) Talking Point (http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/forum.php): Talking Point is the discussion area for the Alzheimers Society (www.alzheimers.org.uk), which works to improve the quality of life of people affected by dementia. Talking Point was established in 2003 as a place 'for anyone affected by dementia...to ask for advice, share information, join in discussions and feel supported'[2].

(2) Carers Trust (http://www.carers.org/forums): Carers Trust (www.carers.org) 'works to improve support, services and recognition for anyone living with the challenges of unpaid caring' and states that its online forums, live chat and blogs offer a community for adult carers who look after a family member, partner or friend, though 'adults with an interest in carers' issues are welcome too'[3].

(3) Talk about Autism (http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk): Talk about Autism is the forum area for Ambitious about Autism (www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk) – the national charity for children and young people with autism – and is promoted on the forum home page as being 'for everyone interested in autism, including parents, carers, family members, people on the spectrum, and professionals'.

(4) Gransnet (http://www.gransnet.com/forums): Gransnet hosts the forums for Age UK (www.ageuk.org) – a merger of Age Concern and Help the Aged, dedicated to improving later life. Gransnet is not a charity itself, but is an offshoot of the Mumsnet business. Age UK promotes the Gransnet site as 'a place to meet like-minded people, exchange views and swap experiences and stories'[4].

All four communities are completely open access, with the capacity to be self-educating, as further discussed in Section 3.1 below.

3. Findings

Our research question – 'Does the voluntary sector offer any opportunities for a public-facing open scholar to extend their digital scholarship for public benefit?' – comprised three sub-questions:

1 Are there any communities in the voluntary sector who have reached the 'creative capability' phase of their evolution and would therefore be receptive to the participation of a public-facing open scholar?

2 Is there any evidence of voluntary sector communities having a learning dimension that might accommodate the activities of a public-facing open scholar and is there any precedent for academics working with voluntary sector communities?

3 Is there a need for a public-facing open scholar or are communities entirely self-contained?

Our evaluation of the four case study communities using Galley's Community Indicators Framework provided evidence relevant to answering these questions and was used in conjunction with a broader scoping study of a wider range of voluntary sector online communities. Each question is discussed in greater detail below. All evidence is dated August 2012.

3.1 Are there any communities in the voluntary sector who have reached the 'creative capability' phase of their evolution and would therefore be receptive to the participation of a public–facing open scholar?

The four case study communities have each reached the 'creative capability' stage of their development, showing evidence of all four of Galley's community indicators. For example, Talking Point has a clear group identity, evidenced in the extensive use of shared language and acronyms[5] and references to the group as an entity: 'The Alzheimer's Society...helped me so much through this Talking Point forum alone, it kept me sane and I made some lovely cyber friends'[6]. Participation levels are extremely high in Talking Point. By August 2012, the community had 22,891 members and comprised 818 blogs with 3,117 entries plus a discus-

sion forum with 44,776 threads and 618,637 posts[7]. The four most active non-moderator participants averaged over 500 forum posts each per year, the most active having made 16,844 posts since 2006. About 100 users have each made over 1000 posts. Participation is repeated and sustained over time without moderator intervention, for example a thread started in 2007 that is still active in 2012, with over 39,000 posts[8]. However, participants may elect to perform an informal 'Volunteer Host' role with responsibility for welcoming new members, helping to direct them to useful resources and explaining how to carry out basic tasks on Talking Point[9]. Community cohesion is present in abundance, evidenced through explicitly voiced mutual support and tolerance of divergent views, as is creative capability, with members pooling experiences to reach new understandings, for example the collaborative creation of an acronyms list[10].

The Carers Trust online community also has a strong group identity, evidenced through shared language and self-awareness, as expressed in this comment to a new community member: 'You will find much understanding and support from this site as Carers can empathise even when our situations are not exactly the same'[11]. Participation levels are fairly high; the Carers Trust community forums were launched in 2002, have 12,000 members and receive around 1,500 posts per month[12], though discussions tend not to be sustained for as long as those in Talking Point. Extensive evidence of mutual support, tolerance and a willingness to listen and learn from others[13] indicates that the community is cohesive, as does the playfulness evidenced in the community's holding an 'online summer party' in the chatroom[14]. The

level of creative capability is also high, as indicated in several instances of in-community campaigning activity, for example the development of 'Care For Carers' – a campaign to get carers' pay increased to National Minimum Wage[15]. Multiple viewpoints are expressed and challenged within the Carers Trust forums, generally leading to new understandings, for example a thread where participants discuss a member's formation of a union for unpaid carers[16].

Talk about Autism, a more narrowly-focused community than Carers Trust, shows a very strong group identity, evidenced through shared language and references to the group as an entity[17]. Participation levels are quite high, though the forums are not as active as those for Talking Point and Carers Trust; Talk about Autism was launched in February 2009 and by August 2012 the community had over 3000 members with over 3,000 discussion threads in its forum. Community cohesion is clear, evidenced in mutual support and tolerance, and participants seem particularly willing to learn from each other. The provision of a busy 'Off Topic' area[18] for discussing subjects unrelated to autism (for example hobbies, music, films, holidays and other interests) shows an element of playfulness that also indicates group cohesion. Like Carers Trust, one of the ways in which creative capability is evidenced in Talk About Autism is through campaigning activities. A dedicated Events and Campaigns forum area[19] provides a focus for community members to discuss campaigns, events, meetings and groups and is well used, with 307 threads and 851 posts by August 2012. Creative capability is also shown in members' sharing and discussing autism-related research and posting surveys, studies and research opportunities in a busy 'Surveys Studies and Research' forum area[20].

The Gransnet community was launched in May 2011 and had 500,000 page views in the first month[21]. By August 2012 Gransnet had over 7000 members. Its forum is divided into 48 topics with 'Chat' being the most popular, with 1048 threads, showing fairly high participation levels. Gransnet also hosts 19

7   These statistics are available on the Talking Point home page: http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/forum.php

8   http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/showthread.php?6842-A-life-in-the-day-of.........................

9   See http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/showthread.php?44584-Three-ways-to-help-us-support-more-people-through-Talking-Point

10   See http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/showthread.php?26388-Abbreviations-List-and-Talking-Point-Jargon. See also this discussion regarding compassionate communication: http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/showthread.php?45465-Dont-forget-not-to-ask-me-to-remember%E2%80%A6.

11   http://www.carers.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=12448

12   http://www.carershub.org/content/virtual-community-carers

13   For example, these comments welcoming a new community member: 'Welcome I am sure you have come to the right place for moral support and people to laugh and cry with.' and 'I have found help and encouragement in abundance on this site – I am sure you will too – and you are so welcome' (http://www.carers.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=12448).

14   http://www.carers.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=13111%29.

15   See http://www.carers.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=12505.

16   http://www.carers.org/forums/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=12603

17   For example this thread welcoming a new member to the group: http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/forums/introductions/index.cfm?mode=completethread&forumid=932&threadId=32195&order=fPosted%20ASC

18   http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/forums/takebreak/index.cfm

19   http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/forums/events/index.cfm

20   http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/forums/surveysresearch/index.cfm

21   http://www.thepcf.org.uk/what_we_do/48/reference/591/

Blogs, plus regular web chats with politicians and experts, authors and celebrities. Group identity is apparent in the use of acronyms in the forum[22] and the widespread use of the term 'Gransnetters' for community members. The messages posted when welcoming new members tend to emphasise a closely knit existing group that is receptive to incomers, for example: 'Welcome...just let it all hang out on here! You'll get lots of help, support and kindness, and no one needs to be lonely as we are a friendly lot'[23]. This description referring to the Gransnet community as 'an intimate group of women (and some men) who give each other support, bounce ideas off each other, share jokes etc., in other words like a group of friends' also suggests strong group identity. Participation in the Gransnet forum is fairly high, though again the forums are not as active as those for Talking Point and Carers Trust. This may be connected with the fact that Gransnet was only launched in May 2011 so has had less time to build a thriving community. Within the Gransnet forums there is evidence of core groups of participants taking responsibility for the forum, for example when tracking down bogus posters[24] and welcoming new members. The Gransnet community shows considerable group cohesion, both through the lightweight tone of forum discussions, where smileys and emoticons are widely used, and through the extensive evidence of self-deprecation, for example the creation of a 'Pedants' Corner'[25]. In common with Talk About Autism, Gransnet creative capability is apparent in members working together to develop and promote relevant petitions on topics such as frozen pensions[26] and NHS reforms[27]. A dedicated e-petitions section[28] had 23 threads as of August 2012.

Talking Point, Carers Trust, Talk about Autism and Gransnet are just four examples of online voluntary sector communities that have achieved a sustained level of creative capability. Many more exist. It is also worth acknowledging that some online communities in the voluntary sector appear to have developed beyond the 'creative capability' stage and have become professionalised (for example the British Heart Foundation). It may be difficult for public-facing open scholars to find an opportunity to participate in such communities.

3.2 Do voluntary sector communities have any sort of learning dimension that might accommodate the activities of a public–facing open scholar and is there any precedent for academics working with voluntary sector communities?

All four communities feature some sort of educational dimension and/or academic activity. Of the four communities, Gransnet features the least clearly identifiable formal academic intervention, perhaps due to the very wide range of topics covered in forum discussions. However, Gransnet does have an explicit partnership with academic publisher Pearson, who offer several free taster courses in subjects such as yoga, digital photography, Spanish, and Family History. Gransnet also holds web chats, for example a well-received chat on dementia with a Professor of Old Age Psychiatry at the University of Manchester[29] and a web chat with a Professor of Rheumatic Disease Epidemiology at the University of Manchester[30]. There is also evidence that academics are present within the community, for example a nature specialist running a web chat on birdwatching[31] and the national creative writing adviser to University of the 3rd Age (U3A) holding a web chat on creative writing[32].

Talking Point also has a fairly low level of academic intervention, though it does provide a well-used forum for 'Researchers, Students and Professionals'[33] and a Resources Forum[34] that includes a 'Really Useful Resources' sticky message identifying the Open Dementia E-learning Programme, some useful dementia publications from the University of Western Sydney and information on Fronto-temporal Dementia from the University of

22 http://www.gransnet.com/info/acronyms

23 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/am_i_being_unreasonable/1192745-hello-and-help

24 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/other_subjects/1192619-bogus-posters

25 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/pedants_corner

26 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/politics/1191584-Will-you-kindly-sign-this-e-petition

27 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/politics/1188095-NHS-reforms

28 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/epetitions

29 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/in_the_news/a1191547-Dementia-webchat-with-Professor-Alistair-Burns-Monday-2-April-2-3pm

30 http://www.gransnet.com/forums/other_subjects/a1189710-Live-webchat-with-arthritis-expert-Professor-Alan-Silman-12-October-1-2pm

31 http://www.gransnet.com/webchats/birdwatching

32 http://www.gransnet.com/webchats/creative-writing

33 http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/forumdisplay.php?35-Researchers-students-and-professionals

34 http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/forumdisplay.php?33-Resources

California. Other Talking Point forum threads feature occasional postings by identifiable academics[35].

The Carers Trust forums feature the next highest level of academic intervention. While The Carers Trust does offer the facility to hold live web chats with experts, only three identifiable academics have conducted such chats since 2006, namely a Professor of Psychiatry of Learning Disability, a Senior Lecturer in Addictive Behaviour and a Professor of Law. However, the main Carers Trust website does have an education page[36] and a Hints and tips forum[37].

Talk about Autism features a slightly higher level of academic intervention and in 2012 the forum moderator was also a doctoral researcher. Talk about Autism holds regular web chats, sometimes featuring academics. In 2010 and 2011 the community hosted seven live Q&A sessions with leading academics and politicians including the Chair in Autism Education at the Institute of Education's Centre for Research in Autism and Education[38], a Professor of Clinical Child Psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry, London[39] and a researcher in autism affiliated with the University of Montreal[40]. Talk about Autism also has a Forum for Surveys, Studies & Research.

3.3 Is there a need for a public-facing open scholar or are communities entirely self-contained?

All four case study communities show members expressing the need for information and guidance. In some instances the communities themselves appear unable to meet these needs, indicating that the public-facing open scholar role would have value within voluntary sector online communities. Furthermore, the enthusiastic reception afforded to existing visiting academics,

evident across all four communities[41], suggests that community members would welcome more extensive participation by academics specialising in relevant subjects, and that other communities may be similarly receptive to the involvement of a public-facing open scholar.

4. Implications: How to become a 'public-facing open scholar'

Having identified a gap in the endeavours of existing public academics involved with online communities in the voluntary sector and a need for academics' intervention in the sector we began conceptualising the steps that might be involved in becoming a 'public-facing open scholar'. A summary follows:

(1) Find a community and identify its OEP-readiness;

(2) Listen to the needs of the community, search OER repositories and collections for resources that might meet those needs then bring the OER back to the community and participate in any discussion about the resources;

(3) Repeat step 2 on a regular basis and disseminate information about the community's needs.

These three steps are discussed in more depth below.

4.1 Find a community and identify its OEP-readiness

The first stage of becoming a public-facing open scholar involves identifying a community to work with – a decision which should be based both on the academic's alignment with the community's values and focus, and on an assessment of the OEP-readiness of that community. Some academics may have a pre-existing relationship with a particular charity established through regular donations or other voluntary work. This relationship may, in turn, be informed by personal experiences that align with the charity's focus. For example, if an academic has a relative with dementia or autism they may feel particularly passionate about working with a related voluntary sector community. Indeed, it is likely that community participants will be particu-

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35 For example this post signposting information about pain and dementia for caregivers, available from a website affiliated with the University of Alberta: http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/showthread.php?43014-Information-about-pain-and-dementia-for-caregivers. Note that it is not always possible to ascertain whether a forum participant is an academic.

36 http://www.carers.org/help-directory/learning-opportunities-carers

37 http://www.carers.org/forums/viewforum.php?f=4

38 http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/liveevents/tonycharman.cfm

39 http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/liveevents/pat_howlin.cfm

40 http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/liveevents/michelledawson.cfm

41 For example, a transcript of the Gransnet Dementia Webchat with Professor Alastair Burns (http://www.gransnet.com/forums/in_the_news/a1191547-Dementia-webchat-with-Professor-Alistair-Burns-Monday-2-April-2-3pm) shows Gransnet members working out their questions in advance of the Webchat. Subsequent comments by Gransnetters express gratitude for the information, which was deemed 'instructive' and 'helpful'.

larly welcoming to academics who can empathise with the issues they are raising. Alternatively, an academic may choose to work with a voluntary sector community that is closely related to their subject specialism. For example, Talk About Autism has featured a live online question and answer session from Professor Tony Charman, Chair in Autism Education at the Institute of Education, University of London.

It is important to check for any rules regarding participation in a particular community as these may restrict certain types of scholarly activity. The four case study communities had slightly different rules and regulations, summarised in Table 1.

Talking point	• 'Personal endorsements of products or services that may be of benefit to our users may be permitted on this forum.' • 'Please do not post medical, legal or financial information in an advisory capacity. Alzheimer's Society aims to remove such content.' • 'New members may not post external links on the forum until they have posted ten bona fide messages.'[42]
Carers Trust	'Carers.org is open to anybody aged 18 or older who is a carer, used to be a carer, works with carers or is interested in issues relating to carers.'[43]
Talk about Autism	'If you have something to offer which may be beneficial to our community, please do not register solely to post a link to your product, services or website. We would love to hear about what you do, but only after you introduce yourself and make yourself an active part of our community. If you've joined our community and have your own initiatives, services, blogs, research, etc., you are welcome to share these with us – we ask that you help us by maintaining a good balance in your contributions, i.e. post your own things, but equally contribute to the other discussions happening here. Community membership should be collaborative.'[44]
Gransnet	'We have no problem with people posting the odd link to other sites that other posters might find useful or helpful.'[45]

Table 1: Regulations related to scholarly activity in Talking Point, Carers Trust, Talk about Autism and Gransnet

42 http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/faq.php?faq=about_talking_point#faq_tandctalkingpoint

43 http://www.carers.org/carers-community-rules

44 http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/forumhelp/guidelines.cfm

45 http://www.gransnet.com/info/netiquette

It is notable that each community approaches participation differently, with Talking Point explicitly prohibiting the discussion of medical, legal and financial information but allowing product endorsement, Carers Trust and Gransnet offering little restriction and Talk about Autism welcoming discussion of research and services but emphasising an appropriate balance for individuals' contributions.

Once a shortlist of possible communities has been compiled, each community should be assessed for its level of community formation, as not all online communities will be sufficiently well-developed to become 'self-educating' – i.e. receptive as a group to academics' interventions in in sourcing OER and giving their time in other ways. (While it would be possible to respond to an individual's requests for information, this is not necessarily the best use of an academic's time; rather, it may be more efficient to work with communities who have the potential to be self-educating as a group, following any intervention by a public-facing open scholar.) It is suggested that shortlisted communities should be evaluated against Galley's Community Indicators Framework, as discussed in Section 2, and only those communities who have reached the 'creative capability' stage of their should development be considered ready for productive intervention by the academic. While this may appear rather limiting it is worth noting Bouman *et al's* (2008) assertion that the most successful communities are those who offer opportunities for identity-building and self-actualisation on an individual basis. An overly early intervention on the part of a well-meaning academic has the potential to stifle in-group support and participation, together with opportunities for individual identity-building and self-actualisation, especially if members of the community look to the academic to perform an ongoing 'sage on the stage' role (rather than the more sustainable and self-educating community-friendly 'guide on the side' role).

4.2   Listen to the needs of the community, search OER repositories and collections for resources that might meet those needs and then bring the OER back to the community

Once a community is identified, academics should listen to the needs of that community and then search for OER that will meet those needs. Operating on a demand-pull basis will require an academic to be responsive to the diverse, ever-changing needs of the community. For example, a community may be affected by new legislation or policy change that, in turn, prompts a peak in the demand for information. Consequently, a public-facing

open scholar may find their usefulness to a particular community ebbs and flows.

The granularity of required resources and the level of intervention will also vary. For example, the needs of a Talking Point member asking 'can anyone give me some helpful tips on how to record the life story of a lovely gentleman who has advanced dementia?'[46] might be met by providing a simple link to an information source such as the Dementia UK website, which includes a downloadable Life Story template[47]. Conversely, a post in the Talk about Autism community where a mother asks for help understanding her 4-year-old son's behaviour[48] might offer an opportunity for an academic to supplement participants' shared resources by identifying an online OER course covering the topic, in addition to spending time working with community participants discussing the issues covered in the course, either in discussion forums or through live web chats where such facilities exist. So, the role of the public-facing open scholar will change in response to the level of need. Academics might also respond to more general queries about where OER can be found and what resources might be available, as the basis for empowering community participants to self-source resources.

Table 2 gives an indication of the extensive range of case-study-relevant OER available from four major OER repositories/collections – Merlot, OpenCourseWare Consortium, OpenLearn and iTunesU. The UK Open University's OpenLearn repository (www.openlearn.open.ac.uk/) contains over 600 study units spread across 15 subject areas. Study units can take between 1-50 hours to work through and are available from introductory to postgraduate level. MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching) (www.merlot.org) is a project of the California State University. It indexes over 30,000 free and open learning materials. The OpenCourseWare Consortium (OCWC – www.ocwconsortium.org) is a collaboration of universities from around the world. Their index lists over 6000 courses in 12 languages. iTunes U is an area of the Apple iTunes store that allows universities and colleges to distribute audio and video content and PDF files for users to download straight to their computer or mobile devices. It is the world's largest source of free education content with over 350,000 resources. Table 2 shows the results returned from each repository following searches pertinent to the case study communities, conducted in August 2012.

	Search terms	OpenLearn	MERLOT	OCWC	iTunes U
Alzheimers Society	Alzheimers, dementia.	5 study units	34 entries including 5 online courses, 4 open textbooks, 2 presentations and 7 reference materials	4 courses	120+ resources
Carers Trust	Carers, caring.	6 study units	26 entries including 3 online courses, 7 presentations and 8 reference materials.	18 courses	160+ resources
Ambitious about Autism	Autism, autistic.	2 study units	68 entries including 5 online courses, 8 open textbooks, 16 tutorials and 3 workshop/training materials.	5 courses	567 resources
Age UK / Gransnet	Ageing, older	15 study units	55 entries including 3 presentations, 16 reference materials, a quiz/test and 26 tutorials.	2 courses	85+ resources

Table 2: Search results from four repositories

46   http://forum.alzheimers.org.uk/showthread.php?39019-Recording-a-life-story-with-a-person-suffering-from-advanced-dementia

47   http://www.dementiauk.org/information-support/life-story-work/

48   http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk/page/forums/introductions/?mode=completethread&forumid=932&threadId=36890

Table 3 gives examples of four resources that could meet the needs of the case study communities, illustrating the range and diversity of the available OER.

	Title	Location	Type of resource
Alzheimers Society	What's the Difference between Dementia and Alzheimer's?	Found in MERLOT at: http://www.merlot.org/merlot/viewMaterial.htm?id=605282	A webpage reference source provided by the Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation (http://www.alzinfo.org/about-alzheimers/dementia)
Carers Trust	Caring for the Caregiver	Found in iTunes U at: http://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/caring-for-the-caregiver/id469934560?i=101807165&mt=2	A 20 minutes video from Liberty University.
Ambitious about Autism	2011 Summit on Autism	Found in OCWC at: http://ocw.uci.edu/courses/course.aspx?id=136	11 videos of the KIDA annual conference proceedings at University of California, Irvine.
Age UK / Gransnet	Retiring lives? Old age, work and welfare	Found in OpenLearn at: http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/DD305_3	An advanced-level 10 hours long study unit.

Table 3: Four OER pertinent to the needs of the four case study communities

4.3 Repeat step 2 on a regular basis and disseminate information about the community's needs

Communities' needs are ever-changing and a public-facing open scholar should be prepared to repeat step 2 on a regular basis while also disseminating information about their chosen community's needs amongst other academics within their own institution and elsewhere. In particular, the public-facing open scholar might identify any unmet needs and lobby for further OER to be released to meet them. Social media such as Twitter and blogs might be a useful platform for disseminating such information.

Figure 2 summarises the various components and phases of the collaboration between public-facing open scholars and communities outside HE.

5. Conclusion

The public-facing open scholar role, located at the intersection of HE and the voluntary sector, has the potential to greatly extend the beneficial impact of existing OER and to prompt institutions to release new OER in response to the needs of people outside

HE, not least of all in the voluntary sector, where resources are often scarce. It is envisaged that a public-facing open scholar, in highlighting the existence of relevant OER repositories and showing how resources might be sourced, could contribute to a community further developing their capacity for being self-educating, self-supporting and sustainable beyond the academic's interventions. It is also possible that following an initial phase of regular work with a community, a public-facing open scholar may then adopt a lower-key relationship with that community, perhaps using a tool such as Twitter to draw the community's attention to relevant OER when new resources are released.

However, a challenge to the beneficial impact of this new type of academic may be posed in terms of the time required to perform the role and possible clashes with the demands of paid work for the employing uni-

Figure 2: Visualising the collaboration between the public-facing open scholar and online communities outside HE

versity. We share Weller's (2011) assertion that the time is now right for universities to start recognising digital scholarship as an important part of academic output, according digital scholarship parity with more traditional outputs such as journal publishing. Furthermore, we propose that universities should formally recognise the activities of public-facing open scholars in reaching out with OER to the benefit of communities outside higher education, perhaps rewarding such activities through the staff appraisal process or by incorporating this role into the job specification of faculty staff. Should such recognition and institutional support for the public-facing open scholar be afforded, a new role for learning institutions may be on the horizon – that of a 'benevolent academy' which takes seriously its responsibilities to civic society.

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