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Col.laboratori (CIRAX) and LORO, collaborative networks for educational repositories and teaching communities

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Abstract

This study focuses on the connection between LORO (Language Open Resources Online), from Department of Language at the Open University, and the prototype CIRAX (Collaborative Interuniversity Learning Resources on the Net), from the Consortium of University Libraries of Catalonia (CBUC). LORO is a consolidated and successful languages teaching and learning repository that was developed with UKOER JISC funding and institutional support. In 2011 it was highly commended in OPAL awards for quality in innovation through Open Educational Practice.

LORO was identified as an appropriate and effective experience to learn from and apply to the new CIRAX, which aims to be a radical step forward in creating a teaching community and a space for interuniversity collaboration. The evaluation and effectiveness of LORO in changing educators' practice and the valuable evidences showing that a repository is more accepted and used if those who are affected, educators, participate in the decision making and its implementation, clearly marks the way to be followed by CIRAX.

These two projects share a common purpose in helping teachers to become a learning community that systematically uses learning materials stored in a shared repository, and both are also active in the creation, maintenance, and sharing of resources and methodologies for learning. In short, both projects strive to continuously improve the quality of teaching and the progress from the experience and reflective practice. LORO has become effectively embedded in institutional practice at the UK OU and in engaging with other disciplinary users nationally to activate a discipline-based community of educators. Whether this approach can be applied across different discipline areas is a question for its future.

In an initial pilot phase, CIRAX has chosen mathematics and statistics to promote and consolidate a community of technological development and educational practice. This provides an opportunity to test the effective practices developed in LORO beyond the Language teaching community. Subsequently, a second phase will extend to other discipline areas. The prototype's creation includes agreed mechanisms for sharing and classifying resources for their development and use,



as well as collaborative systems that can be applied immediately to the catalan universities' teachings. It will continue facilitating the spread of open practice and exploring new pedagogies for learners and educators.

This presentation will explore the basis of the collaboration, pointing out the most important processes and findings as transfer of effective open practice is extended into a cross-disciplinary, non-UK form, as well as discussing similar experiences in order to incorporate new knowledge and to generate future challenges.

Keywords

Open Education, Open Educational Resources (OER), educational repositories, teaching communities, collaborative networks, educational innovation, LORO, CIRAX.

1. Introduction

The Open Access (OA) movement pursues the free and open dissemination of scientific production; that is, the contents derived from research. This initiative has been expanded to teaching material, or Open Educational Resources (OER), the value of which has been enhanced in the European context by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and, especially, by a new educational model that encourages teachers and students to use, reuse and share resources with the rest of the educational community.

Universities have joined the OA movement by creating institutional repositories to house and disseminate academic outputs generated by its members. As for storing and managing OER, some institutions have hybrid repositories with special collections for learning content, whilst others have settled on specific educational repositories separate from their scientific production. Finally, there are other initiatives of educational repositories at the departmental, faculty/college or cross-institutional level.

The term *openness* in education had an evolving nature over the past two decades, although it is now often discussed almost exclusively in relation to new technologies (Weller, 2011) that facilitate it by providing the tools and spaces (social media) to distribute content across the network. In this way it is hoped that the use of technology can lead to a change in academic practice. However, there are other facets of the concept of openness. Peter and Deimann (2013) point out, in their historical reconstruction of "openness", that it is not only a technological, but also a social, cultural and economic phenomenon, not bound by institutional or national



boundaries. They also indicate that different notions of openness might inspire different instantiations of open practice.

In this paper we describe two examples of how the push towards openness and increased collaboration has taken shape in two different contexts with different needs, and we examine commonalities between the two projects.

2. LORO, a departmental repository for languages

LORO (Language Open Resources Online, <http://loro.open.ac.uk>) is a JISC-funded repository of Open Educational Resources developed by the Department of Languages (DoL) in 2009-10. It hosts the OU's resources for supporting the teaching of languages through synchronous online conferencing and allows course designers and teachers to share tutorial resources openly, as well as being an open repository of OER for the wider language's community.

Its implementation was timed to coincide with a change in the online audio-conferencing platform used by the institution. As a result, there was a need to repackage the resources provided for teachers by the institution, and an opportunity to make them available through an open platform that would allow users to also share their own resources and to access the whole range of language teaching resources available at the institution.

From 2010 teachers at the Department of Languages have used LORO to find resources for online synchronous teaching and for other modes of teaching and have benefitted from being able to access and download materials for all languages and levels. Data from usage surveys show that about three quarters of respondents (n=176 in 2010 and n=156 in 2011 of the approximately 300 language teachers in the department) use LORO to find resources for the course that they teach, whilst one third uses LORO to browse and download material for other courses (Comas-Quinn, 2011)

Users in the department have reported the benefits derived from opening access to this material as: the possibility of using, adapting and repurposing the existing resources, and the time freed by not having to create everything from scratch, which can be used to develop other aspects of their practice; new ideas and inspiration to create new and different resources using a variety of approaches; validation and increased confidence in their own practice through comparison with the practice of others; and an incentive to increase the quality of the materials produced when these are intended for sharing.

LORO is now a consolidated language teaching and learning repository receiving around 10,000 visits annually from over 100 countries. Its main users continue to be language teachers in the UK, and in 2011 the project was highly commended in the OPAL awards for quality and innovation through Open Educational Practice (<http://www.oer-quality.org/the-loro-project/>) for its impact on the practices of these teachers.

Opportunities and challenges for LORO

Following the implementation of LORO the department has provided opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively in the creation and peer review of teaching resources, and various professional development events have been organised to increase teachers' awareness of the advantages of reusing and adapting and sharing their work openly. These activities have been offered on a voluntary basis and taken up by those who had an interest in developing their skills and knowledge in this area. Echoing Nielsen's (2006) theory of participation inequality, users fall into three categories: a small group who are active in contributing resources, a wider group less actively engaged in occasional sharing and commenting, and the majority who are either passive users who consume content or those who simply ignore the tool and its offerings.

3. CIRAX, a cross-institutional repository

CIRAX (Collaborative Interuniversity Learning Resources on the Net) aims to be a space for cross-institutional teaching collaboration, a cooperative repository designed from the [CBUC](#) (Consortium of University Libraries of Catalonia)¹² and launched by [SUR](#) (Secretariat for Universities and Research), which contains digital resources resulting from teaching activities carried out in member universities.

This project attempts to be a dynamic and user-friendly environment for sharing materials, which facilitates resources management and includes discussion forums. It is intended to act as a point of reference for teachers in Catalan universities, to help them optimize the time spent in materials preparation and to publicize and improve their work. The idea of CIRAX is to bring out and nurture a teaching community that uses the learning resources systematically stored in a shared repository, and that is active in the creation, updating and sharing of resources and methodologies for learning.

In an initial pilot phase, the goal is to consolidate an existing community of technological development and educational practice in Mathematics and Statistics. This experience will later be extended to other areas of knowledge.

The project is divided into several stages. Currently, a prototype is being developed over two platforms: an existing repository (MDX) and a social media tool (Sophia.org). MDX is a CBUC's existing cooperative repository for learning materials online, based in DSpace software (version 1.5.1) and OAI-PMH interoperability protocol. In order to optimize economical resources, the new

¹ <https://www.oercommons.org/groups/cirax/65/>

² CBUC was set up in late 1996 as a public body with its own legal status. It is composed of the following institutions: 8 catalan universities, The [Biblioteca de Catalunya](#) and the Universities and Research Department in the [Ministry of Economy and Knowledge](#) from the *Generalitat* (the autonomous government of Catalonia).



development aims to build on MDX and reuse both the platform and the existing processes. MDX is currently underused but has potential to become more useful.

Sophia is an educational platform, designed to share lessons and courses, to help teachers enrich their course materials and to enhance learning. It enables the formation of groups and the establishment of areas of collaboration amongst users.

After a theoretical and evaluation framework, several procedures have been established in the process of resources' depositing/publishing, standardization of metadata, content licensing and quality control, etc. Some activities designed to engage and motivate the teaching community have also been set up. In parallel, several follow-up interviews have been carried out amongst potential users (a group of Math's' teachers) in order to know about their needs and perceptions.

Opportunities and challenges for CIRAX

While barriers and enablers to use, reuse and share learning resources have been discussed in the literature, less attention has been given to the purpose and the motivation of the protagonists, teachers and learners (Pegler, 2012 is one exception). One of the challenges of this project is to contribute to an area of research that is largely underexplored, and to answer some questions from the perspective of a specific repository and teaching community: which factors have influence reuse for teachers, how they interact within the community to share resources, what kind of difficulties they find to adapt materials, and how all these aspects are related to each other.

Educational repositories have not yet been widely adopted by teachers as part of their teaching practice and there is not much evidence about who is using OER and how (Dichev and Dicheva, 2012). CIRAX could become an "alternative" that might change this behavior pattern, since it is intended to be a different kind of "repository", an extension of resources and tools used for preparing teaching based on social aspects. The purpose is to have a dynamic community which encourages participation and is self-sustaining, a hybrid between a traditional repository and a social network.

Some of the challenges for CIRAX are to have a positive impact in the quality of the resources produced (peer-reviewing and updating teaching materials) and to improve teaching (developing experience and confidence amongst teachers as well as reflective practice)

4. Discussion

In this section we start by looking at the contexts in which these two projects were undertaken and the problems that they set out to solve. After acknowledging their differences in purpose, location and timing, we go on to consider what both projects have in common.

LORO was a departmental initiative conceived as a response to concrete practical problems for the storage, management and sharing of existing resources within the institution. Its potential for playing a part in the professional development of teachers, and for providing a way of showcasing the institution's high-quality resources and sharing them with the languages community beyond the institution were additional, albeit important, considerations that emerged as the project took shape. The development of LORO coincided with the creation of other discipline-based repositories of educational resources, many funded by the [Higher Education Academy](#) (HEA) through its now demised subject centers, and the [Joint Information Systems Committee](#) (JISC) as part of its digital repositories programme.

Conversely, the request for the creation of CIRAX has come from the Secretariat for Universities and Research (SUR), which reports to the autonomous government of Catalonia. The project has the specific aim of encouraging collaboration between Catalan universities around quality enhancement of teaching. In the Catalan and Spanish contexts, many institutions make educational resources available through institutional repositories whose main purpose is showcasing and marketing. During the past few years, the volume of educational resources has increased significantly and so has institutional collaboration in OpenCourseware (OCW) initiatives. Half of the Spanish universities have an institutional repository or participate in a consortium one and over a third of them have joined the OCW project. Nevertheless, there are few examples of specific educational repositories, which have a secondary role. (Santos-Hermosa; Ferran-Ferrer and Abadal, 2012). CIRAX uses a new approach in the Spanish context, trying to activate a latent, disciplinary community of practice and providing a space where it can engage in pedagogical reflection and discussion. In this sense, the collaboration between faculty and librarians was essential; an example was the one established at UOC (Santos-Hermosa, 2012).

In spite of their differences both projects share the common aim of enabling teachers to become part of a learning community that shares learning materials stored in an accessible repository. In both cases the geographical location of the potential community is important: LORO serves the needs of teachers working for the Open University in the UK, whilst CIRAX will be used by teachers in Catalan universities. The fact that they are based on local communities with shared references and contexts of practice makes these repositories much more relevant to the intended users than comparable initiatives with a more global reach.

The basic affordance for both platforms is making a searchable collection of teaching resources available openly. The reflection and conversations around pedagogy that can ensue might take place in different platforms, which might or might not be linked to the repository. In the case of LORO, teachers at the Open University can use existing spaces where these conversations already take place: the virtual staff room for each course, or the regional groupings to which they belong and where many of the training and professional development opportunities are provided (although these are also increasingly offered online across the whole institution). After all, online communication and collaboration are central to the way in which the Open University works, and therefore a key element of academic practice.

On the other hand, CIRAX amalgamates mostly traditional institutions, where teaching can be undervalued, and research regularly takes priority in the working lives of academic staff. The debate and collaboration that characterizes research work does not normally extend to teaching, and reflective practice is often neglected. It is here that CIRAX can capitalize on an opportunity to encourage teachers to opening up their classroom practice by providing a space where the conversations around teaching, pedagogy and materials can take place. In this respect CIRAX addresses one of the challenges of the OER project: to transform static repositories into dynamic hubs where contributors engage with each other while uploading their own resources and reusing and repurposing resources for other teaching and learning contexts (Comas-Quinn, 2011). Doing this in a discipline community that faces similar challenges and where members may already be connected through their research and institutional networks seems the most promising way of engaging teachers in this endeavor.

The concept of Open Educational Practices (OEP) draws heavily on OER as a way “to raise the quality of education and training, and innovate educational practices” (OPAL, 2007) through collaboration, open sharing and peer review. The emphasis on resources is more congruent with the pedagogical approach of open, distance, online and blended institutions, where high quality teaching and learning materials are already at the heart of the pedagogy. In more traditional models, where teaching is performed one class at a time with an educator mediating the experience and making up for any shortcomings of the teaching material, teachers might find themselves at different stages in their readiness to share their practice openly.

5. Conclusion

This paper has drawn on two case studies within higher education in Europe which represent similar approaches to educational repositories and the sharing of resources in teaching communities.

It has been argued that there is a need for re-thinking the role of OER repositories, which, some argue, should focus on archiving, providing high visibility and stewardship for resources (Dichev and Dicheva, 2012). This is to some extent what LORO was initially conceived to do. CIRAX, however, is putting more emphasis on involving teachers in the creation, publication and reuse of OER through professional networks, as a way of enhancing the quality of teaching. Other community-driven platforms such as wikieducator, youtube, iTunes or slideshare, offer a model for educational repositories, which under this approach become community-driven tools for sharing resources and practice. LORO and CIRAX have already identified this opportunity to be used beyond resources’ archiving and preservation and are trying to realise it in similar ways. We consider that activities around using, repurposing, and remixing OER in repositories can be achieved if they are integrated in professional development and ultimately become community driven. New experiences to foster communities of teachers around educational repositories (Beaven, 2013) might bring new and hopeful results.

The connection between these two projects has allowed lessons learned in LORO to inform the development of CIRAX, in the sense of highlighting results, rethinking strategies and processes, and identifying trends. At the same time, CIRAX offers LORO a slightly different approach through further development of a similar idea, and a stronger emphasis on the work of the educational community.

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