The Future of Open Libraries:

Open Educational Resources and the Universal Library Initiative

By

Jessica Pryde

Submitted 4 November 2009

LIBR 287-05: The Open Movement and Libraries

San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science

Fall 2009

For the past fifteen years or so, Open Education has been utilized and advocated through

numerous mediums in higher education. These resources have developed from the crude

web pages of the mid-1990s to the elaborately planned initiatives of the current day. In

modern times, academic libraries and other library groups have taken to utilizing this sort

of resources. The goal of this paper is to examine the development of Open Educational

Resources (OERs), their current use in libraries, and the potential for a universal library

OER project.   After an overview of the history and purposes of OERs, I will prove that

there is the possibility of a sustained overarching library system as long as there is the

proper funding and institutional support.

Open Educational Resources—Past, Present and Future

What are OERs?

An open educational resource is a single resource or collective group of resources

produced by an institution or consortium. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development defines OER as "digitised materials offered freely and openly for

educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research"

(p. 10). These resources range the gamut of documents and media, from classroom

handouts to podcast tutorials. The most important aspect of each resource is that it is

"open," or available for use by all. Sometimes this "all" is anyone viewing, and

sometimes "all" is a registered group of users.

One can define a collective or initiative of open educational resources as

"accumulated digital assets that can be adjusted and which provide benefits without

restricting the possibilities for others to enjoy them" (p. 10). Many producers of open

education and open educational resources often do not present them as singular resources,

but in collections.

Open Education and e-learning have been a topic of discussion for a number of

years. The first known use of the term OER was at a conference sponsored by UNESCO

in 2002. "Open courseware," course materials compiled for a complete class, was one of

the earliest forms of open educational resources, and is currently one of the most

common.

Why do people use them?

The primary goal of OERs is to produce free and usable materials for the

advancement of students of all ages. Some people use OERs in order to supplement their

own studies. Some use them *as* their studies. And instructors and professors use OERs

for both their free qualities as well as their derivative values. "Because of the reuse and

customization capabilities of OERs, professors can pick and choose from what is

available, make needed modifications, and add content of their own to come up with

something that more closely meets the need of a specific course -- or even a specific

section of a course," begins C. Jeffrey Belliston.   He continues that "…a printed copy of

the result can be produced at a reasonable price for students" (p. 285).

Where do we see OERs going in the future?

OERs have the potential of numerous things. Going in their current direction, the

next step for institutional academic OERs is developing a more cohesive initiative

system. With the broad expanse of current OERs, it would be nearly useless work to

build a brand new one, but a connective system of OERs would provide for a great deal

more use across the board. It is true that each institution's initiative might have course-

specific class materials, but one never knows what might be made available to students at

other institutions.

The solution for this would be a cross-searching system that linked the

institutional initiatives and repositories but did not combine them. There are numerous

initiatives available to the public in various shapes and sizes, but there is not a clear way

to search them all without going to each site and conducting a search, wasting time and

energy. A federated cross-search engine would allow for a database-like results list,

leading a user to each item through its own initiative.

Libraries and Open Educational Resources

What are libraries doing with OERs?

There are a number of libraries and library consortiums that have taken the

forefoot in producing resources for all. While many have featured some of their

information on universal initiatives or pages of their home-institutions' initiatives, they

had not previously worked towards producing their own. Now, the library world is

producing these resources on its own.

One example of an institutional level initiative is the Harvard Open Collections

Program. This program is part of the Harvard Libraries and Museums. The collections

are a linked grouping of digitized materials that are free to use by anyone who comes

across the site.   Unlike some other library initiatives, the library's materials themselves are the key feature of this open collection. Instead of locking access to some of their newly digitally archived materials to Harvard users, they have provided primary resources that are interesting and useful to the world community. While library professionals might look to this example as a model for their own future open collections, it is more for the library user than the librarian.

Other organizations are going in a more instructor-friendly direction. An example of a collective initiative (sponsored by an organization) is ACRL's PRIMO, or Peer-Reviewed Instructional Materials Online. This collection of materials is a very good example of a universal starter-kit: not very many materials and not a very advanced searching mechanism, but ACRL has the right idea. The ability to browse materials is just as important as the need to search, and PRIMO gives us this ability. There is no searching mechanism, however, which would cause issues when a significant amount of materials were made available through this engine.

A third example of the right idea is ANTS, or the Animated Tutorial Sharing Project. This is a collective of shared and developed library tutorials, with individual membership. This initiative not only provides shared materials, but also gives information and instruction on creating and sharing them. This is a step in the direction of where a universal initiative could go were it to have more channels of thought and production.

The potential of all of these initiatives lies in their existence. Each has good standing in their own communities for providing their users with what they are searching for. But what if we could produce something that links all of these types of resources

together, a broadened and enhanced "OpenCourseWare Search" for libraries? A

collective of such magnitude would contain all the best aspects of the above examples:

primary and useful resources, a thorough search engine, and guidance for the creation,

alteration, and production of materials.

What is the likelihood of a potential library-wide OER system?

The ideal library OER would be a universal, over arching initiative system.

Published as a website, it would be produced by an organization similar to the

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), or a brand new

organization charged with forming this system. This organization would be in charge of

the planning and publicizing of this initiative, in order to acquire initial interest and

eventual membership.

How would it work?

Unlike my earlier suggestion for the cross-searching system that would benefit the

institutional academic initiatives and repositories, this would actually be a combined web

initiative. Libraries would come forth as member organizations, and produce and present

materials to be placed into the initiative. As a universal system, there would be

categories for public libraries, academic libraries, archives, special libraries, law libraries,

medical libraries, etc. Within these categories, there would also be categories for

instructional and educational materials, library-specific materials, pre-published papers,

and materials regarding special events or occurrences in libraries. With this more general

categorization system, a user would be able to search for a subject like "online searching

guides" and it would produce the results for all sorts of online searching guides in all

sorts of libraries. This type of cross-searching would allow for a wider variety of results,

as well as results that might not have been considered in a different search. For example,

the perfect guide template for an academic librarian might come from a public library

document. This librarian might have the option of a presentation, or a handout, or even a

five minute screencast tutorial complete with soundtrack and actors. In a different sort of

repository or initiative, these materials might not have been available.

Utilizing open source technology, this initiative would be the work of volunteers

and the institutions taking part in producing the material. Ideally, there would be a data

entry/query template that would work for new entries and submissions. A simple system

determining the type of library, the type of material, audience, and age level would allow

for general categorization. As more materials are added, more categorization would be

necessary.

What would be in it?

This initiative would be almost completely open, allowing for any materials

meeting a certain criteria based on the purpose of the document. On top of the instruction

materials and educational tutorials that might be presented in the library part of a regular

OER initiative or repository, there would also be other library materials, including

reading guides, librarians' documents, and any other materials each contributing

institution believed would be useful that also met the criteria provided.

With the advent of participatory culture, "peer-review" takes on a whole new

meaning. Because of the diverse variety of materials that would be available on the

initiative, a criteria would be created for different levels of material. With the assistance

and oversight of the planning organization, the initial member institutions would develop

criteria for the various subcategories. This includes what types of materials are preferred

in each grouping, how long the materials may or may not be (depending on the type), and

how the materials would be evaluated at a set interval.

Usage allowance would also come in levels, depending on the materials and their

purpose. Pre-published papers, for example, would have more rigorous requirements for

use and attribution. The section for library-specific materials, on the other hand, would

have fewer limitations on use and derivative qualities. Attribution requirements would

still be the same, and would follow similar rules as Creative Commons and other

licensing tools.

One of the more important central, static aspects of this system would be the

existence of instructional materials *on* instructional materials. In other words, there

would be a separate portion of the initiative that will include written and screencast

tutorials on how to plan, develop, and produce materials that might then be placed into

the initiative. This would be a circular service for member institutions, as they would be

provided with the means of not only acquiring new materials for their libraries' use, but

of making their own to share with others (if, indeed, they do not have that capacity

already filled).

Another possibility for the initiative would be a collaborating and reviewing

community. Pre-published papers and other materials that might require review could be

posted, discussed, and edited by members of this community. There would also be space

for collaborating on new papers, instructional materials, conference materials and proposals, and any other idea members might develop.

In the height of its life, this initiative would be a series of collections that would be inter-searchable and easily navigable. There would be member listings for thousands of institutions worldwide, divided by public libraries, academic libraries, medical libraries, law libraries, and special institutions. Instructional materials, including lesson plans, handouts, and presentations, would be featured, as would new tutorials and library-specific materials. Library specific tutorials would be cross-listed under both library specific materials and screencast tutorials. Pre-published papers would be organized by topic and length. Interactive materials produced both by and for users would be organized in a similar fashion. Two clicks from the home page can allow one to seek and find materials in any subcategory and from any institution type, or take them to the community where collaborations and reviews take place.

There are endless possibilities for this initiative, as long as there is server space available. Libraries are information centers; an information center for libraries should continue to grow as the libraries themselves grow. As ideas develop, I would hope that more branches of the initiative would as well.

Who would use it?

Both like and unlike general OERs, this system would be used on the instructor's side of things, instead of the student's. Classroom instructors and the students in the community of the particular repository or initiative almost equally use the materials in OER initiatives or repositories. This library initiative system would be available to users,

as long as they are in search of materials produced by their own library or library system.

But the primary purpose of this would be to provide library and information professionals

with resources to use in the classroom or at the desk, or in order to produce their own

resources.

The key question in regards to users is how to maintain the "openness" while still

maintaining the criteria and authority of the initiative. The possibilities lie between a

completely open and available to all, and a registered user base, with login—still open

and available to all, but slightly more manageable. On one hand, the Open Library would

maintain a charge of making materials available for anyone interested in using them.

There would still be a required free registration for submission of materials into either the

database or onto the review and collaboration forum. But searching materials and

browsing the initiative site in its entirety would not be blocked to unregistered users.

On the other hand, an additional page asking for login and contact information

would allow for an easy management of user numbers and ease of navigation once within

the site. It would, possibly, deter potential users; however, if one does not wish to take

the short amount of time to create a username and password, providing an existing e-mail

address, they probably do not have a strong desire to utilize the initiative.

When it comes to those that produce information for the database and

instructional materials collection (where the written and screencast tutorials on producing

materials are located), and who join the forum for review and collaboration, there would

be both member institution and individual user inclusion. It is more than likely that due

to contractual issues, individual users would have to be affiliated with one or more of the

member institutions. This would be a different grouping of registered users than the

proposed user-registration for every general user; each user in this group would have the

authority to upload and remove materials from the general database and the instructional

materials collection.

How could we make it sustainable?

This is the big question. There is nothing to say we could not. The primary

necessity for sustainability is the proper funding. As a part of the planning process, there

should be a plan for pre- and ongoing development. Once a set group of member

institutions has been produced, a member campaign might be initiated. The member

institutions, being mostly non-profit themselves, would likely dedicate a portion of their

budget per year to this initiative. There would also need to be a development plan,

requiring development officers and volunteer fundraisers.

The other necessity is the proper contract and license. There would be a required

contract for each individual institution contributing their resources. This contract would

maintain the rights of the institutions and the rights of the initiative. While no one could

claim the institutions' resources without the proper attributions, the institutions

themselves would not be able to remove their works from the initiative without going

through the proper channels.

Once the money and materials were in place, this system should be relatively self-

sustainable. With OS software and volunteer contributors, the only thing that would

require constant funding is server space. The funding for this could come from an

endowment set up in the first year of the system's development, or could be maintained

through constant contributions by the institutions involved. It could also be a mixture of

both, as the necessity for server space goes up and down.

Conclusion

      Open Educational Resources have been gradually developing into a large part of

the electronic learning community. Institutions have been working on their own and with

other institutions to build initiatives and e-learning resources for their constituents and for

the general population. Now is the time for more libraries to do the same. While there

are a few library initiatives, and while some libraries have included themselves in single-

and multiple-institution collectives or initiatives, it is now time for libraries to take the

lead in OERs with a universal library OER initiative.   The practical existence of such an

initiative is a long ways away, but the possibility is there, and doable, provided the proper

planning, financial development, and knowledge is put forth.

Resource List

ANTS, Animated Tutorial Sharing Project. Last accessed at http://ants.wetpaint.com/, 2

      November 2009.

Association of College and Research Libraries, PRIMO (Peer-reviewed Instructional

      Materials Online). Last accessed at

      http://www.ala.org/apps/primo/public/search1.cfm, 1 November 2009.

Atkins, D. E., J. S. Brown and A. L. Hammond (2007). A review of the open educational

      resources (OER) movement: achievements, challenges, and new opportunities. A

      report to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Belliston, C. J. (May 2009). Open educational resources: creating the instructional

      commons. College and Research Libraries News, 70(5). p. 284-7.

Center for Open and Sustainable Learning, OpenCourseWare Finder. Last accessed at

      http://ocwfinder.com/, 2 November 2009.

Harvard University Libraries, Open Collections Project. Last accessed at

      http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/, 1 November 2009.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Centre for Educational

      Research and Innovation (2007). Giving knowledge for free: the emergence of

      open educational resources. Downloaded from

      http://www.oecd.org/document/41/0,3343,en_2649_35845581_38659497_1_1_1_

      1,00.html, 20 October 2009.