

SCORE Fellowship Final Report By Tony Coughlan, The Open University

Sustainable Relationships between Universities and Vocational OER Users

Tony's project ran from 1st October 2010 until the 31st January 2012, the aim of the project was to create a sustainable long-term relationship between the Open University in the South West and regional voluntary sector network South West Forum in developing vocational OER for the UK voluntary sector. CharityWise has been the working title for the project, which involved Project Officer Lois Thorn, OU Assistant Regional Director Meriel Lee and Tony Coughlan.

Activities

I began this SCORE Fellowship project by working on resources for charity trustees, a priority of the sector skills body Skills-Third Sector (www.skills-thirdsector.org.uk). Ten OpenLearn study units were adapted for charity trustees, mapped against Elements of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) and released through a small dedicated website.

The sector skills body were enthusiastic about this project and I became involved in negotiations about incorporating OERs and open educational practices in their new model for nationwide voluntary sector training. The sector skills body submitted a funding bid to the UK Government Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and are currently working at a proof-of-concept stage.

Alongside the negotiations, I designed and conducted a survey to collect information about Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) trainers' awareness of, attitudes towards and existing

use of Open Educational Resources. As there would not have been a sufficient sample size to draw on in my own region of South West England, this needed to be a national survey. I therefore involved three national voluntary sector infrastructure organisations in the survey design and they then also co-operated by publicising the survey amongst their members, thereby increasing the sample size. The survey received approval from the Open University's Ethics Committee and was subsequently completed by 101 individual VCS trainers and training managers. The findings indicated a high level of interest in the potential benefits of OERs for the voluntary sector, with many trainers suggesting that they would consider using them if dedicated training or mentoring were made available and if using OERs extended the range of subjects that they could deliver. VCS trainers were particularly interested in the potential of OERs to overcome geographical obstacles (seen as beneficial by 85% of respondents) and in allowing individuals to study at their own pace, at minimal cost, as and when they need to learn about a particular subject.

A more detailed summary of the survey results is available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/CharityOERs/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Attitudes-of-VCS-trainers-to-OERs.doc>. In response to the survey findings, I designed a training and mentoring package for voluntary sector trainers that can be implemented if and when resources become available.

Also throughout the year, and alongside the negotiations, I searched for and appraised open educational resources that would be useful to trainers and academics in childhood and youth studies, which comprises a large segment of the UK voluntary sector. This process of searching suggested to me that there were fewer OERs published for vocational subjects than for more academic disciplines. To establish if this were true - and if so why - I designed and conducted a quantitative research study with a colleague that led to a published paper about the different approaches of academic disciplines to Open Educational Resources (reference below).

I have published the collection of OERs suitable for trainers and academics in the childhood and youth segment at <http://opencollection.wordpress.com> and now that my SCORE Fellowship project is over, I shall continue to add to it monthly, acting as an OER curator. Supporting and building upon this role, I have completed peer review training with California State University's

MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching) and have since formally reviewed two resources there: <http://www.merlot.org>.

Outputs

Members of the project team adapted 10 Open University OpenLearn study units for leaders and managers of small charities, voluntary and community organisations. They can be accessed at <http://labspace.open.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=449912&direct=1>. As OpenLearn's LabSpace is not really designed for non-academics, a small dedicated CharityWise website was also created to act as a landing page for trustees, and the adapted study units can also be accessed from there: <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/CharityWise>. The CharityWise website includes video case studies about trustees of three small and medium sized voluntary organisations in the South West of England who each describe the approaches they are taking to improving their organisation's effectiveness.

The ten adapted OpenLearn study units are those thought to be most likely to be of interest to the target audience, but they cannot hope to address the wide training needs of trustees, so the project team have assessed all of the 600+ study units in OpenLearn for their relevance to the voluntary sector. We then tagged 63 study units that might be useful to trustees with a Trustee_Development tag (<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/tag/index.php?id=16439>) and tagged 130 study units that might be of more general use to the voluntary sector with a CharityWise tag (<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/tag/index.php?id=16432>). In both cases, the intention is to aid discovery by making relevant study units easier to find, and our two terms now appear quite prominently in the OpenLearn tag cloud.

Findings

This project led me to have many discussions with voluntary sector policy-makers, leaders, trainers and managers. Some of the detail from those discussions is on my project blog, but here I will try to pull out some of the themes that emerged:

1. OERs offer a way to integrate education for the UK voluntary sector workforce. Such education is currently fragmented and confusing. OERs have the particular quality of being useable across institutional and sector boundaries: independent trainers, charities,

colleges and universities can all work with them, and if we were to do so successfully it may lead to more coherent education for the sector.

2. As part of an antidote to the sleaze and corruption that has blighted public life, OERs and particularly open educational practices are recognisably ethical. This resonates well with the UK coalition government's transparency agenda and potentially offers a contribution to ethical public life.
3. The low cost of OERs is attractive in a time of severe public spending cuts.
4. Some policy-makers are exploring where to store knowledge and research resources that have been publicly-funded, but whose original hosts are now being closed down by public spending cuts. There is a view that publicly-funded resources should remain in the public domain, and an OER repository offers the added attraction of also encouraging the active use and re-use of resources, rather than them just being archived.
5. The UK voluntary sector is littered with how-to guides, instructions and toolkits, often assembled by committed authors, but now out-of-date or hard-to-find on dormant websites. There is also a back-catalogue of academic resources that is growing quickly as universities shut down unprofitable courses.
6. It is very labour-intensive to assess the value of all these diverse resources and turn the suitable resources into OERs. Initially National Occupational Standards were used as a basis for indexing and cataloguing OERs. At some stage I would expect to find that OERs do not exist for some activities, and some would need to be produced anew.
7. The aim has been to support a community of volunteer contributors to use, create and improve the OERs, but further exploration is needed of the motivation for these contributors and how they would be rewarded for their efforts. I am optimistic that a good reputation-management system would help achieve this.

Reflection

A recurring challenge has been that while OERs are at least partly established in universities, they are very poorly understood outside universities, so a lot of time is spent explaining what OERs are and why. The terminology certainly doesn't help! I think the OER movement would benefit from at least one public project succeeding so that we can point to it and say 'take a look at that to see how it works'. I have been pointing to The Open University's Tessa Africa project (www.tessafrica.net) but it has been easy for sceptics to marginalise this example because of the contextual differences between Africa and the UK.

Questions about assessment and accreditation have frequently been asked. It is possible to point to an impressive array of learning resources at OpenLearn but the tools to bring them together into a programme of study (e.g. OER glue (www.oer glue.com) and OER University (www.wikieducator.org/OER_university/Home)) are not yet well-developed. This question is now being asked across the OER movement, and MITx by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (mitx.mit.edu) indicates one way forward.

The issue of a Digital Divide was raised repeatedly. The UK voluntary sector works with and represents many of the poorest members of society, and many parts of the voluntary sector itself run on a shoestring without access to the latest technology or skills. Even for those in the sector with suitable access and skills, the existing software tools for editing OERs are unfamiliar to the general public and not intuitive to use. I began considering what training our volunteer contributors would need but did not reach a conclusion.

I found that as people began to understand what OERs are I encountered some suspicion, scepticism and hostility, particularly from those who fear their livelihoods would be threatened by the OER movement. At times unlikely alliances formed to defend the status quo, but there has also been an equal amount of enthusiasm. The launch of the free, online European School of Volunteering (www.ev-school.com) in autumn 2011 demonstrated that a number of initiatives across different countries have been moving in similar directions. Here in the UK, voluntary sector trainers, managers and policy makers are more aware of Open Educational Resources (OER) and they are increasingly featuring in both strategies and training delivery.

Dissemination

Throughout my SCORE Fellowship I regularly posted on my project blog, which can still be viewed at <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/CharityOERs>.

One journal paper has been published as a direct result of my SCORE Fellowship:

Coughlan, Tony and Perryman, Leigh-Anne (2011). 'Something for everyone? The different approaches of academic disciplines to Open Educational Resources and the effect on widening participation'. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 15(2), pp. 11–27. Available free from: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/31071/1/42-239-1-PB.pdf>.

The paper explores the relationship between academic disciplines' representation in the UK Open University's OpenLearn repository and in the OU's fee-paying curriculum. It reveals that while 'Hard' disciplines (e.g., Science & Technology) enjoy an increased share of the OER curriculum, 'Soft' disciplines (e.g., Arts) and especially 'Soft Applied' disciplines such as Health and Social Care, and Education) are under-represented as OER. The paper then considers the implications for widening participation, exploring which people could be disadvantaged by the disparity in representation.

I am currently working on a second journal paper utilising the results from the survey of voluntary sector trainers. Its working title is 'Reaching out with OER: The scope for collaboration with the Third Sector'.

Conclusions

The international OER movement is to some extent in tension with the current economic climate in the UK and the consequent reduction in Government funding of universities. The business case for OER is unproven and there is scepticism about the viability of OERs. This particularly applies to provision for the voluntary sector, which is characteristically poor and unlikely to offer the scale of return on investment for universities offered by more lucrative sectors such as Medicine or Law. On the other hand, there does seem to be scope for developing OER more explicitly in the arena of widening participation and social benefit, which are harder to express financially but potentially offer rewards for universities in terms of visibility and reputation. If

widening participation does become an important arena for OER, the identified differences between disciplines towards working with OERs needs to be addressed.

My experience thus far has been that the OER movement is still supplier-led by universities, with few examples of collaborative partnerships with end-users. The survey results from voluntary sector trainers suggest that a willing community of potential users exists, and engaging them successfully could be one way of developing a sustainable business model for OER.

Another aspect of engaging with end-users is listening to what they ask for. A message from the UK voluntary sector seems to be that there are sufficient OERs (both formal and informal) to be going on with, but what they really want from recognised universities are affordable assessment & certification packages to fit around OER. Again, this could be a component of a sustainable business model for OER and should be a priority for attention by the OER movement.

Summary

CharityWise - a project to develop vocational OERs in partnership with the UK voluntary sector.

The aim of my SCORE Fellowship was to create a sustainable long-term relationship between the Open University in the South West and regional voluntary sector network South West Forum in developing vocational OERs for the UK voluntary sector. CharityWise was the working title for the project.

As a basis for long-term sustainability the plan was to cultivate a Community of Practice between end-users, policy makers and academics, in which contributors from each stakeholder group participate in improving, updating & creating new educational resources for the voluntary sector. The successes of Wikipedia and open-source software communities (e.g. Linux, Mozilla Firefox) in which volunteers develop resources in a public, collaborative manner demonstrate how this might be achieved. My project was influenced by how open-source communities operate, and aimed to share some of their characteristics.

The original aim was partly achieved in that ten OpenLearn study units were adapted and published collaboratively. However, national policy-makers became interested in the project and

the project focus shifted from the original South West partnership to scoping the potential for a nationwide partnership. Although my individual SCORE Fellowship has now ended, the national development continues, in parallel with the free, online European School of Volunteering, a similar activity by a consortium of other European countries.

An unexpected discovery of my SCORE Fellowship was that there were proportionately fewer Open Educational Resources available for vocational subjects than those from more traditional academic disciplines such as Science, leading to a journal paper being written and published on this topic.