WHERE IS THE DUTCH OER LIBRARIAN?

by **Hilde van Wijngaarden** and **Frederike Vernimmen**

A growing portion of teaching materials are available online. How is this development affecting the role of libraries at research universities and universities of applied sciences? Although some libraries in the Netherlands are already seeking to tailor their services to reflect this new trend, most are still working to develop an appropriate response. So far, their support activities have been oriented towards 'online' rather than 'open' teaching materials. In the United States, libraries play a prominent role in the area of OER support. However, this support appears to be limited to the domains traditionally associated with libraries: content and collections. Library support for blended learning and the creation of interactive learning materials is somewhat less advanced. Which differences and similarities can we identify between the Dutch and American situations, and which US examples would be worth emulating here in the Netherlands? Does the Netherlands need an *OER librarian*?

How are Dutch libraries contributing to open and online education?

In early 2015, SURF commissioned a review of Dutch higher education libraries in conjuncture with SHB (the Samenwerkingsverband Hogeschool Bibliotheken or University of Applied Sciences Libraries Partnership) and UKB (the consortium of Dutch university libraries and the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (National Library)) (SURF, 2015). A well-attended specially-themed meeting was organised on the subject in March of 2015. As it turned out, views on the exact definition of open and online education varied. In order to ensure the consistency of all terms used in this article, we will be adhering to the recent conceptual framework published by SURF (see box) (SURF, 2015).

Online education, open education and OER

Online education is defined as education whereby all or at least 80% of all learning materials, tools and services are made available online. Open education can be categorised on the basis of three different dimensions of openness:

1. available free of charge;
2. freely accessible (no entry requirements, no closed paywalls, etc.);
3. free to edit (with learning materials published on the basis of an open licence).

OER are free learning materials that can be freely used and reused. The copying, editing and distribution of these materials is permitted (subject to certain conditions) through the use of an open licence, such as Creative Commons. OER may consist of individual learning materials such as web lectures or articles, as well as composite learning materials such as open courseware or MOOCs.

The extent to which Dutch research universities and universities of applied sciences have developed policies in the area of open and online education varies greatly from institution to institution. Views on the libraries' potential roles and services in support of digital learning also vary. Unlike many other institutions, Delft University of Technology has genuinely enshrined open and online learning in its institutional policies and clearly defined the role of its library. For example, the library is responsible for managing the open courseware website – used to store materials after the MOOCs have concluded – as a part of its duties in the MOOC development process. Support activities by the library thus reflect the institution's strategic choices.

Most other libraries support the open and online education process on the basis of their allocated – more or less traditional – role or requests from teaching staff, rather than adhering to any specific institutional strategy.

Traditional library services

According to the SURF review, the ongoing development of OER is lending new relevance to the libraries' traditional tasks and inherent strengths. These include providing access to, creating metadata from and indexing of teaching materials, providing advice on copyright fees and licences and helping users improve their information skills while searching for, selecting and using online education. Almost all libraries offer support in these areas and are working to convert their own workshops on information skills into online tutorials under the Creative Commons licence. For example, Maastricht University has developed an online information skills module under the Creative Commons licence in collaboration with lecturers from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences. The new module will help students learn the skills they need to find suitable material in various OER sources.

A new role for the library

The latest innovations in education and research are also giving rise to other – less traditional – educational roles, which are being adopted by some libraries and ignored by others. These include the management of video and publication platforms or comprehensive electronic learning environments such as those found at Maastricht University Library (Lutgens & Noteborn, 2014).

We should also highlight a number of examples from the current practice. In the same vein as traditional cutting files, libraries can store and describe all available online teaching materials within a specific field (content curation) or work with lecturers to seek out online materials. The library at the University of Twente is helping to build a repository for online teaching materials and has launched a 'digital learning resources helpdesk' project for students and lecturers (with a focus on OER and MOOCs) in collaboration with the Centre for Educational Support.

The library's role can also shift towards the support of content creation. Examples include studio facilities offering lecturers practical support in the creation of videos, web lectures and knowledge clips, as is the case at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences and Windesheim. Some libraries also facilitate experiments with these technical aids or other e-learning tools, or provide advice on their practical application in the day-to-day teaching practice. The Maastricht University Library is conducting various experiments in collaboration with the faculties and EDLAB as a part of the 'EdICTed' initiative. These experiments extend to aspects such as the educational use of smart glasses, online feedback and grading tools. Rotterdam

University of Applied Sciences has established a Digital Learning Lab, while the library at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences will be launching an e-learning support (ELS) project in the short term.

However, some libraries feel such activities fall outside the scope of their responsibilities and prefer to play a more traditional role. In some cases, libraries are hesitant to assume responsibilities more traditionally associated with lecturers. After all, the lecturer plays a leading role in the shaping of education. According to a brief inventory amongst Dutch lecturers, the library is generally not always the most obvious port of call for advice on the use of open and online education or the online publication of their own materials.

Which measures are libraries in the US taking in support of open and online education?

November 2014 saw the publication of a blog on the Open Education Conference in Washington DC (Van Wijngaarden, 2015). We will now compare Van Wijngaarden's impressions of OER librarians in the United States with the situation here in the Netherlands.

Several university libraries in the US currently play the role of OER librarians: librarians charged with providing advice on and access to OER. Students purchasing books at the start of their degree programme can consult this official for advice on open alternatives. Students and lecturers seeking more in-depth materials for specific courses can visit the OER librarian for tips. Lecturers that are working to prepare courses and wish to gain inspiration from their colleagues can also consult the OER librarian for advice on comparable courses that can be used during their lessons. The process is a two-way street: lecturers and students seeking to provide open access to their own materials can seek advice on publication formats, projects and funding for open textbooks and open licencing. Although this role is certainly not commonplace yet in the United States, a growing number of OER librarians are increasingly communicating with and supporting one another.

This position is currently still largely non-existent in the Netherlands, where libraries do not necessarily play a role in the process of supporting and promoting OER. Despite such examples of libraries cautiously moving towards a more supporting role in the area of open teaching materials, the idea of a Dutch OER librarian (still?) seems relatively far-fetched.

How can we explain the differences between the Netherlands and the US?

The lack of such a role in the Netherlands can be attributed to various key differences with the situation in the US. The first of these differences between the Dutch and American education sectors lies in the aspect of costs. University education is an extremely costly affair in the United States. Students pay high tuition fees, and expensive teaching materials only add to the cost of their studies. Open alternatives can thus help reduce these high costs and ensure that higher education remains accessible.

A second difference lies in the aspect of scale: the average US university library is far greater than its counterparts in the Netherlands. A library with a staff of 200 is normal by American standards, whereas a facility of this size would be considered extremely large in the Netherlands. These US university libraries still employ a large number of librarians charged with traditional library services: searching and finding,

collecting and creating metadata. These staff members have taken on the labour-intensive tasks associated with searching for and finding OER.

Finally, we should emphasise the difference between sourceware and courseware. Dutch libraries are often largely focused on the collection for background information and research purposes (sourceware) rather than the prescribed study materials (courseware). US OER librarians tend to be far more directly involved in the process of preparing and providing access to mandatory study materials. Dutch libraries are increasingly opting not to apply this strict distinction. The university library in Maastricht creates e-readers at the request of lecturers (this service includes the verification of copyrights in preparation for inspections by Stichting PRO) and makes them available to students within the electronic learning environment at individual course level. The library at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences is leading a project aimed at the creation of interactive digital readers. As a result of this process, traditional readers are gradually transforming from volumes of articles into online courses with quizzes and video clips.

As long as libraries continue to apply this distinction, librarians may well fail to give OER the attention it deserves: after all, this type of material is not viewed as part of the library collection. There are, in other words, plenty of reasons why OER librarians are scarce in the Netherlands. More importantly, though, we should ask ourselves whether this situation needs to change.

Do we need OER librarians in the Netherlands?

The deployment of OER librarians as a part of the effort to improve findability and use of open and online learning materials has had a major impact on educational support at US universities. Nevertheless, their work seems to be largely centred around 'traditional library services'. US libraries still devote limited attention to the embedment of blended learning, the educational use of video and other innovative developments currently being gradually adopted in the Netherlands, as well as other didactic scenarios.

Libraries can play a greater role!

With the emergence of blended learning, online courses and the general digitisation of our education, lecturers in the Netherlands could certainly do with a little help. Creation and the use and reuse of content requires a great deal of time and effort. A new information flow has recently emerged: in addition to the flow from sender to recipient, we now also have to process interactions between lecturers and students. For example, blogs with reactions, Facebook notifications and comments in response to articles may be included in the available course materials. This raises issues in the area of licences, findability, metadata creation, storage, sustainable management and copyright. These are the types of questions library information specialists are ideally positioned to address. Although this educational innovation offers libraries an ideal opportunity to prove their added value, OER librarians in the US are largely failing to focus on this aspect.

However, we could certainly look to our US colleagues when it comes to the aspect of 'open'. Most Dutch lecturers are still highly reluctant to share their own learning materials. Although some research universities and universities of applied sciences are working to make their materials openly available, the majority are still developing policies and strategies to encourage and support the open sharing of material, as the previous trend reports have highlighted from various perspectives.

Assuming research universities and universities of applied sciences want to adopt open education, we should ask ourselves which role libraries can play in this process. This could take various forms: The information specialist can assist during the creation of new materials and provide advice on licences in order to facilitate the careful sharing of materials. Libraries could also take responsibility for the management and sustainable accessibility of teaching materials. An active role by information specialists could help convince lecturers to participate. As soon as lecturers start sharing, a larger volume of higher quality materials will become available. This will facilitate better education that reflects the needs and possibilities of our day and age, which – lest we forget – is the driving force behind all our efforts.

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