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OER to MOOCs: In Defence of Open



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This special issue of IRRODL on OER and MOOCs is supported by UNESCO, which has also provided funding to enlarge and promote IRRODL's inclusion of OER and other forms of open distributed education research. The two are irrevocably connected: MOOCs, originally based on OER and other free content, have expanded from the OER movement and have been assembled or linked (by students and/or instructors) to form full courses. Although OER can be used online or offline in traditional classroom settings whereas MOOCs are available only online, both OER and MOOCs can provide efficient, cost-effective flexible educational opportunities to large numbers of learners. The most popular form of xMOOCs (the mostly video-based, computerised courses delivered by Coursera, Udacity etc.) have been accused of “open-washing” – claiming to be open but resting on copyright-restricted “closed” content rather than using an open licence. Nevertheless, both OER and MOOCs represent important developments in the educational ecosystem, positing sustainable approaches to opening up educational opportunities to large numbers of learners internationally. These innovations will help to meet the rapidly growing worldwide need for affordable access to education.

In this editorial, I would like to clarify some “OER/MOOC facts.” Firstly, it is becoming customary now to use the acronym “OER” to refer to both one or more Open Education Resources, rather than the seemingly more grammatically correct “OERs.” OER, therefore, can be both singular and plural. This trend has not extended to the plural of “MOOC,” which remains “MOOCs.”

I would also like to take this opportunity to clear up a misunderstanding that has been persisting in the OER/MOOC environment for some time (Hysten, 2008; Jelley & Scanion, 2013), and that is this: When content is released under an open licence, it is given “away.” In truth, nothing is given away. When authors give the world their content, they still have it. They retain the copyright; they do not lose it. Using the term “give away” in regard to OER/MOOCs is therefore erroneous, both from a semantic and legal understanding. The correct English word is “sharing.” Likewise, the illegal use of copyright-restricted content cannot be characterised as stealing because nothing is taken “away.” The English language also has a word for illegal copying: “infringement.” Writers using the word “stealing” in relation to the copying of material are either misinformed or are deliberately misinforming.

Another point I would like to make for educators when reading this issue’s articles is that many, if not most, of the quality and sustainability issues and other perceived problems with OER and MOOCs are the same, if not worse, when the same criteria are applied to commercial content. As Wiley (2015) has noted, the type of licence on a production has no bearing on quality. The glossiness of the publication is also not a major criterion. What counts is the effectiveness of the product in supporting learning.

One final consideration for readers before introducing the papers is the issue of sustainability. When considering the sustainability of OER-based ecosystems, one should bear in mind that it is the present traditional system as it stands that is not sustainable, even in supporting present levels of higher education participation. And the traditional system is clearly is not capable of meeting the need for mass 21st century education. OER and new technologies may not be the solution, but they assuredly will form part of any advances that occur in mass lifelong learning.

My choice of the first paper for this edition was deliberate, not because the author is an Athabasca University professor, but because he is addressing the important issue of cost-effectiveness and financial sustainability. This is personal to me because I have been chastised in the past for bringing up cost-effectiveness in distance education; and now it is becoming an important area of research in our field. As Annand notes, current funding practices are constraining the development of lower-cost online higher education. Governments typically provide more funding to traditional institutions, compounding the problem. The present traditional university sustainability model is based on state support, either full support or, in most cases, partial support.

Annand has re-emphasised a classic principle that has been exemplified in Mark Twain's unfinished work *Pudd'nHead Wilson* (Twain, 1894). He writes of a man with two heads; one of the heads drinks heavily, the other is a teetotaler. Unfortunately for the teetotaler, he gets the hangover. Likewise, in our current institutional systems, instructors choose the textbooks and the students get the bill.

Annand argues that if institutions were required to provide the learning resources to students as part of their fees, rather than download textbook and other resource costs to students, there would be a pressing need for the institution to reduce costs by integrating the production of OER

fully into their educational processes, rather than relying on individual faculty members to make these decisions.

This paper is followed by several on the issue of quality in relation to OER and MOOCs. I once again caution the readers to ask themselves if these issues are unique to OER/MOOCs or if they are also applicable to commercial content. Also remember that the only quality measure used in all too many of our traditional institutions is to put a PhD in a classroom. And although that instructor usually has no educational training, it was only when online learning appeared that the issue of “quality” rose its ugly head.

Even if OER/MOOCs critics are not looking at the quality of their own work, open proponents must still address this issue of quality in order to win “the Battle for Open” (Weller, 2014). The following articles acquit themselves well in this regard, positing effective arguments supporting the quality of OER and MOOCs and winning some skirmishes, if not the war.

According to Yuan and Recker, the wide availability of OER does not assure their high quality or educational utility. They argue that low-quality OER can hamper instructional practices. They investigate the confusion caused by the different rubrics used for OER evaluation and alert us to their different characteristics and aspects including rating scales, scoring guides and empirical testing results. They conclude by emphasising the importance of pedagogical values over content quality such as accuracy and clarity. This echoes Wiley's (2015) argument above that support for learning is the main quality criterion to be considered. I would advise commercial publishers to take heed. There is much for them to learn from the quality rubrics being used to evaluate OER.

In Kimmons' comparison of teacher evaluations of K-12 textbooks, OER were rated as good as or better than commercial texts. There are good OER and bad OER, good commercial texts and bad commercial texts. This supports Wiley's view that the existence of a particular licence has no bearing on the quality of the content. Kimmons' research also demonstrates that teachers recognise the benefit of free texts, influencing the obvious aspects such as cost and timeliness, etc. In his survey, the teachers nevertheless emphasised the importance of open textbooks in supporting the creation of new resources that better serve their needs and expectations. The fact that OER can be adapted, remixed, and modified means that they can be of even greater value to educators in addressing local contextual needs.

In their mixed method study of e-textbooks, Bozkurt and Bozkaya show that well-designed interactive e-books can significantly contribute to learning processes in effective and efficient ways. They caution that although interactive e-books are a good and flexible alternative to provide individualized learning opportunities, they are not necessarily better than printed or other types of e-books. Although this is not a research paper on OER, I have included it in this edition because of its relevance to OER development.

The quality of MOOCs is examined in Lowenthal and Hodges' analysis. They recognise that MOOCs are often described as poor learning experiences because of the little-to-no teacher-student interaction, the large class sizes, and the greater emphasis on lecture and testing. They

are quite right in pointing out Anderson's (2013) observation that this type of pedagogy is still the norm in many classrooms (online or not) at all levels of education. They argue that it is unfair to discount the quality of MOOCs when they mirror these common practices elsewhere in colleges and universities, while in other respects pushing some of the boundaries in learning.

In the next paper, Israel reports on several studies on the effectiveness of MOOCs in different blended learning environments and, not surprisingly, Russell's (1999) “no significant difference” phenomenon emerges once again. Israel notes that in most of the reviewed studies, MOOCs were being used as if they were OER rather than as online courses. She then notes the prohibition on using Coursera's copyright restricted content in blended learning environments, once again pointing out the importance of OER in supporting innovative and collaborative learning. Can MOOCs work in a hybrid environment without OER? Additionally, one of the primary benefits of using MOOCs in blended environments is that students can get two facilitators for the price of one or at a minimum take a course with two differing points of view.

Ozturk uses a connectivist Learning Environment Assessment Tool (CLEAT), which was developed for the purpose of framing and reifying connectivist pedagogy, as well as assessing a learning environment to see whether it has open connectivist learning implications. She posits the implications of “libre and gratis,” noting that they were not significantly ensured in current MOOC implementations and therefore lacking in “democratic values.” Furthermore, the formal organization of MOOCs are not indicative of the chaotic “structure” (or lack thereof) associated with connectivist pedagogy. Nor was there much evidence of community participation with little advantage taken of the “network effect” in which the value of a networked experience increases as more people make use of it.

The view from China on microblogging is the subject of the next big data learning analytics paper by Jinjing, Parres, Zheng, and Chen. This study analysed microblogging of the Chinese word for “MOOC” on China's largest microblogging website over a four-year period. They confirmed as expected that activity dropped considerably during student vacation time, but increased surprisingly at the beginning of every work week, when they thought people would be too busy. Their analysis could be used by others for scheduling their programmes seasonally, weekly, and even by time of day.

“There are strange things done in the midnight sun by the men who toil for gold.” This famous first line of the Canadian poem *Sam McGee* by Robert Service introduces the final paper on OER in Canada. It was written by myself and my IRRODL colleagues, Editor Emeritus Terry Anderson and c0-editor Dianne Conrad. The paper sheds light on what is happening in OER and open education in Canada. The implementation of open education in Canada remains in its early stages. However, the growing interest in MOOCs, and recent OER initiatives in Western Canada, could well be harbingers of future cooperative and/or collaborative developments in Canada. We hope so.

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