

Title: Open Teaching in a Digital Age: Becoming a Global Scholar

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Introduction

Higher education institutions in the 21st century find themselves in a complex and often contradictory environment, as many of the world's leading institutions are formulating policy to give a selection of their content away for free and are investing significant resources in establishing open content platforms; other smaller institutions are holding onto content and proprietary systems in order to protect their identity and intellectual capital.

The open educational resources (OER) movement follows in the wake of open source software and open access publishing initiatives and is fast transforming the way in which teaching and learning materials are created, shared and appropriated. OER has come to symbolise a global, internet-driven community effort whereby learners and educators are working together towards sharing resources with the intended outcome of supporting education worldwide. Drawing on the concept of the 'Knowledge Commons' and the principle of sharing knowledge for greater good, the OER movement has the potential to play a substantial role in disrupting the traditional flow of information and transforming how institutions view and share their pedagogical practices. This is the realm of OER, a new philosophy in teaching and learning.

Driving Forces

Four key factors are generally acknowledged to have colluded in the time since the birth of the internet to bring about 'a perfect storm' for a change in higher education and facilitate the rise of OER:

Technological developments: The internet has made it possible to share on unprecedented levels. The removal of traditional costs associated with sharing electronic media has catalysed the culture of contribution Atkins, Seely Brown and Hammond (2007) speak of, and Web 2.0 technologies have transformed the realm of what was previously thought possible in terms of data sharing and trans-border collaboration.

The internet and rise of Web 2.0 technologies have also creating new channels for collaboration and feedback. Sharing builds networks and has the potential to transform our practice as the reach and impact of our work is extended.

Legal change: In the digital age, most of us are, in some sense, creators of digital media and content. This content typically ends up online and creators are inevitably faced with decisions around copyright and licensing.

The rise of the Creative Commons and other 'some rights reserved' forms of licensing – as opposed to the traditional, locked-down 'all rights reserved' system – has created an environment in which users can legally share content based on conditions stipulated by the author. The culture of 'remixing' which this licensing system allows is central to the idea of what OER is, and how it is grown and perpetuated.

Shift in ideology: The internet-enabled societal shift to a 'culture of contribution' (Atkins et. al., 2007) has manifest most profoundly in the realm of education, signalling a return for many academics to an age-old ambition of pursuing and sharing knowledge for the greater good of society.

Moreover, the wealth of teaching and learning materials now available for legal use and remixing enable academics to select and combine resources without re-inventing the wheel every time they revisit their curriculum. OER presents real benefit to users and creators in terms of having already-archived materials to draw from, allowing educators the time to focus on pedagogy, context, and teaching.



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Added to the time-saving benefits, academics are increasingly turning to open educational content to find new ways of engaging their students and drawing from a broader pool of knowledge as the demand for personalised learning experiences grows (Johnson et al. 2009).

A change in thinking about financial models: The three aforementioned factors have facilitated a change in the global educational context and facilitated the rise of a 'knowledge society' in which the cost of the act of sharing has been largely removed. There are, however, still costs associated with the creation, re-appropriation and dissemination of content. Various models of sustainability have been suggested (Downes, 2007; Wiley, 2007) but no single model can be identified as best practice considering the diverse array of institutional contexts. In order for institutions to commit to the resource expenditure entailed in operationalising OER, we believe there would have to be some other benefit such as global profiling.

OER has provided an effective means for universities to showcase their teaching content and collaborate with other institutions around the world, allowing many smaller institutions an opportunity to compete with large, prestigious universities by making an imprint on the global Knowledge Commons. OER builds visibility for universities and visibility builds brand. In addition to this, a number of institutions have been able to tally the positive impact of openness on factors such as student enrolment.

The OER UCT Project

The OER UCT project, hosted by the Centre for Educational Technology at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and funded by the Shuttleworth Foundation, aims to showcase the teaching efforts of UCT academics by encouraging the publication of resources as OER. The project has resulted in the online OpenContent directory¹ which lists the UCT Collection of OER. The directory allows for the sharing and visibility of UCT teaching materials and global institutional and individual profiling on international OER sites.

At a residential university such as UCT, it was not assumed that academics would have extensive and exclusively online learning material that could easily be shared as OER. It was also noted that the full sharing of coursework, as in the MIT OCW model, could not be expected of academics without significant additional resources. The OER UCT project could provide only limited support to authors wishing to publish OER. Given limited time and resources, the project was only able to support authors who already had resources which could be published as 'ready' OER or were willing to undertake the necessary work around overcoming third-party licensing constraints.

Through a series of workshops around UCT and other Western Cape institutions the OER UCT team has promoted the concept of the 'Open Scholar' (Burton, 2009). The term embodies a movement in academia where openness is the default approach in designing course material, research, and scholarship in general. By introducing the wealth of openly licensed educational material currently available online to UCT, it was hoped that academics would gradually gravitate towards becoming users and creators of open content.

By encouraging UCT academics to develop teaching and learning materials with the objective of sharing them openly from the outset, it is anticipated that a culture of sharing will be fostered in academia, which may have a significant impact on scholarship.

There are currently a number of institutional barriers to supporting the 'Open Scholar'. One of the most notable barriers is the focus on research activities over teaching and learning activities. There is little incentive for lecturers to share their materials as universities generally value the publication of research above that of teaching and making teaching materials available (Hodgkinson-Williams et. al., 2009). These barriers to OER adoption highlight current contradictory properties in higher education and emphasise the need to re-examine the current state of affairs.

¹ <http://opencontent.uct.ac.za/>



In this presentation, Michael Paskevicius will introduce the exciting terrain of OER, identify the social, technical, legal, and financial motivators that are enabling the movement, and demonstrate how it has the potential to change academic practice and create new avenues for collaboration and feedback. He will argue that in adopting and familiarising oneself with OER practice academics can become 'global scholars', embracing Web 2.0 tools and open licensing systems which have the potential to enhance and increase the reach of their knowledge.

The presentation will detail an African university's journey towards institutionalising support for open educational resources. The talk intends to provide a base with which OER advocates can encourage African academic leaders to embrace openness and to highlight some of the benefits not only for the global community but also for the contributing institution and individual student and academic.



References

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