OPEN UNIVERSITY UK: OPEN CONTENT INITIATIVE

OER   SITE VISIT REPORT

Visit on 16/6/06, by Tom Schuller

1.   GENERAL BACKGROUND

The Open University (OU) is a university with a global reputation as a pioneer in distance learning. Its headquarters are located in Milton Keynes, in central England, but with an extensive network of regional centres throughout the UK and representatives in other European countries. The University also has significant international partnerships. With over 4000 staff it serves around 200,000 students on a range of programmes, from short courses up to doctoral level. It offers all main academic subject areas.

The OU is particularly proud of the quality of its teaching, in addition to reaching large numbers of students who might otherwise not participate. It scored very highly in recent UK Quality Assurance Agency assessments, and came top in the 2006 National Students Survey. It has a major link with the British Broadcasting Corporation, which has given it outreach into the nation's homes.

Part of the OU's mission, defined in its Charter, is to promote the wellbeing of the community generally. So as well as striving to maintain high conventional academic standards, it seeks to promote educational opportunity and social justice. This has been given fresh impetus by the current vice-Chancellor, Professor Brenda Gourley, whose commitment to outreach is very public.

2.   WHY THE OU?

This question barely needs an answer. The OU has since its foundation in 1969 been pioneering open and distance learning, combining learning technologies with student support. However there is an additional reason for its inclusion in this study, namely OpenLearn, the University's open content initiative. This is a major project, with a £5.65 million budget in its current phase, a substantial proportion of this coming from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (for details see: www.open.acuk/openlearn). Over 30 full-time staff are working on this initiative. These combine academic, editorial, technical, marketing and external collaboration functions.

The aim of OpenLearn is to draw on the OU's very extensive accumulation of learning materials, and to make them available in an international web-based open content environment. The aim is to advance open content delivery methods by:
- deploying learning management tools for learner support
- encouraging the creation of non-formal learning communities
- enhancing international research-based knowledge about modern pedagogies for higher education.
The last of these is particularly notable: 12% of the budget is devoted to research and evaluation, underlining the serious commitment to building a knowledge base.

In a sense the CERI OER study comes too early to be able to make full use of the OpenLearn initiative, which is only now getting under way. But the project's first phase, which was mainly focussed on developing a detailed proposal for consideration by the William and Flora Hewlett foundation, has already yielded a good deal of information and ideas, and even describing the

project's intentions within the OU's overall framework should be a substantial contribution to the OER study.

3.   STATE OF THE ART

The OpenLearn initiative is in its second phase, which started in May 2006 and is due to last 2 years. This phase has the following goals:

a. to develop two complementary sites:
- a 'LearningSpace' site (originally called the Repository): an open learning site for learners with social technology and peer support. This will contain material already generated by the OU, based more or less on existing disciplines/subjects, and a mix of material designed for the web and material converted to web use. About 5% of the OU's huge reservoir of learning materials is due to be showcased.
- a 'LabSpace' site (originally called the Depository): a supported open 'sense-making' site for creators, ie where people can make and deposit their own materials as well as revisioning material which is already there. The LabSpace will also contain the material placed in the LearningSpace.

b. to make available substantial amounts of learning materials
- 900 'learning hours' within the LabSpace by the launch of OpenLearn in October 2006, rising to 5400 learning hours by 2008. A 'learning hour' as a unit refers to the amount of time a student is expected to spend on a given task; 900 learning hours is equivalent to 90 credits.
- a further 2700 hours within the LabSpace by 2008.
The intention is to start with level 1 courses, most of them already established for about 3 years (rather than being brand new), and then respond to demand in the further development of the materials.
- add open source learning tools to the LabSpace. These tools have been developed by the OU's Knowledge Media Institute (see below). A crucial part of the OpenLearn project is to develop a suitable learning environment, and to enable self-supported non-formal learning communities to be formed, both among learners and educators.

c. to build the knowledge base on Open Content by developing a systematic understanding of how material are used, what models offer effective support and how providers and partners can work together, especially to reach new groups.

OpenLearn sees itself as going well beyond the MIT Open Courseware initiative.   MIT has placed 1280 courses on the web, and attracts many users (2004: 250,000 visitors per month) but there is no feedback mechanism, no support for the supposed learners and no grip on what the learners actually do with the materials. (These comments were not made critically, but as a description of the OCW.) By contrast, OpenLearn aims to provide a supportive environment , to build learning communities and to understand what happens as a result.Also, OCW is about making classroom-based resources available. OpenLearn is making open and distance learning materials available.

Two other aims should be mentioned. First, to seek out groups under-represented in higher education, and explore how OpenLearn might attract them. Secondly, to explore how open

content provision might be put on a sustainable basis. These models of sustainability should underpin Stage 3 of the initiative, if all goes well.

The intention is to work with partners who are serving learners on the ground, notably UnionLearn, an innovative learning service delivered through trade unions; and the Workers Education Association, a long-established provider of adult learning opportunities. These kinds of partnership should allow the new technologies to be applied in user-friendly non-technological environments.

OC materials

The aim is to achieve a breadth of offer. Every faculty is involved in supplying materials. The materials will be 'chunked' into units ranging from 3 to 15 hours, ie estimated as equivalent to an evening or a week's study. Most OU materials have been developed in the context of linearly constructed courses, so chunking may present problems.

Academic staff involved inauthoring learning material for the OU range range from those at the cutting edge who have a server under their desk and can produce materials fully ready for the web from the start, to those who essentially take pdfs and top and tail them for placing on the web. It seems to be possible to allow this degree of diversity. But there may be a problem in maintaining consistency, so that learners are not suddenly confronted by major variations in technological sophistication or in the quality of the materials' appearance.
Although the OU has always been a pioneer of distance learning, many of its academic staff are still very print-oriented. This means that they do not fully understand the process of transformation. They tend to believe that everything has to be redone from scratch. There is some tension between these, and the technology-oriented staff, who aim for high-volume conversion of materials.
On the other hand, there is now some move towards 'native digital authoring' ie producing text which from the start is written for hypertext.

We had some discussion of the structuring of courses by tagging. Tagging refers not to the labelling of content (as I had thought) but to the hierarchical structuring of the material via XML. I assume this is intended to make the structure more visible/transparent, and to increase interchangeability.

One other pedagogical issue, related to course structuring: how is assessment, including formative and self-assessment assessment, related to the chunking? In other words, the relationship between sense-making and assessment in an OER context needs exploration.

VLE

The OU made a major decision to use Moodle as its sole VLE. This doubled Moodle's producer volume overnight – the OU is by far Moodle's biggest client. They choose Moodle in preference

to proprietary platforms such as WebCT. It allows a short 'time-to-market' for the production of materials. They have very good working relations with Moodle and share a commitment to share improvements across the community. Worldwide some 200,000 people are studying courses which are placed on Moodle.

The biggest concern is not about the technology but about the level of change demanded of academics, and a major task is to effectively manage and reduce the amount of change.

Learner support

The aim is to create non-formal learning communities. These will be supported by new tools developed for the OU from within its own Knowledge Media Institute (KMI). KMI is an R&D lab for the OU, developing knowledge management tools for organisations around the world. The tools for OpenLearn include:
- MSG: a web application that allows people to use the basic functionality of the earlier BuddySpace Instant Messaging system within a standard web browser
- Flashmeeting: allows people to join together in realtime webcast meetings, which are recorded and made available to others. These are self-organising – for example a group which constituted itself to share thoughts and expertise on producing animated films.
- Compendium: software which allows concept/argument mapping, or "a hypermedia environment emphasizing visual maps of concepts joined by semantic links"; thus as a doctoral tutorial is conducted, by webcam across the Atlantic (the student is in New York), the supervisor (or the student) can be graphically reproducing the arguments and the evidence on the screen.

Forums will be specifically enabled. Each chunk will have associated with it the ability to create a forum where the learners support each other online.
There is some debate about how these forums can themselves be supported. The OU has massive experience in supporting cohorts of learners to do this, ie learners who sign on at the same time to pursue a defined course, but the situation changes when learners are just 'dropping in', without necessarily pursuing a linear course over time. .

OSS
The OU have been in a major joint project with JISC and the OU Netherlands to produce OSS. This has been a very positive experience, enabling OU to share products with the outside world and indefinitely, unlike traditional partnerships which offer restricted and time-limited sharing.

Intellectual property
The OU thought about producing its own licence, but wanted to be a full part of the OC community; and was interested in getting access to other people's materials.
Copyright collaboration can be v complex where this crosses national boundaries.
Staff don't expect financial incentives   The attraction is for them to get involved in material production. But this still gives them a higher profile, eg in conference invitations.

Evaluation

As noted, evaluation forms a major component of the OpenLearn initiative, and is designed to yield information of broad use to the OER community.
A major element is to do more for our understanding of informal learning.
 The strategy is to gather information in several ways:
- provider and learner views
- large scale datasets built up through online questions
- detailed evaluation studies targeted to particular groups.
There are new values to be embodied in the education:
- accessing knowledge not 'acquiring' it, (Google vs human memory)
- free and open vs expensive and controlled (Linux/Firefox vs Microsoft)
- speed and popularity vs stability and quality control (blogs and self-control vs journal and moderation)
- power of many vs wisdom of experts.

4.   **THE FUTURE OF OER**

The future could be very big indeed, not just because of the scale of the OpenLearn initiative but because potentially it might 'reverse engineer' the rest (or some proportion) of the OU's entire offering, for instance by supporting the introduction of Structured Authoring - the structured processing of text for outputting to XML. This prospect may exist more in the mind of the OpenLearn team than as a probability, but it is at least thinkable.

Sustainability remains an issue.
One option might be our conversion model, ie people transferring from the LearningSpace into fee-paying courses.   This is probably the key for the OU – unlike MIT which doesn't need extra demand of this kind.
Another (not exclusive) might be to bring in material from outside, rather than developing it all in-house. I assume this means that the OU expertise in converting material would enable them to draw cheaply on a wider range.
Another might be an OER resource bank of Wikipedia dimensions. A vibrant and well functioning LabSpace with links to content by other providers including repositories of Learning Objects held by JISC offers enormous scope for the pre-authoring of the educational resources which the OU might then run as fee paying courses.
Offering other services should also help, for instance negotiated pathways to other services. The Skype model was mentioned, ie a large volume service with assumption that 10% will buy other services.

Key issues identified:
- user experience in a web 2.0 world
- borderless HE and QA: will OER accentuate this?
- metadata issues: IMS {=??} is too broadbrush and doesn't describe in enough detail, so there is a big job to be done in defining and delivering metadata standards, eg common classification of subjects/topics, or the definition of course levels
- how to capture and report what is happening, ie appropriate measures
- copyright and how this works in a mass media context
- how to achieve necessary uniformity for scale production, without killing creativity.

5   **CONCLUSIONS**

OpenLearn is clearly a major example of OER in progress, because of its scale, its institutional location and the fact that it is designed as a development initiative from which general lessons can be drawn about the nature of learning. The site visit came too early for much substantive evidence to be produced, but this will be forthcoming quite soon.
The initiative also combines technical, business, IP and educational strands, explicitly defined in an overall strategy.
The OU is likely to develop business models in which Openlearn will play a significant part, though I was not able to probe this in any detail.

Annex   OU site visit interviewees

9.05	**Introduction to OpenLearn:the Open Content Initiative: Jerard Bretts, Programme Manager and Sheran Wilson, Programme Coordinator**
9.30	**The Process of Transforming Open Content:** **Nick Heap, member of Academic Team**
10.15	**Technical Strategy: Stephen Bradley, Technical and Production Director**
11.00	**Tea/coffee break and meeting with** **Linda Jones, Pro Vice Chancellor (Curriculum and Awards)**
11.15	**Research and Evaluation: Patrick McAndrew, Research and Evaluation Director**
12.15	**Intellectual Property Rights: Richard McCracken, Head of Intellectual Property**
1.00	**Lunch**
2.00	**Integrating collaborative learning tools into the OpenLearn environment: Simon Buckingham-Shum, Knowledge Media Institute**
3.00	**Tea/coffee break**
3.15	**TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa): Claire Hedges**
3.45	**Concluding session : Jerard Bretts, Programme Manager and Sheran Wilson, Programme Coordinator**