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Current developments around open education in Irish Higher Education
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Abstract

This paper explores open educational practice in the context of the recommendations by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Digital Roadmap around open education (National Forum, 2015); and a subsequent focused research project which aimed to explore the use of learning resources and open access in Higher Education institutions in Ireland (Risquez et al, 2015). In addition, the author explores the recognition of structured non-accredited opportunities as a valid professional development activity by the National Forum through its recent digital badges initiative. In order to open the debate, the author goes on to discuss her recent personal experience in relation to open structured non-accredited education opportunities for continuous professional development. This offers a contrast between open education models that focus on scalability (as MOOCs) versus those that focus on community and connections.

Introduction

Education for Sustainable Development is about enabling us to constructively and creatively address present and future global challenges and create more sustainable and resilient societies (UNESCO). In order to address this challenge, promoting educational sustainability is crucial. This comprehends consideration of open pedagogies, our legacy as teachers, our engagement with communities and society, and lifelong learning (including digital capacity). In this sense, the concept of ‘lifewideness’ (Jackson, 2011), offers interesting insights into how a ‘lifewide education could enhance a university’s ability to recognise and value learning and personal development that is essential for survival, success and personal fulfilment in a complex modern world’ (p1).

As we consider the challenge to provide educational opportunities that are based on personalisation, collaboration and informal learning, open education raises to the forefront. In ‘The Future of Learning is Lifelong, Lifewide and Open’, Christine Redecker (2014) reminds of the massive power shift from institutions to the learners that we are currently witnessing. This in turn poses several challenges: unbundling institutional functions and practices relating to the provision of educational opportunities; open up curricula, by concentrating more holistically on competences, instead of knowledge; and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The national digital roadmap and open education

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education was announced by the Minister for Education and Skills in November 2012 and became operational in October 2013. The role of the Forum is to enhance the teaching and learning for all students in higher education. Engaging with leaders, managers, teachers and students, the Forum
mobilises expertise and inputs from across the entire sector to extend and shape best practice in all institutes of higher education in Ireland. One of the key goals of the National Forum was, via wide consultation, to create a digital roadmap to help to guide institutions and organisations in the development of local and national digital strategies and to ensure alignment, coherence and a sense of common endeavour at a sectoral level. In 2015, their Digital Roadmap report was published in order to identify the key priorities for change and provides an informed framework for supporting organisations in addressing these priorities. The Digital Roadmap Recommendation 3, Priority 5 (2015: 41), directly addresses the national priorities around open education as ‘Develop and implement open education principles and practices for Irish education that are aligned with EU policy and emerging international practice’. In doing so, they first pose these questions to us all:

- Has your institution adopted the principles of open education and encouraged the development of OERs?
- Does your institution or cluster/partnership support a digital repository system for research and teaching resources? How is the level of engagement with such by staff measured and promoted?
- Has your institution considered developing approaches via local repository managers to ensure that professional development resources, tools, protocols, evidence and learning design processes are actively incorporated into local repositories?
- Has consideration been given to issues of inclusivity?
- Have you ensured that your staff and students are familiar with and encouraged to have appropriate data backup?

In conclusion, the National Forum proposes the co-ordination of funding mechanisms/key targets to ensure that the open education principles are adopted locally and adhered to by higher education institutions (HEA) as a key system-led action. It also commits to promote the adoption of open education principles, including the production and re-use of open educational resources (OERs) across the sector and facilitate uptake through collation of relevant research, international case studies and policy documents.

Learning Resources and Open Access in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland

As part of Forum’s commitment to leading and facilitating enhancement from an evidence based standpoint, it funded a focused research project to be conducted over a six month period by higher education researchers in partnership with the Forum (Risquez et al, 2015). This project was designed to facilitate rapid and focused research on open educational resources and open access, to inform academic practice and guide enhancement activities. Successful bidders were awarded funding by the Forum following competitive selection, based on international peer review and were initiated in December 2014. Ethics approval for the project was granted through the higher education institutions involved and the National Forum’s Research Ethics Committee. The project contributed to create a baseline understanding in a national context on this topic, as well as a springboard for future enhancement activities and further practice/policy developments. Importantly, the successful completion of this projects attests to the collaborative partnership and engagement between the Forum and higher education institutions in developing a shared common purpose for evidence-based enhancement activities. ‘Learning Resources and Open Access in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland’ constitutes a national analysis, set out to examine strategies for sharing OERs to enhance teaching and learning in Irish higher education. Drawing on the collective expertise and experience of colleagues, the study explored current practices and potential approaches for future sharing of resources. As part of the exploration a national survey and a number of focus groups were held with selected groups of academic, library, educational development and educational technologists.
Consequently, this report provides a considered account of some of the key issues which influence the sharing of open educational resources from primary data gathered and also from a survey of current research literature. The relevant issues incorporate questions of awareness and understanding of open educational resources at individual as well as institutional level, and in particular the value placed on openness as a positive incentive for academic engagement and sharing. Alongside the increasing growth of social media and online sharing platforms, which have altered the way resources are shared amongst some groups, there is also the question of how in an Irish context distinctive institutional missions and approaches can determine levels of OER engagement. Acknowledging the complex interplay between these factors, the study suggests important practical steps to take forward OER engagement, including: awareness raising; professional development for academic staff; capturing excellent OERs and continuing relevant and targeted research to support particular OER initiatives.

Findings from the survey and focus groups conducted with academic staff for this project, in line with findings from studies in the literature, showed that the majority of participants had low levels of awareness of OER and poor understanding of the associated issues. This is all the more relevant when the self-selected nature of participation is taken into account because, it might be argued, sample participants were those most motivated and interested in OER in the first place. The understanding of the concept of ‘openness’ is very limited with a majority of respondents equating ‘sharing’ of resources, with, for example, what happens between teachers and their students and between teachers and their colleagues in closed spaces. All findings therefore in relation to OER and repositories must be filtered through this restricted lens of understanding. The key deterrents to OER-use centred around perceptions of quality, time constraints and a lack of supply of relevant material. These same factors (time, quality and relevance of materials) were also regarded as potential enablers when selecting learning resources. Findings showed the complex and multi-faceted nature of decisions around whether to share or not to share on the part of academics. The research also showed a wide gap in understanding between the small minority who have fully embraced engagement with OER and the majority who have not. In relation to digital repositories, usage is low (at most 40%, but likely closer to 25%). While half of respondents considered their local institutional repository suitable for hosting open educational resources this has to be interpreted in the context of the low levels of awareness and poor understanding of digital repositories in general and the fact that some institutions do not have institutional repositories. Barriers to sharing resources through institutional repositories centred on concerns around intellectual property, repository functionality, time and lack of confidence/fear of criticism. Enabling factors included a belief in the principle of ‘sharing’ (though, as discovered, this may not necessarily equate with ‘open’ sharing); personal profile building; collegiality (again, understood to be in the context of immediate colleagues); and reciprocity. There were low levels of awareness and much confusion about digital rights management, licensing and intellectual property rights. The question attempting to assess training needs in relation to institutional repository use demonstrated that requirements are much broader. While there is a definite need for training in educational technologies and digital literacies, findings suggest that such training needs to occur in the context of a broader discussion on open education and the intersections between components, particularly those between open educational practice (OEP) and open educational resources (OER). In line with conclusions in the literature, survey and focus group findings show that early adopters of OER have moved away from repository use to social media and online sharing platforms such as YouTube, SlideShare and WordPress. Such services have now become the established mainstream. Even amongst those not very familiar with the area of OER, the survey showed that the vast majority of respondents searched for learning resources (whether OER, or not) on platforms such as Google and YouTube rather than in learning
resource repositories. Learning from the no longer existing National Digital Learning Resources project (NDLR) prompts a similar conclusion raising a question about whether such platforms obviate the need for a national learning repository service. In this regard, there was acknowledgment in the focus group on repositories that towards the end of the NDLR project there was a move away from repositories, based on the view that they were seen to ‘stifle the education process’. Some interesting alternatives were suggested in focus groups that warrant further investigation e.g. the use of reading-list management like software; placing links only in institutional repositories to OER outputs stored elsewhere e.g. online platforms or personal websites; and linking teaching outputs with research outputs as part of broader research-led teaching strategies.

**National Forum Professional Development (PD) Online Badge initiative**

The National Digital Badge System is the most recent national development around open education. This initiative, developed in close collaboration with the higher education sector to create a means of recognising and acknowledging those committed to ongoing professional development in teaching and learning, has seen the design of 15 open-access open programmes with national digital badges to the HE sector which have been developed against nationally agreed criteria. The first phase of the national PD digital badge, concluded in November 2017, is intended to enable educators to have achieve recognition and mobility within their PD journey and career advancement in the Irish sector. Each badge requires approximately 25 learner effort hours. This may include workshop-based and independent learning. There are a number of learner activities to be successfully completed and these are aligned to each of the badge criteria. A number of PD Facilitator Development Workshops were recently run across the country ([https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/pd-open-access-programmes-earning-pd-digital-badge/](https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/pd-open-access-programmes-earning-pd-digital-badge/)). All those attending the facilitator development workshops can sign up to register as a badge facilitator. The PD Portal with access to all the badge materials is available from 1st November 2017 ([https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/digital-badges/](https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/digital-badges/)). In terms of claiming badges for workshops, facilitators must complete a ‘Declaration of Eligibility’ to confirm they have expertise in the area of the PD programme; the participants that they are claiming the badge for have completed the requirements of the badge criteria; and in addition, the facilitator must provide a short evaluation on the materials of this beta version of the programme so that any amendments can be made prior to the final version being released in 2018.
Although the National Forum (NF) currently is in a period of transition, the PD digital badges initiative will continue. It is anticipated that there will be a thorough evaluation undertaken on the full digital badge development and delivery process. While the NF is gearing up for the next four years of work, Phase 2 of badge development will be postponed, but this will not impact on the piloting of current badges with target audiences in the sector. I was involved in the development of one of these badges (‘Getting Started with online teaching’) in collaboration with Hibernia College and CIT. Funding has been obtained from the National Forum Seminar Series to digitalize the material designed and run the first iteration of the programme in Spring 2018. But for many of the other projects, funding and timing has constrained the level of digitisation that has taken place. In addition, consideration now needs to be given to the rollout of the badges. Motivating facilitators to deliver the badges, run the workshops and ensure that the criteria are met by the participants are likely to be challenging.

**eMOOCs vs Creative HE (and lovely homely stuff)**

In order to conclude this paper and open the debate, I go on to discuss here my personal experience in relation to open structured non-accredited education opportunities for continuous professional development. This offers a contrast between open education models that focus on scalability (as MOOCs) versus those that focus on community and connections.

One of the most prominent areas around open education has to do, of course, with MOOCs, so when I realised that the 2017 International MOOC summit (where the CEOs of the main MOOC platforms were to meet) was to be hosted in my native hometown, a bare 10 minutes walk from where I grew up, I decided that it was a sign of destiny (ok, the perspective of my mum’s cooking may, only may, have also had something to do).

Since the most prestigious US universities joined the MOOC movement around 2012, these have received a huge amount of attention, paired with equal expectations that they would radically transform higher education as we know it. Five years on, it is obvious that the revolution has not materialised, and the practice of MOOCs has developed in diverse directions. One of the main divergences stems from the focus on the ‘M’ bit: is the course
geared to taking over the world through scalability (these have come to be known as xMOOCs) or on the contrary, is the focus placed on a social learning, requiring (obviously) a level of human interaction (cMOOCs)?

Serendipity wanted that while planning to attend to this conference, I was in discussion with Prof Norman Jackson, who is leading our Contemporary Issues in Higher Education summer module (#TL5003) in our Graduate Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship. Norman has a vast experience in creative pedagogics, lifelong learning and, amongst many other endeavours, leads #CreativeHE (in collaboration with Chrissi Nerantzi and other like-minded colleagues), a community of creative academics which (they might not agree with this) could be somewhat categorised as the cMOOC type. The next iteration of the course was meant to run during the same week so I signed for the experience in the interest of authenticity and why not, a bit of fun CPD.

**DAY 1 and 2**

Expectations were high for the main keynotes in Day 1 and 2. Sir Timothy O’Shea, principal in University of Edinburgh, opened the conference keynote and offered some interesting insights. Many were on the positive side: despite of evangelists having said that the MOOC would be the end of textbooks, they have actually been a driver for more textbooks being produced in his institution. This was counterbalance with the stark statistic that completion rates of (their extremely expensive) MOOCs are only around 6%. FutureLearn claims to be a catalyst of the digitisation efforts of universities, and one way of doing this is through online degrees with open pathways. As an example, the platform has partnered with Deakin to pioneer a full MA degree through Futurelearn, some of it paid and some through MOOCs. In other cases, MOOCs are compensated with university credits. In order to facilitate flipped classroom blended approaches, they are currently piloting a space with looks pretty much like a LMS… A more complete overview of the themes was curated in the #EMOOCS2017 twitter feed, but
in general, I got the clear picture that after the MOOC hype, economic sustainability of these platforms and return on investment is the major elephant in the room.

Simon Nelson from FutureLearn quoted Inside HE (2017): ‘Gone are the promises about revolutionizing HE or driving most colleges and universities out of business. In their place is a pledge to work with colleges on how to offer education online and internationally’.

In the meantime, Day 1 of #CreativeHE had started. I found Google + (where the community is hosted) to be very confusing to use. I attempted to engage with the tasks, which invited us to produce creative artefacts to answer to specific challenges, but I found that I was ‘piggybacking’ in others’ creativity (with pictures of murals on the streets) rather than challenging myself with my own, but nevertheless, appetite was opening and I was slowly moving from the internal talk of ‘I don’t really have time for this’.

I found the themes that emerged in my real (i.e conference attending mode) and online world (in #CreativeHE) fed each other nicely (lifelong and lifewide education, the sustainability of the current educational model, and creativity as a ‘must’ for survival, rather than a ‘nice’ addition). The fact that the conference was hosted so close to home (this is, the one where you revert to your teenage bad habits) helped to contextualise things for me in the building where I used sneak in to find a place to study while being an undergrad. I walked back home to my mums’ lovely cooking and to spend time with my family and friends, and in turn, I found that progressively, I could incorporate discussions and memories into my creative endeavours for the #creativeHE tasks. It was all a nice experiential, ‘in the moment’ integration of living and learning on the go. Resources shared in #CreativeHE also informed my growing understanding of the MOOC phenomenon. I was also deepening my critical lenses into this world through posts such as Alan Levine’s ‘The future will not be powerpoint(ed), neither MOOCed‘, and finding reassurance in my remit of power as educational developer and citizen in this world… this, while I sat right next to Tim O’Shea talking about the Limerick weather!
**DAY 3**

On Wednesday I targeted the discussion panel on social inclusion and MOOCs chaired by @vincentzimmer, which highlights digital exclusion, and were wifi was (arguably) referred to as a ‘human right’. The starting point was that, while MOOCs have been argued as a means for democratising access to education, experience to date has shown that it tends to be used by those with a good level of educational attainment for CPD purposes, rather than those most in need. As a response, the EU has developed a catalogue of initiatives in MOOCs that facilitate digital inclusion (http://moocs4inclusion.org/). This research has revealed that we know very little about the real impact of MOOC initiatives on digital integration. This is not to take away from the potential advantages provided by this model of education. For example, interesting insights followed into gender access. Vincent Zimmer reports their experience breaking cultural barriers to female education in refugee families, where at home MOOC education is making it socially acceptable. Of interest was also the discussion that followed about ‘educational colonisation’ of MOOC platforms based on the northern hemisphere, and the call for partnership approaches as an alternative. The argument is that they are many people that are taking MOOCs now that would not have access to education at all otherwise. The flip side (as argued by Tim O’Shea) is that the progressive reliance on online education poses a greater digital divide in many populations. In conclusion, I left with the feeling that refugees were indeed a focal point through the event, but were somewhat opportunistically used to justify the social value of MOOCs in tokenistic ways, while CEOs of Coursera, FutureLearn and Edx presented their (increasingly excluding) business models in order to sustain the MOOC movement.

In the meantime, in #CreativeHE we got an unexpected day off, as the tragic events in Manchester left everyone with no desire for creativity or fun. At a personal level, I greatly welcomed the the break as the late conference dinner the night before (Spanish style) took a toll on me, and followed the advice to go out and walk in the lovely sunshine. As recommended though, I read Browns (2009) typology of adult learners, which pretty much validates ANY type of activity that we love as valuable learning play. We were also invited to join the relevant #LHETchat which happened to deal with the issue of creativity in HE later that evening, but honestly I completely forgot about it while spending some much needed quality time with my family in the open.

**DAY 4**

On Thursday, I attended a MOOC design session which resonated strongly with the experience that I underwent through the Epigeum Blended Learning course design: reinforcing the delivery of information, video production and knowledge testing (strongly relying in T&Qs). There was not much scope really for flexibility or creativity that I could see… reinforcing this view of MOOCs (at least the ‘x’ type) as relying in structured content dissemination. While sitting right next to an expert on MOOC production, I really tried my best to introduce the agenda of creativity and scope for other pedagogical approaches. He gave me a look which made it obvious that his neurological pathways were too settled in a certain direction...

Back in action in #CreativeHE, we were challenged to think about storytelling around ‘threshold concepts’. After much thinking, I just decided to produce a little fun video with recording from my 3 year old and some of her buddies, who are full of joy and fun for learning… surely a threshold concept must include some of that! My post read ‘I am not quite sure if this effectively addresses threshold concepts but probably goes in the right direction…
at the age of the actors in this video, most of learning is transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded and troublesome. With thanks to my small one and friends for their kind collaboration!

Video posted in my blog (https://angelicarisquez.wordpress.com/2017/06/14/emoocs-vs-creative-he/)

Back to ‘real’ (aka teaching) life

On the way back home I reflected on this pretty intense CPD experience a bit. It was certainly interesting to go through both experiences CreativeHE and the eMOOCs conference because my understanding progressively formed in multi-layered dichotomies: directional (bottom-up creativity VS top-down content delivery); economical (free and ‘do-it-yourself’ community in Google docs VS exclusive powerful platforms for a selected few); etc. Rick Yale from Coursera claimed in his keynote that ‘the future of the university will happen in an ecosystem of lifelong learning’, but it remains to be seen if MOOCs will effectively survive to be a part of it. The final message was one of empowerment and freedom: no hype will ultimately decide what kind of educator we will be in the future, the future of education is in our hands (sort of).

References


