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Observing Open E-Learning Content: A Roadmap for Educational Policy and Institutions and Hands-On Tips for Practitioners

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Key words: *Open Educational Content, Open Educational Resources, E-Learning, Educational Policies*

Abstract:

This presentation is concerned with Open Educational Resources and Practices, based on findings of the EU-project “Open eLearning Content Observatory Services” (OLCOS). We present the results of a study on the European OER landscape, which explores the possible pathways towards a higher level of production, sharing and usage of OER and provides an orientation as well as recommendations on possible measures and actions to support decision making at the level of educational policy and institutions. Besides this, OLCOS tutorials are presented, giving hands-on tips for practitioners.

1 Introduction and Background

In the last few years Open Educational Resources (OER) have gained much attention, e.g. through the extensive media coverage of the Open Courseware initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the work of ever more organisations that promote the use of Creative Commons licenses, and the success of Open Source Software based systems such as Moodle in the educational sector. We present definitions of the term “Open Educational Resources” also in another contribution to the proceedings of the ICL conference [1].

However, in order to further benefit from OER it is necessary to gain a much clearer understanding of the role it can play in changing educational practices. Since the beginning of 2006, the Open e-Learning Content Observatory Services (OLCOS) project has explored how OER can make a difference in teaching and learning. The project runs from January 2006 to December 2007 and is co-funded by the European Commission under the eLearning Programme. The project consortium comprises the European Centre for Media Competence (Germany), the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN Hungary), the FernUniversität in Hagen (Germany), the Mediamaisteri Group (Finland), the Open University of Catalonia (Spain) and the project co-ordinator Salzburg Research, EduMedia Group (Austria).

The project aims at promoting OER through different activities: OLCOS has produced a roadmap to provide educational decision makers with orientation and recommendations on how to foster the further development and use of OER. This study can be downloaded freely (www.olcos.org). Besides these recommendations, the OLCOS project develops free online tutorials for practitioners. The objective of these tutorials is to support students and teachers in the creation, re-use and sharing of OER.

2 Priority of Open Educational Practices

OER are understood to comprise content for teaching and learning, software-based tools and services, and licenses that allow for open development and re-use of content, tools and services. The OLCOS project considers OER to be an important element of policies that aim to leverage education and lifelong learning for the knowledge society and economy. However, the project also emphasises that for achieving this goal it is crucial to promote innovation and change in educational practices. In particular, OLCOS warns that delivering OER to the still dominant model of teacher-centred knowledge transfer will have little effect on equipping teachers, students and workers with the competences, knowledge and skills to participate successfully in the knowledge economy and society.

Therefore the OLCOS project focuses on open educational practices that are based on a competency-focused, constructivist paradigm of learning and promote a creative and collaborative engagement of learners with digital content, tools and services in the learning process.

3 Selected Recommendations for Stakeholders

For many years considerable investments have been made to equip educational institutions with computers, software programs, local networks and Internet access. Expectations that the use of ICT would somehow bring about student-centred and collaborative approaches have not been fulfilled. Rather there is a considerable mismatch between teaching and learning as framed and maintained by typical educational institutions and the fabric of work in a knowledge-based economy “out there”. In addition, there is an obvious gap between current educational practices and what a younger generation of students uses almost naturally to communicate and form communities of interest outside “the classroom”.

The OLCOS road mapping has been carried out to inform and support a transformation in educational practices that brings learning processes and their outcomes closer to what individuals will need to participate successfully in the knowledge society. The OLCOS Roadmap 2012 on Open Educational Practises and Resources [2] explores the possible pathways towards a higher level of production, sharing and usage of OER and provides an orientation as well as recommendations on possible measures and actions to support decision making at the level of educational policy and institutions.

The OLCOS roadmap report provides a comprehensive set of 25 recommendations for stakeholders from educational policy makers and funding bodies to individual teachers and students. Among the recommendations that address open educational practices and Social Software based tools and services are the following:

- Boards, directors and supervisors of educational institutions are advised to scrutinise whether educational institutions employ innovative approaches beyond classical teacher-centred knowledge transfer. For example, they should ask educational institutions about what amount of teachers’ work concentrates on coaching students in identifying real world problems, clarifying study approaches, assessing the relevance of information and observations, and critically discussing study results.
- Teachers should change their role from dispensers of knowledge to facilitators of open educational practices that emphasise learners’ own activities in developing competences, knowledge and skills. Therefore, an educational culture and mindset

must be fostered that builds on sharing of resources for, and experiences from, open educational practices. For teachers, this would for example include sharing within a community of practice experiences, lessons learned and suggestions on how to better foster the development of students' as well as their own competences and skills. This would be part of a new understanding of teachers' professional work that includes a permanent questioning, evaluation and improvement of educational practices and resources.

- As facilitators of open learning practices and processes, teachers should favour learning designs that make use of tools and services for collaborative learning and sharing of ideas, experiences and study results. Teachers should be aware that there is available a new generation of easy-to-use tools and services (e.g. Weblogs, Wikis, RSS-based content provision, etc.). They should experiment with such tools and services that allow for setting up an information environment that they and their students can manage themselves.
- Also e-learning implementers at educational institutions are asked to support open educational practices. Such practices do not require large, centrally managed systems. Rather, groups of teachers and students will benefit from e-learning implementers' technical advice and support in selecting, setting up and using appropriate low-barrier tools.
- With respect to the set of recommendations for learners, it may be interesting that the roadmap invites students to challenge teachers with requests such as: Why not use Weblogs to share ideas, observations and commented links to useful study material? Why not use a Wiki for a collaborative study project? Why not subscribe to thematic RSS-feeds that provide a project with relevant and regularly updated "real world" information? A further recommendation for students is to have an e-portfolio for documenting and reflecting the progress and results of their study work, and to make results they are proud of accessible through an open access repository under an open content license.

4 OLCOS Tutorials about OER

Besides these recommendations, the OLCOS project develops free online tutorials for practitioners [3].

4.1 Overview and concept

We explore free online tutorials from the OLCOS project, providing information and guidance on how to plan, search, produce/re-use, share and publish open educational content in e-learning and the OLCOS collections (e.g. of OER repositories). To support the idea of OER, the tutorials itself have to be open, free and collaboratively developed.

For that, we decided to use the WikiEducator project as a suitable platform to collaborate with other key figures and interested parties. The WikiEducator is a community project "working collaboratively with the Free Culture Movement towards a free version of the education curriculum by 2015" [4]. Its technical infrastructure is supported by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to "encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies." [4] This choice is fruitful for both parties, as can be seen in the fact that the start of the OLCOS tutorials in September 2006 has

been a highlight for the WikiEducator team on the way up to an average of a 1000 hits per day (the hits are currently even higher) [4].

Concerning the content of the tutorials, we try to follow a multi-perspective and practical introduction, using existing content and the didactical templates of the WikiEducator (e.g. assignment, web-resources, tip). By means of some case descriptions, the learners should solve some concrete assignments. The tutorials are tested and evaluated in national workshops and are originally written in English, but are also available in German and Spanish since August 2008.

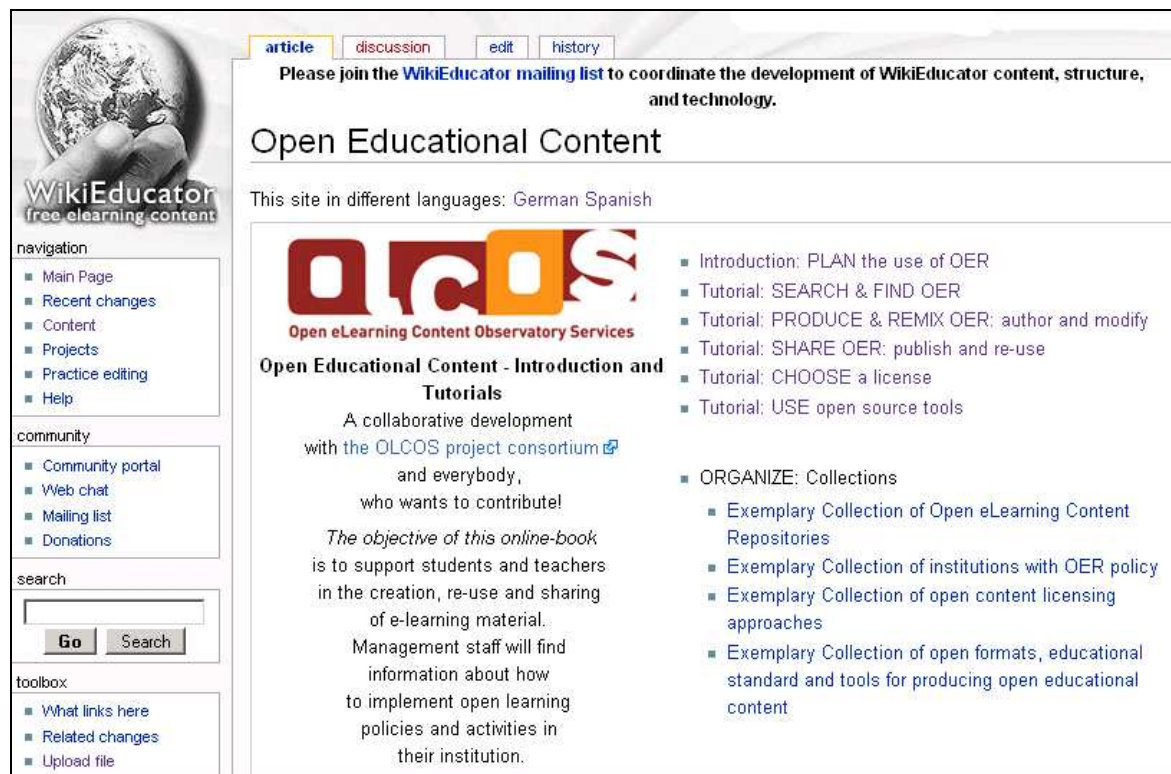


Figure 1: Screenshot of the tutorials

We introduce to our definitions, and to the overall planning of general/macrodidactical, technical and legal aspects. We illustrate our tutorials with some practical examples. The tutorials show, how the goal of OER and open practices could be obtained by practitioners (see also Figure 1). The top-level topics of the tutorials are as follows:

- Find and evaluate existing Open Content
- Create Open Content with Open Source tools
- Publish and share of the content
- Technical considerations and planning
- Legal/license considerations and planning

Beneath that, we present some exemplary collections of

- Open e-learning content repositories
- Institutions with OER policy
- Open Content licensing approaches
- Open formats, educational standard and tools for producing open educational content

In the following, the tutorials are described briefly.

4.2 Introduction: PLAN the use of OER

The “introduction” provides a definition of OER, information about benefits of using OER, and instruction to plan the (re-)use and creation of open content in the daily work of teachers, trainers, students and learners. We provide also an overview about terms and our tutorials and collections.

4.3 Tutorial: SEARCH & FIND OER

The first scenario we use in this tutorial is the following: In a project, a group of students is working on a short presentation about pollination of apples. For that, they are trying to find materials that they can use for a project webpage. They not only want to collect hyperlinks, but also want to re-use the materials. For that purpose, they need more information and help.

To this aim this tutorial offers practical information, advice, and guidance how to search and find Open Content. It shows efficient ways of searching the Internet for relevant information, resources and OER that meet your needs and also provide with some ideas on how to keep yourself up-to-date about resources you are interested in.

4.4 Tutorial: PRODUCE & REMIX OER: author and modify

Perhaps you have found a course module or learning unit which exactly fits your requirements after the first tutorial. Usually, however, one wants to create own materials by mixing, re-using, and adapting findings. For that it is important to be aware of what is permitted by the creator. In addition, though not necessarily so, Open Content is very often a collaborative process, which means that more teachers and learners wanting to create learning materials work together in an open process. In addition, the tutorial provides information on formats that can be published as OER and tools that support this process and how to use standards and metadata.

4.5 Tutorial: SHARE OER: publish and re-use

There are many possibilities to publish and to share the Open Content. But one needs to keep in mind that employers might have different rights and interests on one’s work. This means that you might have to ask before publishing your work. This tutorial provides information and practical tasks in publishing and sharing OER, and facilitating the sharing of this new content by using suitable formats, licenses, educational metadata and visibility strategies.

4.6 Tutorial: CHOOSE a license

Before you publish your content or before you start to build up a collaborating community creating Open Content you should decide about the legal requirements for re-using that content. This is needed, because the EU requires to ask the owner of the copyright of learning materials before using, copying, modifying the learning content, and to enter into a contract. With an open content license, you could profit e.g. from clear descriptions of the rights of the author(s) and the users, licensing formulations which are proved by legal practitioner, the

awareness level of the license or the possibility (for others) to more easily discover content with most of the search-engines.

This tutorial provides information and practical tasks for choosing one of the most popular licences models, the Creative Commons licenses and how they can included in the learning materials.

4.7 Tutorial: USE open source tools

Open Source Software is based on and uses open formats, and for that, it is destined for the creation of Open Educational Content. In a way, it is a monstrous task to write this tutorial, because there are so many tools we can write about. Hence, this tutorial provides information about other services and lists instead of a list of single recommendations.

5 Future Prospects of the Project OLCOS

In the OLCOS project, a lot of work is already done in the field of research and development of the materials. The project consortium now concentrates on dissemination: The project members offers several awareness raising workshops and presentations in the European e-learning community designed to foster the uptake of the concept of Open Content and OER, and how to develop the required infrastructures, legally sound practices, educational policies and organisational strategies.

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