

Chapter 7

OLnet: A New Approach to Supporting the Design and Use of Open Educational Resources

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ABSTRACT

The web 2.0 practices of user participation and experimentation have created models for social networking that influence the way people communicate and interact online. This chapter describes an initiative, OLnet, that is creating a technical environment based on web 2.0 principles to support the sharing of experiences around the design and use of Open Educational Resources (OER) in order to facilitate closer links between researchers and users. The aim is to combine online functionality, face-to-face events and research activities so that research outputs can inform users and users can help steer future areas for research work. This chapter sets out the challenges and background that have motivated OLnet before looking at two of the tools that form part of the initial OLnet technical infrastructure; a tool for visualising OER designs – CompendiumLD, and a social networking tool for exchange of ideas – Cloudworks.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter revisits the view that online technologies can change the way we learn and teach. In particular it sets out some actions that can be taken to meet four challenges that have emerged from previous research and discussion in the community. These challenges are, in brief, to understand why:

1. Despite the rhetoric around the potential application of technologies in education, their impact on practice has been limited.
2. Teachers seem to lack the design skills needed to exploit the potential of technologies within their teaching.
3. There is an abundance of free resources (learning objects and Open Educational Resources) now available, but the majority of teachers do not use them.

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4. Research into the use of technologies in education and into OER, on the whole, does not inform practice and vice versa.

These challenges are reflected in the concerns that others in the community have expressed but are also linked to our previous work in two areas - the development and evaluation of OER through the OpenLearn project¹ and Learning Design research as part of the OU Learning Design Initiative²

The structure we follow in this chapter is to first consider the background to the first challenge: what are the promises of online learning and what steps are needed to move those forward? Secondly a review of OER research and the associated challenges. Thirdly a description of the OpenLearn project. Fourthly an outline of the OU Learning Design Initiative. Finally we discuss the OLnet activity and how we aim through OLnet to bring together learning design and OER research within a community structure showing examples of how social networking approaches are starting to help us address the fourth challenge: linking researchers in OER to practice in OER.

Key Terms and Definitions

Terminology in this field is contested and varied; therefore it is worth clarifying our meaning of the key terms used in this chapter.

- A learning object can range from a simple digital asset (such as a piece of text or an audio file) through to a more complex learning resource incorporating a range of media and designed to support a particular learning activity.
- Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching and learning materials made freely available for use and repurposing by teachers and learners. Potentially synergistic with learning objects, the emphasis is on the open licence allowing use and reuse of the resources.
- A learning activity consists of a set of tasks a learner undertakes, either individually or in a group, using a specific set of resources (which may include tools) to achieve a set of intended learning outcomes.
- Learning design is a research area developing methods, tools and resources to support teachers in making pedagogically informed, better use of technologies.

The Rhetoric around Technology Transformation

This section reviews the use of technologies in education, focusing in particular on why they have not had a great impact on the practice of education. The disruptive nature of technologies has long been heralded, many have argued that features and affordances of technology are poised to revolutionise education (Christensen et al., 2008; Sharples, 2002). Examples can be identified that show there is some truth in this statement in terms of the ways in which technology is used to support research, teaching and administrative activities within educational institutions. Institutional and departmental web sites are now standard, email is used as the main form of communication, Learner Management Systems (LMS)/Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) are now commonplace. There has also been a noticeable move towards a strategic recognition of the mission critical importance of technologies as part of wider institutional structures. These changes are evidence that technologies have had an increasing impact on education *processes* over the last couple of decades, however the impact on actual *practice* – on teaching and learning – is perhaps not as radical as might have been expected. Considered in terms of methods of teaching, models of work and the relations between teacher and learner, the impact of technologies has not been as transformative in education as it has been in other industries such as finance, tourism or online shopping.

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