

**Open Educational Resources: Friend or Foe?**

(Information Literacy Discussion Paper by Aneliya Kochneva, Cohort II, Spring 2013)

The topic of Open Educational Resources (OER) is not entirely new to the world of education and literacy development. Everyone praises the nobility and progressive thinking behind it, and yet it has been one of the most controversial and frowned upon issues in the academic circles. The purpose of this discussion paper will be to shed a light on the OER as a phenomenon, what it is, why everyone should care about it and why to get involved, how it will affect the education in global aspect, and finally why OER can be trusted.

To answer what OER are, a question that should be addressed first is what Open Education (OE) is. The moment a child begins to play with other children, the first lesson it learns is how to share and that is the main concept behind OE- sharing. Open education is a way to create, collaborate, convert, correct, challenge, critique and share educational information with the purpose of making the using ( and reusing) of that information free of charge and open for everyone to modify. It is an excellent way to stimulate innovation in the educational circles and to connect people globally. ( Openeducationweek.org, 2013). OER are one of the tools that OE uses. OER are the materials openly available ( under the Creative Commons licensing policy) for any educator or student, any librarian or government official, any institution or individual who considers these materials of benefit for furthering their personal or the educational advancement of their peers. These stakeholders are therefore encouraged to use OER, adapt them to their needs and share them for others to adapt and reuse, thus creating a spiral of educational progress along the way.

Why everyone should care about OER is a valid question. Education has long been considered to be a way of solving global problems of the scale of World hunger and Poverty, Human rights and Environmental issues (Richter and McPherson, 2012). In their nature, people are hungry for knowledge, and OER are a way to open a door for many who have not been able to take full advantage of the opportunities the existing traditional educational resources (TER) provide (Openeducationweek.org). The expensive educational materials in higher education, the customization of these materials to fit a superficially narrow market with the only purpose to not allow reuse of these materials, the unnecessary production of new editions with hardly any changes made to the original content pushed by publishers for higher sale numbers, the expiration dates on digital content, which renders the “owner” rights useless, but most of all the artificial market the publishers create by focusing their efforts to “hook” the educators on their “freebie bait” by providing complimentary copies of the “new” educational materials are some examples why TER are not adequately satisfying the needs of the stakeholders. The logic behind the “baiting” is that if the decision maker is in favor of a particular material, the end users (the students) will be forced to accept that decision without any say in the matter, regardless of the price, which the decision maker is spared of paying in the first place (Belliston, 2009).

This is why people should care about OER, because they provide an alternative. The OER content can (and should) be addressed by anyone - the teacher, as the decision maker, or the student, as the end user. Both can work together to make sure the content fits the needs and purposes of the education process they are involved in. It is past the times, where education meant only direct instruction. Students want to be involved in the education process and it is

their right to do so. According to Sally Johnstone, vice president for academic advancement at Western Governors University, who spoke in the Panel of Higher Education in Washington in February 2012, the students are already taking advantage of this by participating in the active learning process and providing feedback on the materials adopted by their professors (DeSantis, 2012).

However, it is not a matter of student demand only. Plenty of educators, librarians and professionals are seeking alternatives as well, whether to supplement their existing curriculum or to completely switch to OER. A recent ALA Listserv search shows that on a question of supplementary resources to a psychology course, the suggested materials by the Listserv members in response to the psychology professor request involved 50% hybrid materials (materials that are not completely open, free for use with restrictions) and 50% OER (Mascarenas, 2012). Teachers are aware of these resources and they are spreading the word. There is simply no denying the fact that OER are moving in quickly and they are here to stay.

Even if OER are here to stay, there are a lot of skeptics who consider them a foe, rather than a friend. A common fear is that OER will be the end of the printed materials, which is considered a reason why people with interest and influence in the publishing business are doing their best to discourage the development of OER. However, there is no ground for fear according to Belliston, who is the author of the 2009 ALA Midwinter meeting article. Belliston quotes a NACS survey that shows that students are still continuing to use printed materials that are copies of digital content provided for free. Belliston explains the reasons behind this paradox with a couple of reasons - the authority of the professors, who still use a printed copy, the fact that the

majority of students in higher education at the moment are digital-immigrants (Prensky, 2001), who grew up perusing printed text and that influences their reading, note-taking and annotation habits, and last the accessibility factor, which affects OER that are available only through network access. If Belliston is right, OER can actually boost the business of printed (on demand) materials, not hurt it. Nevertheless, the publishers' concern is understandable and therefore to be expected.

What is unexpected is the lukewarm reaction from educators and education institutions where OER are concerned. In his article on the Washington Panel of Higher Education, DeSantis describes the concern about the quality of the OER and the quality assurance process that the OER derivative work will undergo. Affordability is an issue where education materials are concerned, but quality is a priority. DeSantis is not the only one who reports on the issue of OER quality- Belliston, Richter and McPherson refer to this issue in their articles as well.

Richter and McPherson point out that OER are not panacea and we cannot expect them to solve all educational problems, especially in a global aspect, since OER currently do not support cultural diversity, completely depend on global literacy level, and do not address the differences in global educational standards. While they consider OER not to be ready for global collaboration, Richter and McPherson, make recommendations on how to address these issues. They recommend increased adaptability, higher level of transparency in the process of creating and publishing original and derivative work, motivation of feedback provision, as well as the use of common intellectual property and technical standards, but mostly the readiness of OER to join other divisions of the open movement like Open Source, Open Data, Open Access etc.

It is true, that OER are not perfect, nor is any traditional educational resource. The critics of OER, however often point the lack of peer-review and editorial control over the OER as a main reason for their criticism. What is to be done? Gerry McKiernan, a science and technology librarian at Iowa State University Library and avid blogger, reports that steps are already being made in this direction. He reports that the Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA) released a Guide on the Use of Open Educational Resources in K-12 and Postsecondary schools. This purpose of this guide is to help stakeholders understand the nature of OER, what they are, how they can be used, to examine costs and current models, as well as the role of government, private and non-profit organizations in the research, development (through grants and policies) and popularization of OER.

Belliston on the other hand points out the significant role librarians will play in alleviating the threat of “no-control content”. He points out that the librarians with their various backgrounds and expertise have the power to influence the creation, perception, availability, evaluation, credibility, adoption and use of the OER, not to mention participate in the OER movement by creating content themselves. What a better person to evaluate an OER, than a librarian, who is working closely with faculty and students alike, has been doing evaluation of resources for collection development, repository selections and web resource lists forever and has the expertise to teach? It is definitely a rhetorical question.

However, this concern creates a fertile ground for “hybrid” OER. Take for example the MERLOT project ( <http://www.merlot.org>), which is “a free and open online community of

resources designed primarily for faculty, staff and students of higher education from around the world to share their learning materials and pedagogy. MERLOT is a leading edge, user-centered, collection of peer reviewed higher education, online learning materials, catalogued by registered members and a set of faculty development support services” ( Merlot.org, 2013). The best of both worlds, but do we really need to have all OER peer-reviewed?

If credibility is the main concern that educators hold against OER, then things are quite simple. Belliston points out that if a resource is peer-reviewed or subject to editorial control does not necessarily mean it is the best fit for any curriculum and he has a point. There is virtually no lack of control, as OER critics will point out. Teachers do not use educational materials simply because they have been published by a traditional publisher or they have been given to them by the publishers for free. Teachers evaluate the resources available to them and choose the ones appropriate to serve the needs of the audience they will be instructing. It has always been and it will always be like that. An educator is much more qualified to review and evaluate the resources they will teach in their particular context and circumstances than any outside peer-reviewing committee or editorial staff.

Would there be OER that are not up to standard? Absolutely! However, the difference is that if a teacher likes the general ideas behind this OER, he/she can adapt, perfect and reshare that OER, instead of hopping from one TER to another simply to get something remotely close to what they need. Now, the foe can become a friend, and not by the flick of a magic wand, but by relying on educators’ expertise, experience and feedback from their students. This is where the future of OER lies.

In conclusion, the open educational resources are a unique opportunity to create, explore and share knowledge and expertise in the traditional educational environment, therefore challenging its boundaries. Educators and educational organizations will greatly benefit from the use of OER and should familiarize themselves with the processes they involve, so they can become both users and creators of content, and learn to trust OER, in order to take advantage of the huge variety available. The more stakeholders get involved in popularizing OER, the more opportunities there will be for TER and OER to complement each other, and the larger audience will be reached, with the potential in time to expand collaboration globally .

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