USING OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES TO DESIGN AN ONLINE ACADEMIC RESEARCH WRITING COURSE: A PROJECT REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The DETA Conference of August 2011 and the workshops on the use of open educational resources (OER) were the catalyst for a project that aimed to design and build a multidisciplinary online course in academic research writing, using OER for undergraduate and postgraduate students at a Nigerian university as a resource for research reports, assignments, dissertations, and theses. The project provided an opportunity for collaboration among lecturers and IT specialists, thereby raising awareness about the benefits of using OER and broadening the user base for these resources. Some of the challenges encountered include the lack of adequate access to the internet, possible lack of commitment to the project by some participants due to pressures of their workload, unrealistic timelines, and lack of familiarity with OER. The paper concludes with reflections on the reasons for these challenges and suggests recommendations for scholars planning similar projects.

Key words: open educational resources (OER), academic research writing, course development, technology, learning

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INTRODUCTION

Participants in the DETA 2011 conference were challenged to explore ways to use new ideas and duplicate best practices, and to make new learning and information truly matter, by applying their ideas in order to address existing challenges. It is not enough just to attend conferences and workshops: efforts should be made to make practical use of the new knowledge acquired.

Based on the encouragement of conference organisers and facilitators of the open educational resources (OER) workshop, the idea to design and build a multidisciplinary online course in academic research writing was born. Subsequently, arrangements were made at a university in Nigeria for discussions that aimed to identify challenges that needed to be addressed, find a focus for a project, and identify prospective team members. Before describing the project that resulted from these discussions, literature on OER and the OER movement is briefly reviewed.

Open educational resources (OER)

The term OER, which was coined by UNESCO in 2002, originated from developments in open and distance learning (ODL). OER can be defined as 'teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under intellectual property licence' (Atkins, Brown & Hammond, 2007: 4). They include a range of resources such as course materials, modules, tests, videos, and full courses. The goal is to use information and communications technology (ICT) to promote and to increase access to educational materials and to remove barriers to teaching and learning. OER have also been defined as 'technology-enabled, open provision of educational resources for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial use' (Butcher, 2011: 23). OER have two dimensions, the pedagogical and the digital, and both have the potential to transform education. Some of the benefits include making available relevant teaching and learning materials at little or no cost, opportunities to adapt materials to suit local contexts, and encouragement for individuals as well as institutions to develop their own materials (Butcher, 2011; Hilton III, Wiley, Stein & Johnson, 2010; Smith, Wang and Casserly, 2006). The availability and use of OER has risen exponentially in the last decade, and some of the current applications are as supplementary materials, core components in traditional modes like story books and textbooks, and full ODL courses and programmes (Glennie, 2013; Johnstone, 2005).

According to Butcher (2011), OER can be found through the use of specialised search engines such as:

- Global Learning Objects Brokered Exchange
- Folksemantic
- DiscoverEd
- Creative Commons
- OpenCourseWare Consortium

OER can also be found in repositories and directory sites such as:

- OpenLearn
- MIT OCW
- China Open Resources for Education (CORE)
- Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA)
- Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT)
- OER Commons
- Commonwealth of Learning (COL)
- OER Africa

The users of the above repositories and directory sites are however expected to have the necessary skills for searching, evaluating and selecting the relevant OER. Users must be able to distinguish between the requirements of each type of licence. They should possess the skills required to adapt the materials for personal use and release the adapted materials for use by others. The users should also be able to knit together the materials into a coherent course (Glennie, 2013).

THE PROJECT REPORT

The report is divided into various sections. The problem and rationale for the project are first identified and clarified, and this is followed by a statement of the purpose of the project. Next the processes that were followed are described; followed by lessons from the project as well as the challenges that were experienced during the project. This section is followed by recommendations for individuals and institutions who wish to embark on such projects in the future, and the report ends with a brief conclusion.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

- It has been brought to the attention of heads of departments in the Faculty of Humanities at the university that the work of lecturers is complicated by the inability of students to write in the prescribed manner, to properly reference their work and to understand the issues surrounding plagiarism and its consequences. Other challenges identified by the participants include students' inability to source materials for their work, construct an argument, develop a proposal, and fully comprehend the ethical considerations and guidelines for conducting research. Consequently, assignments, proposals, dissertations, and theses that do not meet the basic expected standards are being submitted. Compounding the problem is the fact that some of the modules that are taught are offered to large numbers of students.
- The assumption of the team was that an online course on academic research writing, where there is guidance and the opportunity for self-assessment, would serve the needs of the students and ultimately reduce the need for continuous correction of mediocre work submitted by students. The course could also be used as a resource, to which students could be referred in order to do practice exercises. Lecturers could then spend less time on technical corrections of written assignments. Students could also be instructed to scan their work to detect plagiarism and attach a report as evidence that they have done so before submission. An online resource could ensure that, from their first year in university, the students have access to appropriate guidance that is be readily available as and when it is required. The students will be empowered at the same time to become independent learners.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

During the conceptualisation phase the broad aims of the project were discussed. The aims of the project agreed upon by the participants were to:

- Address the challenges of academic writing among undergraduate and postgraduate students in the humanities
- Assist students to attain the knowledge and master the skills needed for academic writing, to assist them with their projects, dissertations and theses

PHASES OF THE PROJECT

During the planning discussions the team members were identified. There were six lecturers, an IT specialist and a co-ordinator. The project was divided into phases, namely, conceptualisation, design, production, piloting, and evaluation.

The conceptualisation phase aimed to provide opportunities for the team members to meet, understand the challenges, share ideas and jointly agree on the goals and objectives of the project. This phase of the project served to map the scope of the course and outline the main topics as well as the content of these topics. The design and the flow of the content were also discussed and agreed upon during this phase. The culmination of this conceptualisation phase was the development of a project plan.

The design phase focused on the acquisition of learning resources to suit the content of each of the identified topics. Learning activities, practice exercises and assessment strategies were to be identified and adapted for the relevant sections and subsequently integrated. Next was the production phase, when the learning resources were to be digitised and illustrations and graphics were to be created. In addition, videos, programmes, and package simulations were to be created during this period. The formatting, editing and evaluation of learning resources was intended to be the concluding activity for this phase. The implementation phases involved deploying the course on Moodle and evaluating the course after piloting. Finally, training would be provided for selected members of staff, who would then be able to provide support for the users. Table 1 below summarises the proposed project and time frame.

Table 1: Activities and time frame

Expected duration	Activities
	CONCEPTUALISATION PHASE
1 day	Introduce the Faculty of Arts team and team leader
	Project introductory presentation and workshop
	Identify and jointly agree on the goals and objectives of the project

Expected duration	Activities
1 day	Map the scope of the course and outline of topics
	Design the flow of content
1 day	Develop project plan
	DESIGN PHASE
1 week	Acquisition of learning resources
1 week	Selection of learning activities and assessment strategies
1 week	Integration and design of learning tasks and learning activities
	PRODUCTION PHASE
6 weeks	Digitise learning resources
	Create illustrations and graphics
	Format, edit and evaluate learning resources
	Create videos, programmes and package simulations
	IMPLEMENTATION PHASE
1 week	Deploy course on Moodle
	Evaluate course (piloting)
	CONCLUSION
1 week	Evaluation of course
	Training and support
	Handover of course

Conceptualisation phase

Deciding on the scope of the course involved lengthy discussions. However, having earlier agreed on the target and the aims of the project made it easier for the team to agree that the project had not set out to be a research methodology course per se, but to be a course that functions as a resource for students and other

individuals who find the writing of academic and research reports challenging. The team agreed that the scope of the course should include the following main units:

- Academic discourse
- Developing scientific arguments
- Writing process
- Research report writing process
- Plagiarism
- Referencing

Outline of content

Each of the proposed units for the course was presented for deliberation as to what should constitute the content. It was agreed that the outlines for each unit stated below (Table 2) should be a guide. The developers of the content for each unit could include subtopics they deemed suitable in their first draft, provided that such was not outside the agreed scope. Any inclusion would however have to be approved by the project team. The developers were instructed that the broad content of the course for each unit was to include the following:

Table 2: Outline of proposed content for each unit

Unit 1: Academic discourse	**Unit 2: Developing scientific arguments**
Language for academic discourse	Distinguishing between facts and opinions
Structure of academic texts	Inductive reasoning
Content in academic texts	Deductive reasoning
Academic literacy	Logical connectors
Communication skills – style and register	
Specialised texts such as narrative, descriptive, expository/factual, persuasive/argumentative	
Unit 3: Writing process	**Unit 4: Research report writing process**
Generate ideas	Research proposal
Gather information	Literature review
Synthesise structure	Methodology and ethics
Initial draft	Results and findings
Revise, edit, finalise	Present an argument
	Contribution to knowledge
	Recommendations and conclusion

Unit 5: Plagiarism	Unit 6: Referencing
Types of plagiarism	General Information on Referencing
Implications	Importance
Avoiding plagiarism	Tips on Noting Sources
Checking	Referencing Styles
Staying safe	MLA (Modern Language Association)
	APA (American Psychological Association)
	CMS (Chicago Manual of Style)

Course content structure

Various course structures were presented for consideration. These were discussed and a final course structure for the project was arrived at. For uniformity in presentation of the content, the structure below was the agreed course structure for the project during the development of draft content:

- Introductory statement
- Unit objectives
- Content of the unit
- Study activity and/or group work
- Self-study activities
- Unit summary
- Assessment task
- Alternative resources and/or further reading

Content development schedule

Table 3 below is the division of the content development per team member as agreed by the team.

Table 3: Task distribution

Participants	Task
A	Academic discourse
B	Developing scientific arguments
C	Writing process
D	Research report writing process
E	Plagiarism
F	Referencing

Timeline

It was suggested that the pace with which the project had started should not be relaxed; therefore the final submission was set at 12 weeks from the date of commencement. The team agreed that the deadline for the submission of the first drafts and their initial thoughts on the content should be two weeks. This date was set in order to make meaningful progress with the project relatively rapidly.

Once the course content and outline was agreed on, the next step was to give further support to team members in terms of understanding and sourcing OER. There was an introductory workshop to share knowledge about OER, and to discuss the scope and possibilities for use thereof. The introductory workshop also provided a forum for sharing ideas and motivating participants. Below are the main aspects that were covered the workshop:

- Introduction to OER
- Aims of project
- Importance and value
- Finding OER
- Important sources
- Acknowledging sources
- Creating and sharing

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Once the preliminary planning, workshops and meetings were completed, the participants were to work on their individual sections and submit these to the co-ordinator for comments and suggestions for revision. This aspect proved especially difficult, as some members of the team simply wrote their sections in textbook fashion and submitted these. In some cases, only a paraphrasing of the recommended texts, or abridged versions that were no different from the original work, were submitted. These contributions lacked imagination and did not meet the interactive, self-study requirements discussed during the initial workshops.

Furthermore, the co-ordination of the project became problematic at this stage, because some of the participants did not comply with the agreed time frame for the submission of their drafts. When submissions were eventually made the drafts

did not meet the required structure and content (as described above). It was at this point that it became apparent that some of the participants themselves had difficulty with the use of ICT and OER, having only a basic knowledge of these tools. The institution also did not have internet access available to staff. Hence the participants had to fund access to the internet themselves. The participants were also not given time off from their normal duties to perform these additional activities. The implication of this is that institutional support and commitment to this kind of project is essential.

It became apparent that the pressures and demands of the project were proving to be too much for the participants. In terms of planning and with the benefit of hindsight, the time given to the participants was not feasible and probably meant having to prioritise their duties, which resulted in the project losing out. However, having observed the process adopted by other institutions and their commitment to supporting similar projects, the institution in question now appears to be ready to support the team so that they can successfully complete the project.

LESSONS FROM THE PROJECT

The project had a number of positive and negative aspects. It is hoped that this report will lead to some of the negative results being avoided in future projects.

The project provided an opportunity for:

- Collaboration on the use of OER
- Raising awareness about the benefits of using OER
- Broadening the user base for these resources
- Being proactive about creating OER to meet the specific needs of those involved
- Increasing the numbers of those who could also create OER for others to use

The challenges encountered that hindered the success of the project include:

- Lack of adequate access to the internet, exacerbated by irregular power supply
- Lack of commitment to the project by some participants due to the pressures of their workload and little familiarity with OER
- Possible lack of motivation and incentives
- Lack of flexibility in terms of timing and unreasonable timelines

The anticipated commencement-to-completion period for the project was 12 weeks. This now appears to have been overly optimistic, as similar projects embarked upon more recently took between 6 and 12 months. A typical example is the Bihar India Project (Rani, Mishra, Moore & Dheeraj , 2013).

Since the initiation of the project, awareness about OER has increased. Guidelines for engaging in such projects are now available, as are samples that could be adapted for use. More institutions are now involved as well. Even though the project has not been completed, despite 12 months having elapsed since conceptualisation, there is renewed hope of completion, since the process of training for the participants has now been initiated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that open educational resources are here to stay, and need to be understood by individuals and institutions alike. Based on the experiences reported and reflected on in this paper, the following recommendations could make future projects and collaborations more feasible:

- Awareness among lecturers regarding the nature and the use of OER has to be raised
- Basic computer/internet skills have to be taught and encouraged among academics
- Regular local/regional workshops and training in OER uses, production, and support systems need to be organised, so as to ensure that those in remote areas have access
- Mentorship programmes and follow ups should be initiated by the promoters of OER

CONCLUSION

The value of OER is not in doubt and the increase in the use thereof over the last decade is an indication that those who are not on board will be left behind. Both open and distance learning institutions and mainstream institutions of higher learning need to embark on a re-orientation campaign to ensure that both old and new members of their faculties are aware of the potential uses of OER. The fact that one project has stalled does not mean that the next will not be successful. The

lessons learnt from this project can be heeded and applied to ensure that similar projects do not fall prey to the same mistakes in future. Finally, academics need to develop enthusiasm for new knowledge and be conversant with the opportunities provided by new technology.

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