



IntroOpenEd 2007: an experience on Open Education by a virtual community of teachers

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Keywords: OER, Open Education, online community, informal learning

Abstract

In Fall 2007 David Wiley, professor at Utah State University held a course about Open Education. That time, however, Dr Wiley's course was followed by a rather unusual group of students. The Fall 2007 edition, in fact, was available to anybody, free of charge, all over the world. The only requisite required was the possession of a blog for the completion of the weekly assignments. The present paper, whose authors attended the course completing it successfully, is an account of the experience they had. It can be considered an innovating experience from many different viewpoints and can be regarded as an example of how the world of the formal education can meet the demands of the informal one, in the broader landscape of professional training and lifelong learning.

1 The “Introduction to Open Education” course

The “Introduction to Open Education” (OpenEd)¹ course is a formal undergraduate course by Utah State University (USA).

The instructor is David A. Wiley, Associate Professor of Instructional Technology and director of the Center for Open and Sustainable Learning (COSL), at Utah State University². Dr. Wiley is well known worldwide as an author in the research area of Learning Objects and Open content.

The novelty in the Fall 2007 edition of the course was the opportunity of attending the course free of charge, offered to anyone in the world. The only requirement was the availability of a blog, to be used to publish weekly posts on the various topics of the course.

The course could be attended in three different ways:

- *Credit*: students who needed credit had to sign up for an independent study at their university and find a supervisor to whom the instructor should send a grade at the end of the term;
- *Non-credit*: students could attend the course without any grading from the instructor. If they completed the course it was possible for them to get a certificate at the end of the experience saying that the course had been “successfully completed”;
- *Informal*: fully non-credit attendance of the activities.

The course objectives were:

- To give a firm grounding in the current state of the field of open education, including related topics like copyright, licensing, and sustainability;
- To help to locate open education in the context of mainstream instructional technologies like learning objects;
- To get thinking, writing, and dialoguing creatively and critically about current practices and possible alternative practices in open education;
- To be able to propose OER projects in the local context of each participant.

2 The course contents

The contents offered by the OpenEd course were focused on Open Educational Resources (OER) starting, however, from a wide perspective about researches onto the respect of human rights in the educational field, reflections about the opportunities and limits concerning the chance to gain free access to educational resources, and considerations about weaknesses and strengths of the OER movement. Furthermore, it included examples of good practices in

¹ The exact name is INST 7150 Introduction to Open Education, Fall 2007, the syllabus is on http://www.opencontent.org/wiki/index.php?title=Intro_Open_Ed_Syllabus

² <http://cosl.usu.edu/>

the OER, reflections from the rich literature on learning objects and hints about what can come to us with the future development of this movement.

According to the Wikipedia definition, OER constitutes a world widespread community, which aims to create a common cultural background in the educational field through the Internet and through the creation of really usable courses on the web, which should be under the conditions of being adaptable, improved and redistributed under open licenses. Open educational resources include:

- Learning contents: complete courses, materials for courses, modules, learning objects, papers;
- Instruments: software to support the creation, distribution, usage and improvement of learning contents, ranging from research to organization and including content and learning management systems, development instruments and online learning communities;
- Implementation of resources: licenses for intellectual property in order to promote free publication of materials, projecting principles and localization principles of contents.

3 The Italian group

In order to better understand how the Italian group participating to the OpenEd course gathered together and subsequently operated inside the course, a preamble is necessary: in January 2007 the Laboratorio di Tecnologie dell'Educazione (LTE) at the University of Florence³ set up a virtual community of students, former students, professionals and teachers whose main objective is supporting informal learning and professional training for those who are interested in educational technology. It has been named LTEver⁴ and is based on the Open Source software Elgg (Fini, 2007)⁵. Multiple blogs are the main elements in LTEver and it was just from the blog of one of its participants that some LTEver users heard of the OpenEd course and decided to attend it⁶. Meanwhile a dedicated community was activated inside LTEver.

In LTEver communities special spaces have been set up, designed to host discussions and resources on specific topics through shared blogs, community dedicated blogs and file sharing. As a matter of fact, it is a socially limited environment inside a broader collaborative one.

Based on informal networks of relationships through personal blogs and the LTEver community blog, the people involved in the course have played an active and proactive role contributing efficacious proposals to improve their

³ <http://www.scform.unifi.it/lte>

⁴ <http://www.lte-unifi.net/elgg>

⁵ <http://elgg.org>

⁶ The authors of this contribution are all LTEver users and promoters of an international community dedicated to Open Education.

own training experience, in a balanced union of informality and mutual commitment, typical of the communities of practice (Trentin, 2004). The group experienced what Wenger believes are the three basic principles of an effective community of practice (1998):

- Establishment of a 'joint venture', through the formation of a shared vision of problems and shared solutions, the negotiation of priorities among the members and the development of a common awareness;
- Mutual commitment on the basis of which the members interact and share the experience that is owned by the individual in order to feed cooperative learning;
- Presence of a shared repertoire represented by sets of knowledge, tools, methods and artifacts through which the collective knowledge is being conveyed and the memory of the community is being kept.

4 Carrying out the course

In the first week, the students had to cope with a wide range of materials concerning the topic of educational resources in their complex variety while the question of the right to education was introduced and discussed as a basic human right. The students were guided to think about educational issues such as the importance of educating young people living in developing countries. After sharing some perplexities due to the broadening perspective they were facing, the students clearly focused on the basic role that the OER can have in this context. The topics discussed entwined very closely with those about digital divide or OLPC initiatives (One Laptop Per Child)⁷.

In the following three weeks, dedicated to the analytical reading of documents by such international organizations as OECD (CERI, 2007), OLCOS (2007) and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Atkins *et al.*, 2007), the complexity of defining an OER came out in full.

The term OER refers to educational materials and resources offered freely and openly on the net for anyone to use for educational purposes in any educational context. However, an extended definition of the OER meets the needs to overcome the gap between the educational system and the requirements of our rapidly evolving society. Therefore, not only materials and resources are part of an OER but also best practices and new teacher-student relationships. According to an even more extended definition, OER refers to a new learning culture.

Subsequently, the course syllabus submitted a close examination of the OERs available. The outlook was quite diversified, from the centralized MIT approach, which offers course contents mainly through text format to the Rice

⁷ <http://laptop.org/>

University courses that allow anybody to edit contents for a course through the Connexions⁸ system.

During week 6 and 7 the attention focused on copyright, pointing out considerable differences with the Open Source software, mainly regulated by a GPL General Public License⁹ (Carrol, 2002; Pollock, 2007).

In week 8, the OE economic model was dealt with. Once again, it differentiates from the economic model of free software development. In the case of free software, the open source model comes first and then its derivations follow, whereas in the case of OER an economic model able to trigger a spontaneous and free growth similar to Open Source development is still to be found.

Week 9 focused on reflections about a writing task on the Elective readings suggested in the syllabus. There were eleven titles referring to three main themes: the problem of economic and cultural development in developing countries, the new phenomena and effects of the net upon economy and society, the restrictions imposed by copyright laws on the free development of culture. Week 9 also marked a break in the quick pace of weekly readings and activities, so that each student had more time to go on thinking and writing about his points of view on the chosen context of elective readings.

Moreover, week 9 represented a turning point because of the shift in methodology by the professor due to some suggestions from the students, as it has been described somewhere else in the present article.

Since week 9, some more weeks dedicated to reflections and cross-blogging have been included in the syllabus. Subsequently, week 10 focused on writing cross-comments on the elective reading posts, whereas week 11 was about the learning object topic, which provoked lively discussions revealing an interesting variety of thoughts and points of view.

In the end, during week 13 the question on the future of OER was asked, and in week 15, the last week, students had to give their feedback on the course and some personal suggestions. Whereas the appreciation of the course has been general and shared, the expectations about the future of OE have been quite cautious because of some institutional inertia to experience new procedures, which differ from the formal and conventional praxis centered on classes.

5 The collective interaction

As far as the development of the training process is concerned, three different phases took place in which the role of the collective interaction was a decisive factor:

- Creation of a starting process: the course teacher traced an outline of

⁸ <http://cnx.org/>

⁹ <http://www.gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html>

the training process to complete by the end of the course indicating its objectives, tools, materials and schedule. The syllabus was published on a wiki that was utterly available and open to the learners, even in its editing options. Therefore, integrations and changes to the structure of the course were allowed, for example some weekly assignments were changed to fit the needs of a group of learners.

- Emergence of the interactions: a group of participants, while completing the weekly assignments on their own blogs, shared their own ideas and experiences about the learning process that had been proposed and produced a wide and structured net of interactions with constructive functions and cooperative learning purposes. At a first stage, the organizational and didactic structure of the course indicated an individual learning modality for the reading and the working out of the reflections, while the collective interaction among the participants was postponed to a later time, with the stated objective to spur the learners to read the posts in the blogs of their colleagues, getting them to comment on one another. A podcast aggregator had been arranged, but it turned out to be not very functional to the needs of the participants as the references to the comments were not included while, as many learners pointed out, the discussions that sprang from the comments were even more interesting than the posts themselves.

- Restructuring of the process: the course instructor worked on the net of interactions produced by the group, received their stimuli and restructured the development of the course proposing a final version, modified and broadened on the basis of the learners' observations. At the end of the course, starting from the learning material produced by the participants, the teacher could have the opportunity to extrapolate a new pattern for the course to use in the following edition, in a constant process of spiral renewal.

By means of peer interaction, inside a conception of learning traditionally regarded as an individual and passive fruition of contents, as the course seemed to develop in the first phase, we moved on to something else, namely the notion of a learning environment in which the individual who learns changes and creates the learning materials by himself contributing to determine the collective educational experience and making both the traditional learning poles (author-reader) coincide. There was an alternation between moments of individual fruition and moments of collaboration that asked for the reading of the course participants' posts and the comments on the posts that each learner considered relevant. The discussions that sprang from this process turned into such a massive instrument of aggregation that they determined a strong motivation to work out a model of learning based on a constructivist style, which acquires a quite different formative value from a traditional distance course.

"We have moved from a conception of knowledge as a typically reticular

structure to the development of purely connective organizations and patterns, which establish a tight connection between contents and users, towards a more and more creative and collaborative dimension” (Pireddu, 2007).

6 The role of the community

The course was set up with a very open perspective. However, during the first eight weeks activities took place in a rather conventional way. The students read the assigned materials and blogged their own answers to the assigned questions. Therefore, apart from the delivery method, based on blog posts, the course appeared to be a kind of conventional e-learning course, with very little interaction among its participants. Probably, interaction lacked initially because of the very tight schedule.

This state of affairs caused a lot of discussion in the LTEver community of Open Education classmates, so that one of them wrote a pivoting post, the so called “Week X” post, to point out the weaknesses of the course. A broader discussion spread among the other classmates. The teacher proved to be really open-minded since he took part in the discussion and readjusted the syllabus according to the issues rose by the students.

The new syllabus let more time for cross reading and cross-blogging. Even the teacher had more time to comment on the students’ posts. The lesson taught by this occurrence is that, even in a markedly informal course, a sensible attitude of the teacher is crucial. The final group of students was smaller than the initial one of about fifty people, but it was still quite heterogeneous, being composed of college students, teachers and researchers. This final group turned out to be highly motivated since it followed the schedule of assignments regardless of the expectations in terms of final credits.

The Italian subgroup built itself around the Open Education community inside LTEver, which turned out to be a very effective place for discussion and problem sharing as well as a good scaffolding tool.

The Italian community as a collaborative work by means of the presentation tool available delivered the “wrap up” closing assignment from Google Docs. The initiative was a natural outcome of the previous teamwork that had influenced all the course life, being appreciated by the teacher as well as by the other classmates.

“Why the Italians?” wondered some of the participants. Of course, we do not think that general statements about nationality can be made here. Maybe the reason is simply because all the Italian participants already had some experience about online collaborative tools and had the opportunity to operate into a succeeding community, supported by an effective technological system.

7 Conclusion

The OpenEd course can be well considered a case study for several reasons:

- The nature of the course. It was a formal course, offered by a formal institution (Utah State University), but it was managed and released as an informal learning initiative. This could be a real opportunity for universities. In this way, they might open their courses at a very low cost. While, not only in Italy, discussions grow on the role of higher education institutions in lifelong learning¹⁰, this is a possibility to be closely considered;
- The course contents. They were of special interest particularly in Italy where, for the moment, there are no significant OER initiatives, anyway they are not comparable to others that are active abroad;
- The carrying out of the course. It offers a working example of a new way for professional development courses and lifelong learning. In this case, the professional community worked at different levels, almost all of them mediated by the technological system that supports the community life: 1) information; it was through the community that participants learnt about the opportunity of attending the course; 2) decision-making; because of emulation and reciprocal encouragement a group of users decided to enroll, creating a specialized sub-community; 3) scaffolding; participants supported one another, both in the cognitive and the emotional aspects, during the course.

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