Open Educational Resources and the Role of the University

Open Educational Resources (OER) have become an unstoppable development since MIT started publishing educational resources online as OpenCourseWare (OCW) in 2001. Four years ago, the OCW Consortium (http://www.ocw-consortium.org/) was founded, and more that 250 institutions have since joined. The OCW Consortium is the largest international OER organization, but there are many other OER initiatives and organizations. At present, hundreds of higher education institutions worldwide produce, reuse, and remix educational materials. The fact that educational content is becoming more widely available—free and online—leads to the question: What role will colleges and universities play in the future? Some in higher education fear that when institutions “give away” their content, the only added value they have left is certification, turning colleges and universities from institutions of knowledge into educational certification factories.

OER and OCW

OER are educational materials offered online, freely and openly for educators, students, and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning, and research. Colleges and universities produce and use OER for various reasons. An important reason is a belief in open access—in the idea that information should be freely available to all. Higher education institutions are also looking for ways to meet the growing demand for education. As Georgetown University President John J. DeGioia recently stated: “There simply is not enough higher education, and we will never be able to close the gap through the kinds of infrastructure that have defined our past.” OER are seen as a part of the solution. Additional reasons for higher education institutions to be involved in OER are to enhance their educational reputation, to attract talented students and staff, to improve educational materials, and to find better ways to accommodate lifelong learners.

The Role of the University

The world’s first university—Bologna—was founded almost one thousand years ago. Universities may have changed over the years, but their role has changed little: (1) provide knowledge content, (2) offer a learning community that can help students understand the meaning of this content, and (3) certify students who prove that they have mastered this knowledge. OER have an influence on each of these three functions.

The University as a Content Provider

The Internet has changed the information role of universities. Whereas universities used to have a knowledge monopoly in higher education, this is no longer the case. First of all, the Internet makes information available to everyone who is interested. Building on this development, OER and OCW were set up, offering information in the form of educational materials, presenting bits of information in a coherent way, and therefore making the learning process easier. Colleges and universities are still an important place for developing and spreading knowledge, but they now share their role with many other institutions and individuals.

The University as a Learning Community

Many of us find it hard to believe that education can be effective without the face-to-face relationship between a teacher and a student. Those in my generation—who grew up learning face-to-face from our parents, family, teachers, and friends—see the Internet as a complement to traditional learning. For children today, however, the distinction between face-to-face and virtual is far less distinct. Children today grow up with computers and the Internet and may value their online friends as much as their real-life ones. As their social habits change, they may acquire different ways of learning too.

So where does virtual learning stand? How far has it developed, and is it effective? OER started from the supply side, with colleges and universities publishing the content they have to offer. Of the 250 OCW Consortium members, for example, most are publishers of information; very few are users. This means that up to now, OER have been at most an addition to traditional education. But recently a number of interesting experiments have started to focus on the user side and the social system around OER. One recent development is Peer 2 Peer University (http://p2pu.org/en/). P2PU is based on the idea of connecting people who want to learn something with people who volunteer to share their knowledge online. If the student has acquired the knowledge or skills he or she set out to learn, the volunteer teacher can give the student a badge. OpenStudy (http://openstudy.com/) is another interest-
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ing example. It is a virtual learning community that enables thousands of self-learners to study subjects (e.g., mathematics, physics, or finance) together online. In OpenStudy, the teacher is not present, and students help each other.

Some types of virtual learning methods are as effective as live teaching, perhaps even more effective. OER or other forms of digital learning may, however, not be effective for all types of education. For example, OER will not easily replace a lab practical or social training. It may be more useful for acquiring knowledge than skills or attitudes. Regardless, the role of the university as a learning place will most certainly be affected by the development of online learning.

The University as a Certification Body

If information is available freely for all and the learning community can be found online, some in the higher education community fear that universities will increasingly become certification factories. Students will study online and for free, after which they will shop around for a higher education institution that is willing to test them to a given standard and—if they pass—provide them with an appropriate diploma.

It is unclear to me why this is seen as a threat. Online learning offers the opportunity to teach many more students than we do now: a university could have 1 million students instead of 10,000. Lifelong learners who find it difficult to take part in on-campus courses could learn online instead. The business case for universities would be different, of course, forcing them to change from a system of tuition fees to one of course-completion or certification fees. But as long as colleges and universities have a thorough system of testing and provide high-reputation certified diplomas, offering online learning might even be an advantage, allowing more time for other institutional work, such as research.

The real threat is if colleges and universities lose their monopoly on higher education certification. For example, if P2PU offers diplomas like any traditional university but for a lower fee or no fee at all, why would a student pay a high-tuition fee? The answer is quality and reputation. Students attend a university not only because they want to learn something but also because a higher education diploma helps them with their future career. The higher the reputation of the certifying institution, the more valuable the diploma will be. In the future, students will be less willing to pay for tuition at an institution with a poor reputation, preferring to attend a free, virtual university. Students will continue to pay, however, for a diploma or certificate from the best institutions. These diplomas prove reliably what they have learned and at which level, providing a valuable ticket for a future career.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities have no reason to view OER as a threat. On the contrary, OER can help institutions provide higher education to rapidly increasing numbers of students and lifelong learners. Traditional colleges and universities, with their experience and reputation, are in a good position to further develop online teaching, testing, learning communities, and certification. Those that produce high-quality knowledge, teaching, and students have little to fear, and much to gain, from Open Educational Resources.

Notes


2. See, for example, Wim Veen’s description of how the Internet changes young people’s social as well as learning patterns: Wim Veen and Ben Vrakking, Homo Zappiens: Growing Up in a Digital Age (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

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