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A Case for Open Educational Resources (OER) for Liberation: Leveraging Librarians and Library Skills

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Abstract

This paper will establish the case for Open Educational Resources (OER) for Liberation for Ireland, and the leveraging of librarians in pursuit of creating a database of Open resources for public good and public liberation within the context of post-neutrality librarianship. The researchers have conducted a literature review of existing OER initiatives and emerging areas of Open Education. The review is underpinned by the philosophical and pedagogical motivations of Open, with a keen focus on equity, access and accessibility. Through this research, it has been found that there is a strong framework available for establishing a national OER initiative, and that librarians have many skills which can be leveraged and utilized in combination with OER in order to facilitate knowledge creation. Further study is proposed to help assess Ireland's current level of involvement with OER and the feasibility of creating a public OER database for liberation.

Keywords

OER, Open Educational Resources, Liberation, Social Change, Librarians, Ireland

Definitions

Open Educational Resources (OER): Open Educational Resources (OER) are learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open license, that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution by others. (UNESCO, 2019)

Open License: Open license refers to a license that respects the intellectual property rights of the copyright owner and provides permissions granting the public the rights to access, re-use, re-purpose, adapt and redistribute educational materials. (UNESCO, 2019)

Introduction

This paper will establish the case for Open Educational Resources (OER) for Liberation for Ireland and the leveraging of librarians in pursuit of the aim to have a database of Open Educational Resources for public good and public liberation within the context of post-neutrality librarianship.

Higher education is in a state of flux and has a systemic impact beyond learning, promoting civic engagement, equality and social inclusion (Barnett, 1997). As Clapp (1946) found, librarianship is questioned, and the roles thrown into flux with the advent of new technology. Nearly a century later, we are once again facing the existential threat of becoming obsolete in the face of new technology. Once again, our role must pivot and change.

Modern Librarianship exists in a post-neutral state, and the acknowledgement of this fact can be seen in texts by Jennifer A. Ferretti (2018) and Gibson et al. (2017) which argue that neutrality is both a myth, and that upholding that myth is detrimental to carrying out the duties of librarianship. The argument has also been made that librarianship has indeed never been neutral, that “every decision made about collection development and maintenance [...] as well as countless other aspects of library management involves people taking sides informed by experience, bias, and thoughtful research,” (Elizabeth, 2020).

Being a librarian is an active, not a passive role. This idea ought to be embraced, especially in an increasingly globalized world. It has become increasingly evident that many people in our society do not have appropriate information or lack critical thinking skills in order to find the correct information. Institutions, funders, government and so on all look for demonstrations of the library value and each have their own agendas, therefore librarians should be innovative and assess local needs.

Academic librarians have found that OER can fulfil student needs in various ways (Caswell, Henson, Jensen and Wiley, 2008). The largely unknown and uncharted territory of OER can be intimidating to some, while exciting for others (Walz, 2017). The term openness is both widely described and contested as an evolving concept with multiple dimensions and layers (Cronin, 2017; Skidmore & Provida, 2019).

OER have international support from the highest bodies - UNESCO General Conference at its 40th session in November 2019 made a Recommendation on OER that was unanimously adopted, that supports the creation, use and adaptation of inclusive and quality OER, enhanced cooperation within the OER community, developing policy, and supporting open teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2019).

OER have a range of advantages: expanded access to learning, scalability, support for lifelong and non-formal learning, replacing costly course materials, up-to-date information which can easily be made current, enhancement of course content, showcasing of innovation and talent within the institution, and continual improvement of resources (Braddlee & Vanscoy, 2019; Cronin, 2019; IFLA, 2020; Kruger & Abramovich, 2019; National Forum, 2019; Skidmore & Provida, 2019). OER are increasingly important for education and have proven that they provide democratic and equitable access to knowledge (IFLA, 2020; UNESCO, 2019).

However, OER are not challenge free, with some examples being: copyright and legal issues, quality concerns, intellectual property and ownership concerns, lack of recognition or reward, discoverability issues, technological barriers to use (access and skills), and accessibility issues (Cronin, 2019; Czerniewicz & Rother, 2018; IFLA, 2020; Kruger & Abramovich, 2019; Skidmore & Provida, 2019).

Librarians have skills and knowledge in the areas of copyright, licensing, intellectual property rights, quality standards and ethics, discoverability, storage and accessibility are necessary for successful OER implementation and use, advocacy, support and management, publishing, and production (Braddlee & Vanscoy, 2019; IFLA, 2020; Kruger & Abramovich, 2019; Santiago & Ray, 2020). Librarians could also be leveraged to use the institutional repository as a place in which OER can be deposited and shared. Risquez et al. (2020) proposes the institutional repository as a home for OER, although the study found that repository managers did not feel that institutional repositories were necessarily the best fit to host OER. Santos-Hermosa, Estupinyà, Nonó-Rius, París-Folch, & Prats-Prat (2020) found that most OER were held by institutions in dedicated repositories as opposed to hybrid repositories that contain a mix of both OER and research.

OER should be de-institutionalized and embraced by the general populace. We need a dedicated space for public OER, and these OER should be for change, for liberation, for good. We need a collection of resources that can give our citizens the information they need to grow, to foster and to excel. The possible list is endless. This is outreach, this is bringing information and information skills to the people in a new and sustainable way. OER present a unique opportunity as an emerging and equitable way to transfer knowledge and have yet to be rigidly defined as one thing or another.

The methodology is a literature review of similar OER initiatives globally and emerging areas of Open education. The literature review is underpinned by the philosophical and pedagogical motivations of Open, with a keen focus on equity, access and accessibility. Literature was sought in the English language only, although a global perspective was the aim.

OER literature covers a wide breath of topics and angles, and this research will mainly focus on the possibilities and case studies associated with this emerging area of education. Centralized OER projects were sought, as it is envisioned that OER for Liberation would not be an output of an academic institution outright, although they may provide services.

The literature review will focus on post-neutrality librarianship, three OER initiatives (national, continental, and international), and a final section on OER, COVID19; access; and accessibility. A section on proposed further study follows.

Post-Neutrality Librarianship

Librarianship needs to fully engage with its non-neutral existence in order to serve the needs of its community and to uphold the principles of librarianship. This can be achieved by acting as a steward, not a servant, to your community. Where a servant's mission "is solely defined by community, organization, or institution you serve" (Lankes, 2016, p. 19), the steward takes an active role in knowledge facilitation where "the worth of professionals is their values and perspectives," (Lankes, 2016, p. 19). The librarian's viewpoint is valued as a tool to aid in the collation and dissemination of knowledge. This stewardship model, proposed by R.D Lankes in *The New Librarianship Field Guide*, states that the mission of a steward-librarian is "about making things better, and therefore they must have a belief in what is better" (Lankes, 2016, p. 20). How 'better' is defined is influenced by a multitude of factors, from the needs of the librarian's community, to the governance of their collection, and by their own held principles.

Librarians are suited to this stewardship role as the community they work in already sees their position as highly credible; "You are not a neutral resource to your community – you are a trusted resource" (Lankes, 2016, p.69). Even if a librarian aims to act as a neutral force to the community that they operate in, whether that is a library or another kind of workplace, that same community already regards them as an authority of their collection and cedes to their judgement when it comes to sourcing information. Embracing post-neutrality involves acknowledging that patrons already treat their librarians as such.

In the context of this proposal, it is essential to apply post-neutral thinking. The nature of OER for liberation is such that librarians must decide what form liberation takes in their community. This requires understanding how their community is disadvantaged, and how their resources can be best applied to uplift patrons. This also involves using their own judgement to choose what OER should be made available as well as who should make those OER. This judgement links to what Branum posits is the responsibility of a librarian; "to fill information deficiencies and bring knowledge to the masses," (2008, p.2). Branum also argues that this responsibility is "inherently political," (2008, p.2); the decision to create a platform for open education resources cannot be neutral as it requires the librarian to deliberately choose the types of information to include.

The core values of librarianship that inform this proposal, such as “public good, social responsibility, and democracy,” (Gibson et al. 2017, p.3), must also be considered as non-neutral. The definition of a public good and the depth of a social responsibility are informed by the research, experience and training of the people who are charged with carrying them out. If we consider OER as a public good, and the distribution of OER as a librarian’s social responsibility, then choosing what material would benefit the public must be made by librarians. In this way, this project cannot engage with the myth of neutral librarianship. Instead, it will acknowledge the responsibility of choice that comes with collecting and distributing OER and embrace the aim of operating as a principled and active public good.

We should reconsider traditional assumptions about the nature of knowledge, especially in the context of the world today. Hipkins, Reid & Bull (2010) state that the wider political contexts need to be addressed: rethink connections between pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, rethink ‘equity’, rethink competencies and rationale.

Existing OER Initiatives: A Review

When aiming to create a project the size of what is being proposed, it is necessary to study OER initiatives of a similar scope in order to assess how they work. Studying these initiatives gives an insight into the role they play in their communities, the stated missions that they carry out and the principles that guide them. To that end, this section will look at three OER initiatives, national, continental, and international, in order to build a comparative idea of functionality.

The initiatives featured here have been chosen on the basis that the researchers believe them to embody a core mission of librarianship, that is, “improving society through facilitating knowledge creation,” (Lankes, R.D, 2016, p.19). OER initiatives in general strive to encourage and share the process of knowledge creation, but this is more often than not done on an individual institutional level. For example, the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) has a robust set of resources available to enable OER creation. This includes a primer of OER, a production workflow chart, as well as access to the current OER that NUIG is producing (NUIG, 2019). It is a clear and effective introduction to creating OER. However, it is designed to be used by NUIG staff and students. The OER produced can be accessed universally but only those associated with NUIG can contribute to this database.

Understandably, this is the route that many OER initiatives take. If these initiatives start within higher education institutions, they must demonstrate their value to stakeholders in order to maintain themselves. As such, the majority of the material within these OER collections will be concerned with materials produced by and at the higher education institution. However, the initiatives that this section will look at encompass many of the resources produced by these higher education institutions as well as OER from other sources. This level of scope embodies the librarianship principle of making improvements to society as a whole and coincides with the aim of the project this paper proposes.

On a national level, MERLOT, the OER project first established in 1997 by California State University, will be examined. MERLOT was developed in order to distribute “tools to enable the formation of communities engaged in building shared knowledge bases of learning materials” (MERLOT, 2019) and although it started as a project for CSU, it expanded to include “twenty-three (23) systems and institutions of higher education” (MERLOT, 2019) by 2000. This

collaboration has created a collection of tens of thousands of OER items. The focus of this collection is on a variety of disciplines from the Arts to workforce development and any member can contribute material. Members do not have to be affiliated with any higher education institution, and can register themselves in a variety of roles, including as an independent learner.

On a continental level, OER Africa, an initiative established in 2008, stated that their mission is to support “vibrant and sustainable African education systems and institutions that play a critical role in building and sustaining African societies and economies through free and open development and sharing of common intellectual capital,” (OER Africa, 2021). Their current work focuses on training higher education staff in the skills and competencies needed to practice OER in their institutions. As well as this, OER Africa provides toolkits for developing OER, OER policies implemented throughout Africa, and a collection of OER courseware. This collection focuses “on Agriculture, Foundation Skills, Health and Teacher education where we have a wealth of OER course materials that have been developed for the African context” (OER Africa, 2021) and is aggregated mainly from higher education partners of the initiative.

On an international level, the OER Foundation was established in 2009 in New Zealand and “is an independent, not-for-profit organization that provides international networking and support for educational institutions, educators and learners to achieve their strategic objectives through Open Education,” (OER Foundation, 2020). They focus on implementation and participation in other OER initiatives, such as the New Zealand Centre for Open Education Practice and the UNESCO OER Dynamic Coalition, as well as maintaining resources like WikiEducator and the OERu network (OER Foundation, 2020). The collections that the foundation collates are not available directly from them but through the initiatives that they host. For example, WikiEducator displays in-progress OER projects and the OERu network features Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Higher education institutions make up the majority of the contributors to these collections, however, it is possible for independent learners to initiate OER projects.

The threads that tie the initiatives discussed above together are three-fold. The primary focus of all three initiatives is on higher education materials; there is an emphasis on policy creation and implementation; and the collection and categorization of their materials are indicative of the

application of library skills and principles. Examining these threads helps to build a framework for the project this paper proposes.

The wealth of higher education materials hosted in the collections of the three initiatives speaks to their origins. MERLOT in particular started from and remains under the jurisdiction of California State University, and both OER Africa and the OER Foundation have higher education institutions as collaborators and partners. As discussed above, it is understandable that the majority of materials would come from contributors acquainted with higher education, and that the structure of these initiatives would be modelled after similar projects from those sources. However, this focus on these types of materials also demonstrates one of the underlying principles behind OER initiatives- the right to an education. MERLOT was started in order “to provide users [...] with a wealth of services and functions that can enhance their instructional experience,” (MERLOT, 2019); OER Africa aims to “enhance teaching and learning” (OER Africa, 2021); and the OER Foundation has the lofty goal “to build a parallel learning universe” (OER Foundation, 2020). Giving willing learners the means to access open educational resources is the guiding basis of any OER initiative. This is also a leading principle of librarianship. Granting access to myriad forms of educational material – from MOOCs to newspaper archives – and “improving society through facilitating knowledge creation,” (Lankes, 2016, p.19) is the primary mission of librarianship. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares the right to an education, also states that when possible “Education shall be free,” (1948). By providing open access to expansive collections of educational material, OER initiatives abide by this article.

Among the three initiatives examined here, there is an emphasis on networking and policymaking. At the level of oversight that the initiatives work at, this is both a necessity and an opportunity. It is necessary as operating at national, continental, and international levels incentivizes fostering connections and communication. A network that encompasses a country or several countries needs to be able to maintain contact with all the areas it oversees. However, this is also an opportunity as the networking skills that these initiatives use can function as educational tools in order to teach learners that use the initiatives how to develop their own networking skills. Similarly, with policymaking, assembling policy for creating OER resources for use by the initiative can serve as frameworks for learners looking to create their own OER.

The information MERLOT provides on their policies and practices (2019) also works as a guide for contributors when creating or submitting material to the collection. OER Africa collates the OER policy of country-specific initiatives (2021), and the OER Foundation contributes to New Zealand and UNESCO-based policy committees (2020). In this way, these initiatives can develop further OER outside of a higher education environment. By drawing from differing types of experience and training, a variety of OER can be created in order to benefit learners.

The final thread being reviewed is that of the library skills being used in the creation and maintenance of these initiatives. These skills are not exclusive to librarianship but with their implementation, alongside the principles of knowledge facilitation and ensuring access to learning, it can be demonstrated that librarianship is highly suited to the pursuit of OER initiatives. The search system used on MERLOT allows users to filter by material type, material quality, intended audience, technical format, upload date, and more (MERLOT, 2019). OER Africa defines its search by resource type and theme/subject (OER Africa, 2021). On OER Foundation's main website, there is no direct search function, however WikiEducator divides its searching by content pages, multimedia, help and project pages and discussions (WikiEducator, 2021). These filtering systems and layers of categorization comply with one of the American Library Association's core competencies of librarianship, that is being able to understand and use "the systems of cataloging, metadata, indexing, and classification standards and methods used to organize recorded knowledge and information," (ALA, 2009, p.3). Similarly, another competency that was touched on earlier is that of a librarian's ability to understand the role they play in "the lifelong learning of patrons," (ALA, 2009, p.4). The discussion of these three initiatives has shown their dedication to ensuring continuous learning for their users.

As a result of studying these initiatives, the researchers can surmise that the creation of an OER initiative is rooted in a dedication to enabling education; that multiple sources and disciplines should be considered as contributors to an initiative; and that the application of librarianship competencies in a non-library environment aid in the maintenance and further development of OER projects. Although the initiatives examined here differ from the proposed project of this paper at first glance, their foundational principles and operational methods serve as a framework of good practice that can be learned from. The aim of the proposed project is also to advance the scope of what an OER initiative is capable of, and examining existing peers provides a

comparative to work with. This review process has demonstrated the value in examining functionality and lays a strong foundation for the proposed project of this paper.

OER, COVID19, Access and Accessibility

The researchers believe that discussion of OER would not be complete without mentioning their impressive uptake due to the COVID-19 global pandemic – fulfilling now online student needs as well as for sharing ever evolving COVID-19 information, with UNESCO praising OER for these feats (UNESCO, 2019; WHO, 2020). Additionally, COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated the ongoing electronic content crisis, access and accessibility issues. With costs of e-resources such as journals and eBooks rising unsustainably and putting libraries under serious financial strain (LAI, 2020) the creation and use of OER has become even more important.

There have been many new OER databases established due to the pandemic, The OER4COVID Initiative providing one such example, aiming to establish an online community support network for educators, assess local needs, share OER-enabled online courses, give examples of open technologies, curate openly licensed resources and to build capacity to design and develop OER for local needs (OER4Covid, 2020).

Inequality and accessibility are invaluable considerations (Atenas et al., 2019; Czerniewicz & Brown, 2013; Czerniewicz & Rother, 2018) nationally and internationally. We also need to consider unique Irish issues with access and accessibility. There are many faces to the Ireland of today. Unfortunately, for a small country, we have some who have the experience of inequality and lower socioeconomic circumstances (living on halting sites, living in Direct Provision, living in settled Travelling communities, those who are unhoused and so on). The COVID-19 pandemic has also illuminated the haves and have nots in this country and around the world in many ways.

Barriers to access are innumerable and can range from learning difficulties to physical technology access. People with any range of disability must be considered in the creation of OER, and a focus on accessibility is imperative (Skidmore & Provida, 2019). OER would need to be accessible, and a guide could be given to the volunteers to highlight the things they can do to help (for example, Accessibility THRIVES at TU Dublin). We must also consider the fact that digital strangers exist and that the confidence and skills required for use of technology are still lacking in some communities (Czerniewicz & Rother, 2018). Moreover, access to digital technology, the internet and the reliability of such are serious barriers to OER use and adoption in rural Ireland and lower socio-economic areas, as well as globally (UNESCO, 2019).

Proposed further study

Initially, plans for this research included a survey and semi-structured interviews with key Irish experts in OER to gain insights and develop survey questions. The survey which would be developed as a result of the literature review and interviews with Irish experts would then be disseminated to various Irish public bodies and public libraries, with the aim of performing statistical analysis on the data returned. The aim of the survey would be to assess the appetite for a public database of OER for social change, liberation and so on.

However, due to time constraints, this was not possible. The researchers believe that this research plan is feasible, and if given more time, possible. Further research using surveys as data collection would be ideal to find out what general attitudes are present in various Irish institutions. The survey could assess current levels of involvement of librarians in OER more accurately than interviews and could highlight institutions that are leading and those that are following or inactive in the area. Furthermore, the survey could assess attitudes to national approaches, or suggestions for local hosting, oversight and so on. Interviews should be broadened to include members of various identified case studies as well as global experts in OER. Through performing the literature review of the available initiatives worldwide, the researchers believe that there are many blueprints and examples that could be followed.

The researchers believe that much more research and innovation needs to happen in the area of accessible OER. The researchers feel we are barely scratching the surface of what is possible and are very interested in European and international developments in this area as a result. The researchers would like to see an examination of the various potential accessibility issues and means of removing barriers to use in any development of an OER database. It would be important to engage various Irish stakeholders who work in these areas, counselling, disabilities, minorities, as well as the Irish language for their invaluable insights.

The researchers feel very strongly that there should be more research done in this area in an Irish context. It would also be interesting to partner with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI, 2021) as they are engaged in designing and using OER for further education throughout Ireland. They engage with the population at large and will have keen insights that will be invaluable. ETBI also recognizes the significant potential of OER - particularly in the realm of

further education and training, and already links to various OER databases and collections from their website.

Fauconnier, Oates, Krida, Poundstone, Reshetnikov & Lih (2021) led a panel discussion on decolonizing metadata and how “open media platforms can help underrepresented communities' correct data about them in the metadata that accompanies the media files and why it would be important” (Fauconnier et al., 2021). The idea that underrepresented communities could correct their own record is something that could be incorporated into this proposal – the travelling community in Ireland are a community that immediately comes to mind. The act of looking within a community and not simply at the outside liberates us in knowledge. This is a natural fit for librarian skills, and librarians can help communities to get engaged in the process of discovery and transformation, developing information literacy and critical thinking skills.

Cardoso and Pinto (2021) proposed ‘REbirth on the Internet’ an online platform to support the unemployed and their use of digital social networks to strengthen new forms of active job search and promote employability, social integration and socialization in the Region of Madeira, Portugal (Cardoso and Pinto, 2021). The project has a strong pedagogical, social and solidarity basis, relying on voluntary work, in a social entrepreneurship spirit to help unemployed people take advantage of OER and social networks to improve their employability. Their framework is based on the principles of Open Education. The use of OER and a social feature (they use Facebook) allows for many outputs and means of engagement – surveys, texts, private messages, interactions, videos, images and events. They cleverly leverage the positives of social media and the shareability of the platform with the 5 R’s of OER: Retain, Reuse, Revise, Remix, Redistribute. The project has had demonstrated impact including greater equality in access to information, reinforcement of digital literacy and citizenship, greater social integration of the unemployed populations, and the possibility of replication in other contexts nationally and internationally. Creating the kind of discussion and dissemination of information that this project proposes will require something new, operating in a new paradigm. The ‘REbirth on the internet’ project (Cardoso and Pinto, 2021) is an interesting blueprint for the overall project.

Conclusion

OER have a wide range of applications and benefits as outlined in the literature review. OER have aided many situations amid COVID-19 and increasing cost of education. OER are praised by UNESCO for these feats, and they can even help several Sustainable Development Goals.

Librarians have many skills which can be leveraged and utilized in combination with OER, and the researchers argue that this is something which post-neutrality librarianship points them towards. Local needs and global needs are not so far removed anymore, and librarians have a duty to help knowledge seekers and lifelong learners.

The further study proposed would help assess the feasibility of a public OER database for liberation and librarian involvement. In addition, it would allow for partnership and collaboration with several Irish institutions, including Education and Training Boards Ireland, who the researchers believe will be influential on the project.

Ireland has a reputation as the land of saints and scholars and is just a small island in the North Atlantic, but we have changed the world from here. We are famous for many things from our hospitality to our National holiday St. Patrick's Day. Our reach is global, and we have made an impact. Let us continue in that tradition by creating something we can create and share with the world for social change, liberation, and the pursuit of knowledge.

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