

OERs: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Tony Bates's blog](https://edtechbooks.org/-ATz)
[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-ATz\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-ATz) on February 6, 2011.

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[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-mxV\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-mxV)

I increasingly fear that the open educational resources movement is being used as a way of perpetuating inequalities in education while purporting to be democratic. Some components of OERs also smack of hypocrisy, elitism and cultural imperialism (the bad), as well as failure to apply best practices in teaching and learning (the ugly). Despite my support for the idea of sharing in education (the good), these concerns have been gnawing away at me for some time, so after 42 years of working in open learning, I feel it's time to provide a critique of the open educational resources 'movement'.

This is prompted by several recent developments, such as the following publications and events:

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Walsh, T. (2011) [Unlocking the Gates: How and Why Leading Universities Are Opening Up Access to Their Courses](https://edtechbooks.org/-UCU) [https://edtechbooks.org/-UCU] Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press

For a brief review of this book and interview with the author, see: Kolowich, S. (2011) Online courseware's existential moment [Inside Higher Education](https://edtechbooks.org/-efz) [https://edtechbooks.org/-efz], February 3 (thanks to Clayton Wright for directing me to this).

For an interview with the author, see: [Unlocking the gates: interview with the author, Taylor Gates](https://edtechbooks.org/-oP) [https://edtechbooks.org/-oP], in [Higher Education Management Group](https://edtechbooks.org/-Pzd) [https://edtechbooks.org/-Pzd] blog, and a follow-up from Keith Hampson on industrial vs cottage industry OERs: [OERs: Conversation Notes](https://edtechbooks.org/-NJB) [https://edtechbooks.org/-NJB]

EDUCAUSE (2010) Open [Educause Review](https://edtechbooks.org/-zID) [https://edtechbooks.org/-zID], Vol. 45, No. 4 (special edition of open educational resources).

Openness as a value

No, I'm not going to attack motherhood. I agree 100% with David Wiley when he says in his [editorial in Educause Review](https://edtechbooks.org/-aAP) [https://edtechbooks.org/-aAP]:

'those educators who share the most thoroughly of themselves with the greatest proportion of their students are the ones we deem successful.....Education is sharing. Education is about being open.'

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However, this is a definition of ‘open learning’, and I will argue that ‘open learning’ is much broader and actually different from ‘open content’ or ‘open resources.’

For me, in an ideal world, education would be open to all, and would be free for everyone. However, we don’t expect teachers or university lecturers to work for nothing, so we immediately have a tension between the ideal and the reality of public education. There are costs in the system, and they have to be paid for, one way or another.

Furthermore, even if we accept the somewhat questionable notion that content is or will be free in a digital world, I will argue that open content on its own will not do much for open learning, because education is more than about delivering content, and it is in the ‘more’ where the real costs lie.

Lastly, the word ‘hypocrisy’ keeps coming to mind when I hear wealthy institutions pounding their chests for ‘giving away’ content that either the public through taxes or students through fees have already paid for, while their fees are such that they exclude all but the rich from their own programs and the accreditation that open content does not provide.

If you want to hear the justification for these arguments, I’m afraid you are going to have to read a long blog post (but at least its open).

What do we mean by ‘content’?

We need to be clear about what we mean by content.

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Content has many meanings. In digital terms we often describe content by its format: text, audio, video, or blogs, podcasts and YouTube. However, in educational terms, content is about facts, principles, ideas, beliefs, arguments, and descriptions or manifestations of processes, feelings and emotions. Academic content is often considered to be of a second order, one or more levels above direct experience: generalization, abstractions, rules and principles.

The public seems to swing wildly between believing that content is king and that content is now obsolete. The 'content is king' school argues for set curricula, prioritizing content into what is important and what is not important, standardized testing of recall or reproduction of content. The 'content is obsolete' school argues that it's all about competencies, skills, and doing. In fact we need both content, and the development of competencies and skills, which usually means applying content (as defined educationally above) to the real world, putting it into context and evaluating its appropriateness within a given context.

So we do need content in education. However, content is not static, nor a commodity like coal. Modern research into learning shows that content is best learned within context (situated learning), when the learner is active, and that above all, when the learner can actively construct knowledge by developing meaning and 'layered' understanding. In other words, content is not effectively learned if it is thought of as shovelling coal into a truck. Learning is a dynamic process that requires questioning, adjustment of prior learning to incorporate new ideas, testing of understanding, and feedback. These 'transactional' processes require a combination of

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personal reflection, feedback from an expert (i.e. the teacher or instructor) and even more importantly, feedback from and interaction with friends, family and fellow learners. The weakness with open content is that by its nature, at its purest it is stripped of these developmental, contextual and 'environmental' components that are essential for effective learning. In other words, it is just like coal, sitting there waiting to be loaded.

Now don't misunderstand me. Coal is a very valuable product. But it has to be mined, stored, shipped and processed. We are not paying enough attention in the discourse around open content to these contextual elements that turn it from a raw material into a useful output.

The good

Surprisingly, I'm having most difficulty with this part of the discussion. Is it good to share content? Yes, of course, but don't confuse it with learning. Open content is nothing more than a glorified digital public library, without the fines for being overdue. A library does not a degree make.

Ah, but what about getting access to the best and most up-to-date thinking on a subject, such as through MIT's OpenCourseware project? Well, at best it does no harm, but see below my criticisms under both the 'Bad' and the 'Ugly' headlines. Yes, I can certainly see the value if I was an instructor contemplating a new course or program, but I would be surprised if I would need to go to OpenCourseware to determine the curriculum. This will be influenced by a very wide range of factors, such as more recent research in

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publications, attendance at professional conferences, and my own research and that of close colleagues. The danger is that I would just import the material without fully understanding why it was originally chosen, what its limitations are, and then I would be in difficulties fielding questions from students. However, as a resource for helping me define what I want to teach, yes, open content is definitely helpful.

However, for me, the two main reasons for using open content are as follows

- by students, in a learner-centered teaching approach that focuses on students accessing content on the Internet (and in real life) as part of developing knowledge, skills and competencies defined by the instructor, or (for advanced learners) in conjunction with learners themselves. However, this would not be restricted to officially approved open educational resources, but to everything on the Internet, because one of the core skills I would want to teach is how to assess and evaluate different sources of information.
- by a consortium of instructors or institutions creating common learning materials within a broader program context, that can be shared both within and outside the consortium. However, not only would the content be available, but also the underlying instructional principles, learning outcomes, learner assessment strategies, what learner support is needed, learner activities, and program evaluation techniques, so that other instructors or learners can adapt to their own context. This approach is being taken by
 - the Carnegie Mellon [Open Learning Initiative](#)

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[\[https://edtechbooks.org/-PQy\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-PQy)

- to some extent by the UK Open University's [OpenLearn](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/) project
- the [Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth](https://edtechbooks.org/-Aam)
- [OER Africa](http://www.oerafrica.org/)



OER from University of Cape Town in OER Africa repository

Note however the more context that is supplied, the more restricted is the number of possible applications of the content outside the original group that created it. BCCampus requires institutions who use BCCampus course development funding to make that material available for use by any institution within the province, through its [SOL•R repository](http://solr.bccampus.ca/wp/) [\[http://solr.bccampus.ca/wp/\]](http://solr.bccampus.ca/wp/), but it is at best only partly open source, as the government retains copyright of the material (although in practice, it is quite easy to access outside the province as well.)

There are probably other contexts where open content can be both useful and effective, but these need to be defined, tested and evaluated.

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A major argument of course for open content is that this will be of enormous help in developing countries who lack qualified instructors. For my response to this, see ‘The bad’ below.

The bad

It’s easiest here to start with actual examples.

[Health Sciences Online \[https://edtechbooks.org/-wXt\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-wXt) and [GlobalUni \[http://www.globaluni.info/\]](http://www.globaluni.info/). Health Sciences Online (HSO) is a non-profit online health information resource that launched in December 2008. The website aims to provide quality educational resources to health care providers in training and practice, especially in developing countries, thus bridging the digital divide (the global imbalance in access to information technology). The four pillars of HSO are being comprehensive, authoritative, ad-free and free. The next step for HSO is to become an online health sciences learning centre, providing credentials and distance education degrees to help satisfy the great need for more and better-prepared health care professionals worldwide.

It plans to do this through the GlobalUni. GlobalUni claims (like the University of the People) to be the world’s first free university. Founding collaborators and funders include the U.S. CDC, NATO’s Science for Peace initiative, World Bank, WHO, and the World Medical Association. The full health sciences launch in 2011 will include the world’s first free master’s degrees, multiple medical residency training programs and 30+ other medicine, public health, nursing, pharmacy, and dentistry courses.

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All this sounds fine, until you look closer. The materials available to date are terrible, mainly Powerpoint slides, lecture notes, and pdf files. No principles of distance learning design have been applied. Student assessment is a joke, relying mainly on peer assessment and multiple choice, self-assessed questions. Unless the whole thing is radically changed, the result will be appallingly bad training for people in developing countries. It is this kind of initiative that gives not just open educational resources, but all online learning, such a bad name. It is bad, because it lacks all the essential components of a successful learning context, especially for learners in developing countries. They don't deserve third rate teaching such as this.



Health Sciences Online materials

Similarly the claim that MIT's OpenCourseware will radically change learning in Africa and other developing countries is another example of the arrogance of assuming you can just take content from one country and dump it into another, like giving away free coal. Content needs not only to be contextualized but also adapted for independent or distance learning. If MIT really wants to improve learning in Africa, it should redevelop the

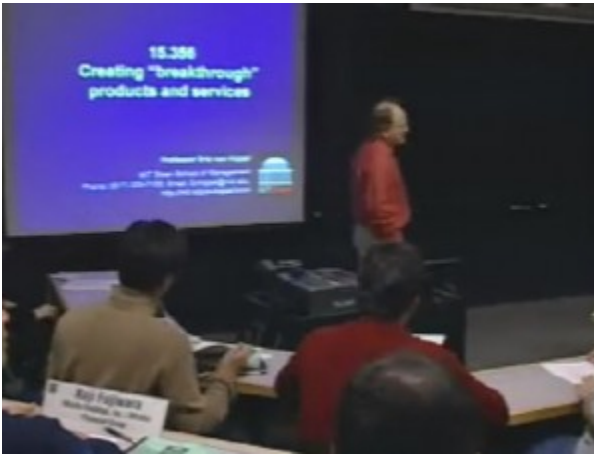
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materials with African partners, build in learning activities, ensure that the learners have well trained instructors, locally or from MIT, to support the teaching, ensure a full learning context is provided, and work with African partners on the ground. It should then give those that graduate an MIT degree. Perhaps then I won't get my regular e-mails from poor students in developing countries asking me how to get into MIT.

The ugly

What makes a lot of open content ugly is the lack of design or adaptation to make it suitable for independent or distance study or for third party use. It is as if 40 years of research on effective practice in distance learning has all been for nothing. The problem of course is cost: it takes time and money to do this. However, if instructors know from the start that whatever they are developing will be used as open content, and they work with an instructional designer to ensure it is suitable for secondary use, then the costs can be kept reasonably low. But this means developing a comprehensive strategy for open content that includes thinking of the contexts in which it would be used, and how to make it valuable within such contexts, which few institutions have done.

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A lecture from MIT's OpenCourseware

Conclusions

The main barrier to education is not lack of cheap content but lack of access to programs leading to credentials, either because such programs are too expensive, or because there are not enough qualified teachers, or both. Making content free is not a waste of time (if it is properly designed for secondary use), but it is still a drop in the bucket. Initiatives such as Health Sciences Online suck up a lot of sponsor funding that could be better used by providing proper educational provision within a developing country. If MIT wants to put its material online to show off the academic quality of its instructors, and their great lecture style (cough, cough) then fine, but don't pretend you're saving the world.

Open educational resources do have an important role to play in online education, but they need to be properly designed, and

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developed within a broader learning context that includes the critical activities needed to support learning, such as opportunities for student-instructor and peer interaction, and within a culture of sharing, such as consortia of equal partners and other frameworks that provide a context that encourages and supports sharing. In other words, OERs need skill and hard work to make them useful, and selling them as a panacea for education does more harm than good.

Suggested Citation

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