



Discussion on Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) for Open Educational Resources

Discussion log, week 2, 23-27 October 2006

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This log of the second week of the discussion captures the main themes discussed. The interaction was lively and at times even went beyond the main focus of the discussion.

1. LEARNING DESIGN SOLUTIONS

“LAMS is an open source (GPL) Learning Design system owned by the non-profit LAMS Foundation. The main website is <http://www.lamsfoundation.org>. For access to the LAMS Community (a community of 1600+ educators discussing the use of LAMS, including a repository of 100+ LAMS sequences) see <http://www.lamscommunity.org/>.”

“IMS Learning Design relies on a number of elements. These include: roles that people perform (who does what); activities (what they do); and environments, which include where they do them (services) and what they do them with (learning objects). [...] IMS Learning Design also enables:

- Transfer of learning designs between systems.
- Reuse of learning designs and materials.
- Reuse of parts of a learning design, e.g. individual, activities or roles.
- Internationalization, accessibility, tracking, reporting, and performance analysis, through the use of properties for people, roles and learning designs.”

“Pedagogic neutrality – as highlighted in IMS Learning Designs – is very much a necessity especially in the context of the changing perspectives on learning. In a teacher centric mode of schooling – as the model of Education – even if an individual teacher tries to go beyond the given framework he or she is expected to then fall in line with yet another defined line of thinking – a beaten path. [...] LAMS seems to be a powerful and exciting tool especially for the teachers and facilitators of learning.”

2. MECHANISMS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

“Here I would like to express that larger the level of participation in terms of stakeholders, better would be the quality of the result in developing the content. I would imagine the inclusion of all concerned while developing content for any target audience rather than leaving it to only the Educational Practitioners.”

3. THE RELATIONSHIP OF OER TO CERTIFICATION OF COMPETENCIES

“I’d like to add a dimension, and pose a question, which is to do with assessment and accreditation of learning. Once we have open access resources (which could be peer reviewed to ensure quality?) and a curriculum (or defined competencies?) how can we provide accreditation of learning?”

“During the previous FOSS for OER discussion few weeks ago, accreditation systems for basic computer skills in FOSS application were discussed. The most famous one is European Computer Driving License (ECDL) and its International version (ICDL). [...] The competences may be certified, on the basis of a previous set of precisely defined competences.”

“Why would we imagine that certifying Free and Open Resources for Education would be a positive thing? Does the whole concept not fundamentally miss the whole point of Free and Open. If it is Free and Open, then I can change it. How do you then certify my changes, and why would you want to? What would you hope to achieve by certifying the raw materials? The whole concept disconnected from the idea of Free and Open.”

“I think that certification is a fabrication of bureaucracy and primarily a profit-centred business. I think that the core of OER must be supplying content that people can use on their own or in groups to learn and pursue their own interests, without any need nor desire for certifying their knowledge of those interests.”

“In some contexts the issue of accreditation of OERs will arise. For example, several African universities will be making use of resources that have been either co-developed (among themselves) or adapted from existing OER collections for use in their formal academic programs. In cases like these, the university accreditation bodies will need to accredit the programs (as they do any other).”

“Accreditation is an quality assurance process carried out by identified and accepted specialists in a field that can certify the international (and national) acceptability of programme content and design – and its comparability with other programmes at the same educational level.”

“In our OER project we are developing courseware and assessments specifically designed for the New Zealand curriculum. There is a quality assurance process to ensure suitability so in that sense it is certified content. [...] The original material is ‘certified’ which addresses return on Investment issues with the funding body and our business need.”

“I think that in the background of the last debate there is the common misconception of considering educational resources and study programs to be the same. They are not. OER’s are (just) resources, whereas in a proper study programs there are always learning objectives, study tasks, assignments, assessment and feedback. We may and should accredit study programs – never OERs.”

“It is true that today OERs do not tend to be study programs or assessments. This does not mean, however, that in the future we will not see physics item banks licensed CC-By or aggregations of OERs structured into study programs. Frankly, if these things don’t happen, a lot of our effort will have been for naught.”

4. PRINT PUBLICATION OF OER

“The main point, however, is that a Creative Commons textbook initiative may not only save students money, it could also give faculty more freedom to customize the content of their courses. [...] I would argue that students in both the developed and developing world deserve to have content that could be a substitute for commercial texts.”

“Your ideas have great attractions but would they not put a bomb under the economics of the publishing industry and hence generate tremendous political opposition? They would require a very powerful political champion and I wonder whether he or she exists. I can’t see a UN agency taking it on. Less revolutionary, but controversial enough would be a scheme directed at affordable textbooks for the poorest countries.”

“My view is to continue with the development of free content in a wiki environment. This facilitates collaborative authoring of content. There are technologies which can produce customised print versions (PDF) from wiki text. These could be used as a master for duplication or larger print runs.”

“FLOSS and open content movement are slightly shaking the boat of the educational publisher. There is a real fear that the role of the publisher in the value chain will change. It looks that what is left for the publishers is the editorial work and marketing, as the actual content creation and distribution will be done online.”

“There is enough reason for both the free content development and the publishing industry to support each other. One thing is sure that the minimum levels of the quality of learning material will improve eventually in any case. Inferior quality stuff may not find any takers in the future. Let us hope that there will be mutually beneficial symbiotic relationships in the area of learning. We need to stand up together for the freedom of education.”

5. CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO OER

“To be re-useable in as many other educational settings as possible, these resources need to be developed into the smallest possible ‘granules’. In this way, future users may choose to pick only the materials they need to develop their own courses. However, if we develop the context and the activities within the context in too much detail, we may end up with a very exciting and authentic story as the backbone for our course, but future users may get stuck with an ‘all-or-nothing’. It’s the old debate around learning objects: how much meaning (context) do you need to add to make it a learning object?”

“What is happening in some developed countries is that technology-based resources are being made available but are NOT being used; we have ‘implementation’ seminars for teachers in technical ed in NSW Australia, to show them how the resources can be used. Sometimes the desire of the system to implement innovation runs ahead of the capacity of the facilitator to use what is provided. Of course collaboration is key here.”

“Does anything actually transmit knowledge? I'd argue that it can't be done. You can send information, but the constitution of that info into knowledge... that can't be transmitted. It can be modelled subjectively perhaps. We need to be careful with the way we think about knowledge and learning, because if we build OER on false assumptions, it is likely that it will be found to be useless over time.”