

Report on the third Ripple workshop (3 February 2011)

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On Thursday 3rd February 2011, the Ripple project held its third event to discuss institutional marketing strategy and policy for Open Educational Resources also known informally as the 'In It To Win It Workshop'. In a room slightly reminiscent of a Las Vegas wedding chapel in Kellogg College, Oxford, representatives of all Ripple projects met and discussed why we make OER, and how we can articulate this business case.

Lisa Mansell, Ripple Project Manager began the day by drawing attention to a recommendation from the HEFCE-funded Online Learning Task Force in their report published in January 2011:

"There is no point duplicating effort to create content that is already available and has been proven to work. Institutions can build on the existing open educational resources initiative (funded by HEFCE, managed by the JISC and the HEA) to achieve economies of scale and efficiencies. In addition they can pull in the best content and openly available learning resources from around the world and adapt them for particular courses. Students can then access a richer, wider range of material to enhance their learning experiences wherever they are studying, and leading experts can build a profile beyond their institution. There are also significant opportunities for partnership with private organisations to produce content that is interactive, responsive and pedagogically effective."

"Collaborate to Compete" OLTf http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11_01/

It was a useful reminder that there is a public policy agenda at work behind the funding for Open Educational Resources, and that that agenda is not just based in community-minded promotion of mutual aid. There are efficiency reasons to collaborate and in the current climate these can seem particularly pressing. There are also opportunities for private enterprise to build upon the results of public collaborations, and strong economic reasons for exploiting these opportunities.

Melissa Highton, Head of the Learning Technologies Group at Oxford where the Ripple project is based, then led us through some promotional videos for different OER programmes and discussed the messages they were designed to convey. First we saw a slick video presenting MIT's programme Open CourseWare. It stressed the centrality and supremacy of MIT in its educational sector and its willingness to throw open its treasury of knowledge to the world. Interleaved with this was a more subtle message – perhaps aimed more at an internal audience – that the treasury they were offering was not the entire crown jewels; an MIT education is also about membership of the local MIT community, and certainly accreditation requires that. It is an interesting dual message, and one that recurred in some of the other videos: "here is something of value that demonstrates our openness, expertise and generosity, but don't imagine it's anywhere near as valuable as our core product." An academic told a personal story of how he had aspired to attend MIT from boyhood because of his ownership of some MIT Press textbooks. The implication was that MIT OCW offerings could have the same effect, and on a much larger pool of potential applicants due to their lower cost of acquisition.

Next we saw Apple's 'iPad is electric' TV ad which includes approximately one second of content from Oxford's OpenSpire OER podcast project (a quantum mechanics lecture with Professor James Binney framed by enormous blackboards). Here the University brand is used (along with two others Iron Man and eBay) to clearly whip up a value proposition to

the ad viewer. The device they are selling is portrayed as a portal to myriad other valuable experiences – a crossroads where you need to be. Apple has about the strongest consumer brand identity in technology, and it's interesting to see which other brands it associates with itself to create this effect. It's also interesting to speculate what the reverse effect is on those 'portalised' brands.

Nottingham's video introduction to the U Now OER project was more sedate and long-form than MIT's sound-bite effort, but the messages were close to identical: the benign promotional effect of OER, the preservation of the institution's core offering despite this new outreach initiative.

Stuart Lee, a lecturer at Oxford, appeared in a short video outlining the personal reasons an academic might make their materials available. Lee makes his lectures available as podcasts and has had contact from around the world as a result from academics and non-academics. In terms of marketing OER, the video made the point that open access to materials maximises their impact, and with public impact becoming a much weightier factor in evaluating the outcomes of funding, this argument can be extremely persuasive.

Finally we saw Open University Vice-Chancellor Martin Bean presenting a table-thumping talk on the benefits of OER at a JISC event. Bean gave concrete figures – 88% of OER downloads came from outside the UK, 6,000 students signed up after first using OU OER. The equation he presented was simple: OER are promotional and the promotion works globally.

Melissa summed up the points the videos made. OER serve institutions in many areas. They showcase both the individual academic and their institution. They build the capacity of an institution to create and publish high quality material. They help create communities within subject areas and they help resources become sustainable through these public communities. Finally we were reminded that with funding tight and tempers raised over cuts and fees, it is important for institutions to demonstrate what it is that higher education does, and OER can provide a way to show that.

Next up was David Morris from Coventry University who spoke on OER, business models and institutional strategy. After expressing slight discomfort about speaking at an event named from a Dale Winton quote, David continued by noting open research has a long and successful history within HE, but that it is harder to monetise the teaching aspect of our role. Nevertheless success can be had. David pointed to Coventry's use of open source software VLE Moodle in their provision of training to Santander Group, and the potential using open materials to enhance impact and its reporting in the Research Excellence Framework.

David went on to discuss what the drivers towards greater openness were for HE institutions. Broadly these related to the twin goals of education and promotion. However it was clear that the sector in general had a somewhat vague idea of what a 'business model' actually is; David provided the definition of 'using resources to generate value'. We are not experienced, he continued, in communicating to the outside world how our academics generate value.

Possible business models for OER release were discussed next, and these again were broadly angled to further outreach and enhance an institution's brand. Using the example of the Oxford Story (a now sadly defunct tourist attraction in the form of a miniature indoor train ride through Oxford's history) David made the point that competition was based in more

than just price, and that brand promotion was an alternative route to generating value. Similarly the foregrounding of 'star' academics whose public profiles were already high could add to the brand value. This was linked back to the aspirational story of the MIT promotional video. David noted that in contrast to the glossy presentation of that video, much of the OER material presented by MIT was not presented glamorously and could be fairly opaque and tedious.

Finally David took us through some of the highlights of the Coventry OER offering, including the Bugatti lectures, podcasts by alumni like David Yelland and celebrities like Jeremy Paxman, and their courses on the business side of sport.

Next, slightly confusingly, was another David – David White, Senior Development Manager at Oxford's Technology Assisted Lifelong Learning unit. TALL has received funding to assess the impact of OER, and so not unnaturally they have been thinking about what impact actually means. Was the impact primarily achieved by individuals or their institution? After all, social media mean that managing the impact one's institution has on the outside world is now far more complex than before. There are more conduits to the outside from within, making institutions more 'leaky'. In some ways the contrast between these institutional and personal conduits was between declaratory and conversational approaches respectively; the press release vs the Facebook wall. You could also characterise this division as indicative of two of an institution's roles, with monolithic declaratory marketing on the one hand and conversational teaching and learning on the other. Perhaps OER can be divided into these categories as well, and their impact assessed in different ways as a result?

With this in mind, David proposed mapping OER activities onto a pair of axes: Individual to Institutional and Conversation to Broadcast, and noting where we perceived risk to crop up as a result. We split into groups with flipcharts to achieve this. The resulting discussion centred around the emergence of conversations between the 'outside world' and the institution that greater openness brings, and whether these were fundamentally desirable. One audience member pointed out that Harvard had resisted OER release precisely because it was felt that sustaining the resulting conversations would not be possible.

After lunch, Carlyne Culver, Head of Strategic Communications in Oxford's Public Affairs Directorate, spoke to us about effective communication. PAD handles the University's media relations, government relations, local community relations and production of the prospectus. Carlyne asked whether we were trying to use OER to educate or promote, and in an echo of David Morris' earlier talk, she noted that in fact the spectrum of motivations covered both areas to differing degrees. We work to share learning and research, attract future students, media interest and future funding. The content of our OER should reflect the balance of these objectives we hope to achieve. It is not much use simply generating the material then expecting promotion to be fitted to it as an afterthought; the content should be created with careful consideration of its desired external impact. What you want to achieve should determine content, style and timing of OER releases.

To understand how to do this, we need to consider the intended audience. We may be targeting the global academic community, potential applicants, alumni, the media, partner organisations like museums, libraries and publishers, or our own internal audience. It is also important to monitor the impact of the measures we take, both by examining the media and using technological metrics like access logs and Twitter mentions.

Carlyne emphasised the importance of selling the idea of OER internally, as this will result (with any luck) in contributors and supporting staff advocating for the project in their daily

roles. Case studies also play an important role in selling the activity internally, and should not be thought of as an optional extra. The group then divided to discuss what actions each project had already taken to sell their projects internally and externally, and which facilities in their institution had been helpful or might be in the future.