FROM OPEN CONTENT TO OPEN COURSE MODELS: INCREASING ACCESS AND ENABLING GLOBAL PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Summary

Two of the major challenges that limit international students’ right of access to higher education are geographical/economic isolation and academic literacy in English (Carey, 1999, Hamel, 2007). The Open Education Resource (OER) movement has to date largely focused on promoting and enabling the creation and distribution of educational resources and OpenCourseWare (OCW) to a global audience. While there is much to be gained through the open sharing of content being created across global education systems, in particular where access to education presents a challenge, we propose that the next step is to examine how adopting open course models in traditional (bricks and mortar) universities can offer benefits to the institutions and the open education movement itself, in particular with students for whom English is an Other language (EOL), through blended or online delivery. This paper describes the model, and an implementation with undergraduate students located in universities in Canada, Mexico, and Russia, where an opportunity to develop academic literacy in English and global perspectives guided the implementation.

Introduction

Two of the major challenges that limit international students’ right of access to universal higher education are geographical/economic isolation and academic literacy in English (Carey, 1999, Hamel, 2007). The Open Education Resource (OER) movement has focussed on the creation and distribution of educational resources and OpenCourseWare (OCW) to a global audience. We propose that the next step is to examine how adopting open course models in traditional (bricks and mortar) universities can offer benefits to the institutions and the open education movement itself. In this article we propose an open course model that can enable global participation in courses (with or without the use of OERs). This open model for cross-institutional collaboration is sensitive to concerns of local/global knowledge and reduces the barriers presented by higher education institutions that require international students from developing and developed countries to efficiently develop their EOL (English as an Other Language) academic literacy to gain access to universities to publish research in the international academic community (Carey, 1999, 2002; Carey & Morgan, 2005; Thorne & Black, 2007). This paper describes the model, and its implementation with undergraduate students located in universities in Canada, Mexico, and Russia.

Background

Huijser, Bedford and Bull (2008) quote that "everyone has the right to education" as described in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which also states that "higher education shall be equally
accessible to all on the basis of merit”. However, access to higher education is denied to a majority of the world’s population because they also lack access to the education that permits them to develop the required “merit” for higher education. Secondly, since academic publications are predominantly published in English, access to tertiary education globally increasingly requires reading and writing literacy in academic English.

Clearly, OERs and OCWs have great potential for providing access to knowledge for the global public including underprivileged and isolated students in developed and developing countries who are excluded from higher educational opportunities. However, to promote efficient learning in most cases these OCWs and OERs must be supplemented with an academic structure that allows students to receive instruction and credit for these courses if they wish to pursue an academic qualification or degree. In this regard, we echo Lane’s (2008) concern that “people may be able to access OERs on their own, outside of the constraints of a university, but what recognition and benefits do they gain from doing so if universities still require prior achievement for entry, and employers recognized only those achievements made at universities?” (p. 155).

Since the financial means to commute to, as well as pay tuition and live at internationally renowned foreign institutions of higher learning remains more problematic, new models for global access are needed. To more fully address the issue of global access an unprecedented capacity for inter-institutional cooperation at diverse levels of university governance is needed.

**Current open models**

Following MIT’s highly acclaimed move to make its educational resources freely available, the number of open learning initiatives (c.f. [http://www.cmu.edu/oli/](http://www.cmu.edu/oli/), [http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Wikiversity:Main_Page](http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Wikiversity:Main_Page) as UNESCO, Open Universities (e.g. [http://openlearn.open.ac.uk](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk)) and the OpenCourseWare Consortium ([http://www.ocwconsortium.org](http://www.ocwconsortium.org)) continues to grow. In addition, the open teaching efforts of David Wiley ([http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i06/06a01301.htm](http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i06/06a01301.htm)), Alec Couros ([http://eci831.wikispaces.com](http://eci831.wikispaces.com)), and George Siemens and Stephen’s Downes ([http://itc.umanitoba.ca/connectivism/](http://itc.umanitoba.ca/connectivism/)), have promoted online access by allowing anybody to participate in their courses. However the ability for students to receive credit for their participation is still a work in progress. Membership or affiliation with the host institution is required to receive credit, representing a traditional model of attaching course participation with credits from a host institution.

**Language, Culture, and Academic (English) Literacy**

English academic literacy is increasingly essential to access at all levels of education (Hamel, 2007). As Flowerdew (2007) has noted the combined pressures of “globalization and marketization of the academy” (p.14) has created a situation where more and more scholars need to write in English for international journals where writing in English is perceived as “a sort of ineluctable necessity (related to both international prestige and editorial needs) rather than a matter of free choice” by non-Anglophone scholars (Guardiano, Favilla, & Calaresu, 2007). Our model attempts to provide ways to allow the participation of EOLs to engage in knowledge sharing but also as a way of developing academic literacy in English.

**Reconceptualising course delivery**

By reconceptualising course delivery, both online and blended modes of delivery can provide an opportunity to enable global participation for students from developing countries. If it is agreed that courses are generally composed of three central components—content, interactions, and assessed activities (Figure 1)—then it is possible to consider how technology can facilitate teaching and learning in each of these related components.
The model allows for the use of OERs to support the content component of a course. However, the model also is founded on the (social-constructivist) assumption that while content is important, the value of a course largely comes from the instructor-student and/or student-student interaction. In particular, the interaction component can be an open global audience that interacts in an online forum to engage in cross-disciplinary activities such as discussion, debates, or joint projects. Thus, students are exposed to a broader spectrum of perspectives and expertise through contacts with diverse cultures that facilitates the integration of various topics across diverse disciplines.

Figure 2 describes our view of how this model could be implemented in a discipline such as Pediatric Dentistry. Each global site designates a portion of its course to be shared with its partners. In this way, students receive credits from their home institution, but are able to access a shared component through collaboration with their global partners. For example, 25% of the course grade would involve the shared component, with the remaining 75% coming from the regular course components as designated by the
home institution. The shared component might include the content, interactions, assessed activities or any combination of these. The shared component would likely be situated online, but the delivery mode of the local components could be face-to-face or online, resulting in totally online or blended mode of delivery for this model.

**Evolution of the Model**

Because it is recognized that social interaction is a critical component of most online learning including EOL academic literacy (Carey, 1999, 2002; Carey & Guo, 2003) and much of this research is grounded in the social constructivist principles of Vygotsky (1978; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000) particular attention was paid to promote collaborative critical thinking and writing through the use of an asynchronous discussion forum.

The second author observed that students for whom English was an ‘other’ language (EOL) were much more engaged and contributed to a higher level of discussion in online courses than in their regular, face-to-face-only courses and reported that their academic English improved more from the online than the face-to-face components in his mixed-mode classes (Carey, 1999). In 2000, he invited students enrolled in a graduate course at Yakutsk State University in Russia to participate in the online discussions of his graduate course at UBC. This led to the development of a research program that sought to explore intercultural collaboration among students who were enrolled in courses at globally diverse universities and participating in a common online discussion forum.

In 2001, the model was adapted to engage undergraduate ESL students for whom English in a global forum. This project involved undergraduate students at three different universities: ITESM-Tec de Monterey in Mexico, Yakutsk State University in Russia, and Ritsumeikan University students from Japan who were on a one year exchange program at the University of British Columbia. All 123 students were enrolled in credit courses taught in English at their three respective universities. The content focused on intercultural understanding and socio-political issues and were conducted both face-to-face and online exclusively in English for six weeks. Each institution allocated and assessed this activity differently and students received credit for their participation in their course, thus avoiding considerable institutional red tape (Basharina, 2006, Basharina, Guardado, & Morgan, 2008; Carey & Morgan, 2005).
Benefits
There have been numerous positive results from this model as expressed by both undergraduate and graduate students and instructors in questionnaires and interviews (Luo, 2004; Carey & Morgan, 2005; Basharina, 2007). The graduate students appreciated the multiple perspectives on international cultural understanding in developing their EOL academic literacy. EOL professors and students reported that due to the intense communicative activity on the discussion forum, they gained English academic literacy in diverse genres and registers. Professors appreciated extended experience in academic English outside of the limited opportunities at short academic conferences (see Flowerdew, 2008).

Beyond developing academic literacy for EOL students and professors, the model allowed for other benefits.

1. International course transfers. This model obviated such complexities by maintaining the specific course requirements and course credits within each course and institution while simultaneously allowing international collaboration of students and professors.

2. Students had access to more professors with different cultural, research and academic expertise.

3. Being in contact with a range of students with varied backgrounds and training as well as educational and professional experience presented an expanded learning opportunity.

4. The flexibility allowed for professors from different geopolitical co-ordinates to be recruited for successive academic terms or years in an academic program.
5. Students received credit for their participation in the discussion forum in the context of their local courses and programs. Thus assignments, term papers and subsequent theses could focus on issues that were of most interest to individual students.

**Future Directions**

We envision that more applied and professional programs such as dentistry, medical anthropology, nursing and environmental studies might also benefit from this model. This might involve online discussions about a topic of global interest, working on case studies in international teams of students, or the sharing of content such as podcasts among international experts.

Although our own use of this model has centred on international discussions using asynchronous technologies, we suggest that it could be applied to students working together on research such as case studies or joint projects using a much wider selection of available technologies. In particular, we considered the benefits of applying this model to courses on international aid and disaster relief, world health, global warming, or any topic where rapid international and intercultural cooperation is required, or where local concerns of developing countries need to be addressed. The model could facilitate both inter-university and intra-university exchanges.

**Conclusions**

This model encourages institutions to think differently about how their students can engage in global collaborative conversation that benefits both local and international partners, and to break down barriers to participation (particularly those faced by EOL students) in academic contexts. In this model OCWs can not only be adapted to local situations and contexts but also provide a scholarly venue for academic discussion through the inclusion of international scholars from a wide diversity of expertise and professional viewpoints. Perhaps in conjunction with the well-established open education and research resources as well as OCW initiatives, it will help contribute to a shift towards a culture of openness in the academy (Wiley, 2006). It is hoped that this collaborative model and its variants can help provide access to quality tertiary education to many of the global students who to date have been denied access to education.
References


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***NB: a longer version (5000 words) of this article was submitted to a special issue of IRRODL and is awaiting the second stage of peer review.***