Adoption and impact of OER in the Global South

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Published by African Minds


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There was much to celebrate when The Year of Open activists and enthusiasts met in Ljubljana, Slovenia, as part of the 2nd World OER Congress in September 2017. The movement had gathered serious momentum and, as anyone in attendance could attest, there was no doubt that openness in education had become a global movement. Conferences are moments to celebrate and share, but, particularly at gatherings of this scale, they also provide an opportunity to reflect on gaps, limitations and biases. As a subset of educational technology and a child (or sibling) of the Free and Open Source Software and Open Access movements, it has taken some time for the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement to recognise that the devil is in the detail. OER seems to be at the height of its hype cycle, and the field is now ripe for critical review, to counter a sometimes “Whig-like” narrative of inevitable progress.

What do we mean by openness? How does openness actually materialise? Is more open always best? How is openness enacted? These fundamental questions have often been ignored, or worse, declared resolved by universal solutions. If these questions go unanswered, we leave room for other uncomfortable questions which are perennially brought up by more critical interlocutors: Who benefits from open? Who is defining what openness means? And more emphatically, does the mainstream view and current trajectory for OER necessarily lead to more emancipatory, democratic, egalitarian and inclusive education? These questions are (or should be) at the center of the debate in the Global South. The work done by researchers in the Research on Open Educational Resources for Development (ROER4D) project, which is showcased in this volume, does much to shed light on some of these important issues.

Systemic aspects necessary for successful OER implementations are covered: culture and policy-setting at institutional and country-wide levels; connections to other open movements (such as Open Access); raising awareness and providing professional development and engagement opportunities — all of these are among the recurring factors discussed in the various studies in this volume.

Detailed and contextualised discussions are added to what, after 15 years, are just afterthoughts to many in the field. The lack of resources in multiple languages is highlighted in different studies. This issue is often emphasised, only to be repeatedly brushed aside both for widely spoken but not hegemonic languages, as well as for lesser spoken languages. The lack of appropriately adapted (or adaptable) resources to cultural contexts is given centre stage in discussions about localisation and access. In the context of professional development, light is shed on conditions, demands and the need for local production of resources. The clear connection between engagement with OER and access

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1 This is perhaps most obvious in our over-emphasis on open licensing as the cornerstone (and for many, the only essential element) of the movement, as if new licensing practices alone would be enough to catalyse change.

2 I exercise, as one of the chapters in the book suggests, all the caveats of dividing the world along the equator, but rhetorical liberty is needed for this short foreword.
to material resources is discussed in light of the persistent digital divide. In this, examples include the challenges for professional development in different contexts and the issues faced by teachers in engaging with OER. Micro-politics, such as institutional demands, and technological momentum\textsuperscript{3} are showcased in the research on faculty experiences with OER. More subtle aspects, including the ethics of openness and production, apathy to the idea of OER, and even negative experiences with OER, are presented. The seemingly naive educator who does not want to use a very liberal licence might just have good reasons to do so!

As the strong literature reviews in each chapter present, these discussions exist, scattered across the literature on OER. But here, and perhaps this is the volume’s greatest contribution, we have these challenges laid out collectively, presenting detailed descriptions of initiatives and projects that showcase the activity around OER in regions which (if at all) are often presented in the aggregate,\textsuperscript{4} and usually in negative (or barren) terms. What is also immensely relevant is that these works are presented in English, and are made available beyond the restricted audience that many scholars in these regions face when writing in their native language.

Discussions on who produces OER, under what conditions, and by whom they are made available should take centre stage. As OER gathers the attention of large corporations and institutions, and interfaces with industries and spheres with potentially conflicting interests,\textsuperscript{5} knowing about and reflecting upon the experiences of multiple groups will be key to advance the principles of openness we hold dear.

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November 2017

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\textsuperscript{3} The notion that some aspects of technological development become locked-in so that changing them becomes a very complex task. An often used example is that of the format used for electricity sockets. Another might be institutional learning management systems.

\textsuperscript{4} Regions in the Global South are often the subject of generalisation – for example, one recent article discusses openness as “incipient” in Latin America and the Caribbean. The use of “developing nations” is common as well.

\textsuperscript{5} What should one do when OER (as well as Open Access and other movements) are promoted by traditional players, surveillance economy businesses (such as Google) and other actors which are, in principle, quite inimical to the ideals of OER?