

Open Educational Resources (OERs) in Higher Education: A Global Perspective

Tomohiro Nagashima
International Christian University, Japan
tomohiro.nagashima0529@gmail.com

Abstract: Based on the philanthropic philosophy, many open educational resources (OERs) have been developed in different parts of the world over the past few years. MIT OpenCourseWare in the USA, OER Africa in African countries, Japan OpenCourseWare in Japan, and OpenLearn in the United Kingdom are just a few examples of OERs. These OERs vary by type of media used, level of education, context of utilization, and so forth. This study aims to organize, compare, and contrast the growing phenomena of OER development in order to help researchers and practitioners in education to conceptualize differences and similarities in the OER movement. First, the cases of OERs development in Americas, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Africa are identified, following this order. Then, the analysis framework is to be developed using differences and similarities among the cases. Finally, the study will conclude with a set of recommendations for future study areas.

Keywords: *Open Educational Resources, OERs, Open Education, OER movement*

Introduction

As the world has become connected, many initiatives of Open Educational Resources (OERs), defined as “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others” (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond 2007), have gained popularity among educators and learners. Despite their shared philanthropic philosophy, those initiatives are different with each other in various aspects, and there are little research examining how they vary by presenting frameworks.

Major OER Initiatives

All of the selected OER initiatives below are on the recent paper by Commonwealth of Learning (McGreal, Kinuthia, & Marshall 2013), an established institution engaging in OERs.

MIT OpenCourseWare (OCW): Recognized as the first major initiative of OERs started in 2001, MIT OCW has provided almost all of MIT’s course materials on the web without any charges and registrations. With MIT OCW, people who do not have access to higher education can learn several disciplines with quality courses (Lerman, Miyagawa, & Margulies 2008). Since its philosophy of “sharing” attracted the entire world, a lot of other universities have launched their OCW websites (Lerman, Miyagawa, & Margulies 2008).

Connexions: Developed at Rice University in the USA, Connexions not only offers free course materials, but also “a set of free software tools to help authors publish and collaborate” (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond 2007). Qualities of various materials are ensured by its unique quality control system called “lenses” (Baraniuk 2008). Through “lenses”, which differ in focuses of qualities and reviewers, users can select the best materials for their uses (Baraniuk 2008).

Coursera: As one of the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) movements, Coursera serves as a platform for delivering the free online courses from many higher educational institutions worldwide. Since it was started by two Stanford professors and other established institutions have joined (Lewin 2012), Coursera, the representation of future education enabled by the cutting-edge technology, receives attentions in the world today.

Japan OpenCourseWare (JOCW): Stimulated by MIT OCW, Japanese higher educational institutions launched JOCW to promote open education movement in Japan. As of 2010, the number of course provided reached 1,497. Among them, 1,285 courses are in Japanese and 212 courses are in English (Yamada 2013). Although it is managed by famous universities of Japan, awareness level remains to be low (Yamada 2013).

OpenLearn: Serving as one of the European leading open education initiatives, UK’s OpenLearn was developed by UK Open University in 2006. It lets individual learners and educators explore Open University’s quality courses with adequate technological supports (Fleming & Massey 2007).

OER Africa: This prominent movement in African countries focuses especially on the education in Africa, aiming to promote sustainable education through OERs, because OERs are perceived as having the potential to expand an access to the education in Africa. It actively promotes educators in Africa to create their own resources since resources should be suitable for African educational contexts, which are often dissimilar to those in developed countries (“Introducing OER Africa” 2009).

Analysis Framework

The analysis framework below visualizes differences and similarities among the initiatives introduced.

	Materials	Degree of interactivity	Funding (Name of foundations)	Languages <i>Translation</i>	Scale	Other features
MIT OCW	Videos, course materials used in face-to-face classes	Low	Hewlett, Kabcenell, Mellon, Rosenbaum...etc	English <i>Chinese, Thai, Turkish, Spanish, Portuguese, Persian, and Korean</i>	World wide	First initiative of OERs
Connexions	Materials are provided in modules	High	Hewlett, Maxfield...etc	English <i>Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai</i>	World wide	Lenses

Course ra	Videos, assignments, quizzes, readings...etc	High	Business model developed	English, Spanish, Chinese, and Italian <i>Russian, Portuguese, Turkish, Japanese, Ukrainian, Kazakh, and Arabic</i> (“Coursera Partnering” 2013)	World wide	MOOCs (registration needed) Company
JOCW	Videos and course materials used in face-to-face classes	Low	No support from foundations	Japanese and English	Japan and other countri es	Not utilized much Low awareness level
Open Learn	Varied (video, quiz, readings...etc)	High	Hewlett Foundation	English	World wide	Under the traditional Open University
OER Africa	Readings, textbooks, sets of materials...etc	Low	Hewlett Foundation	English	Africa	For developing countries (Africa)

Recommendations for Future Study

In addition to the examples shown above, there exist more differences and diverse OER initiatives. As they vary, users are required to consider what to care about when they adopt the appropriate materials for the situations and the contexts of uses. Since the main objective of OER movements is to reuse resources, there is a need for developing the reference information that users can refer to when choosing the OERs from numerous sorts of repositories.

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