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Facilitator’s Reflections on P2PU ‘Intro to Openness’ Course

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Peter Reed is a Lecturer at the University of Liverpool, taking a specific view on Technology Enhanced Learning within the Faculty of Health and Life Science. Some of his key interests include Open Education and the use of Social Media in Higher Education. He is the current co-chair of the UK Blackboard Medical Education Special Interest Group, and a steering group member of both the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) North West Special Interest Group and the North West Open Educational Resources Network.

My experience in Learning Technology includes work on so many different projects across four Higher Education Institutions in the North West of England, including work as a Learning Technologist, Project Coordinator and Lecturer. I’m currently employed as a Lecturer with a particular focus on Learning Technology, within the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at the University of Liverpool.

This range of experience has identified a plethora of interests through working with many colleagues to introduce various technologies to their teaching, as well as my own - both in the classroom and online. Throughout this experience, two of the most significant areas impacting upon my own research and practice have been:

- The potential for Open Educational Resources (OER) to impact on learning and teaching, and in particular, the reciprocity of sharing materials, preventing the ‘reinventing of the wheel’ and associated recurring cost. I’m also particularly interested in the engagement of academic staff with this ‘movement’; and their attitudes, motivations and barriers to participation;
• The role and impact social media can have on learning and teaching, including its role in the increasingly blurred boundaries between formal and informal learning. I’m interested in which tools students use; if they use those tools to discuss University work; and their views on communicating with faculty via those channels.

Being a committee member for the North West OER Network brought my experience in both aspects into focus, through the suggestion to facilitate an online course, not all dissimilar to the increasingly popular Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The aim of this initiative was to facilitate an existing, open course developed by open-guru David Wiley as part of Open Education Week. The course was hosted on the P2PU platform, and facilitated via social media, including Twitter.

As the start date approached, I was increasingly cognisant of other aspects surrounding learning and teaching. For example, whenever I consider the introduction of various technologies, I think about the digital literacies of learners to effectively engage. Normally this is in response to Undergraduate or Postgraduate students, but on this occasion we didn’t know who would be participating. For some time, Prensky’s notion of Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives (2001) has dominated this discussion, suggesting the youth of today have grown up with innate digital literacies akin to speaking a native language. However, recent times have seen increasing skepticism and alternative typologies to describe learners. Most notably, White and Le Cornu’s less-harsh metaphor of Visitors and Residents (2011) is attracting attention. This suggests that users of the web sit somewhere along a continuum between Residents and Visitors. Residents leave a significant trace of themselves online, and see web spaces akin to physical locations; Visitors leave much less trace online, and are likely to use particular tools only for particular tasks.

Where would the participants of this open course sit?

Well to some degree, our course would be facilitated via Twitter or Facebook, and as such required some ‘know-how’ e.g. the use of hashtags in tweets. These are spaces and tasks unlikely to be frequented or familiar to ‘Immigrants’ or ‘Visitors’, and with little
induction to such environments, I wondered how many people would immediately be dissuaded to participate. Are they our target demographic anyway? What could we have done to prepare participants more effectively? Do we, as facilitators, owe such an induction to would-be participants? The questions continue...

As the course started, participants from across the globe engaged. Facilitators devised a number of questions - between 4-6 with the intention of progressing every 10-15 minutes. How difficult can it be to facilitate a 60 minute discussion?

It wasn’t until the evening of my facilitation that I realised just how hectic things were from this angle. I regard social theories of learning highly in my own personal philosophy, but I didn’t expect it to influence me nearly as much as it did! I was the facilitator - seemingly the specialist - asking the questions and provoking thought amongst participants, and yet the range of responses merely made me look into topics in more detail myself, and through different lenses. The topic was Open Educational Practices, which I co-facilitated with Sue Beckingham. We asked easier questions to get started, encouraging participants to reflect on their experiences with OERs and MOOCs, but the questions quickly escalated to tease out barriers to engaging, as well as ideas around unbundling content from the Institution - potentially areas of uncertainty.

At the end of the hour, I was out of breath. My mind was racing with the various simultaneous conversations I was engaged in. I had various Twitter clients open to monitor my own mentions, as well as those tweets that were using the hashtag - #NWOERCHAT. I took a deep breath and headed over to the Google Spreadsheet I’d previously set up, based on some great work from Martin Hawksey. His ‘TAGS Explorer’ requires minimum setup time and little technical knowledge in order to quickly visualise a network, which in this case, was based around the hashtag. It was complex - a range of ‘nodes’ dispersed broadly around the edges, with a huge cluster of connected nodes, representing the dialogue amongst the community. Even to the relatively untrained eye, I knew this was amazing! The buzz and hype surrounding the xMOOCs from Coursera, Udacity and FutureLearn has personally left me underwhelmed. But this is something completely different!
This network diagram was representative of the overall diagram for the week (figure 1). There were so many tweets sent during the course of the tweetchats - thousands - that I just couldn't get my head around it all. It was such a unique experience. As I write this account, I’m still staggered by this experience, and wonder how and where this could be introduced to the formal education that we work in on a daily basis. Could this be the future of the traditional, and often dusty, cobwebbed online discussion forum? The immediacy of the experience was just like having conversations and being in the same room as these people, except they were massively geographically dispersed. From Liverpool to London, to Georgetown, Guyana, to Cairo, Egypt. Truly Global!

But what about those Digital Immigrants and Visitors? What about those outside of the Open Education field? What about those who don’t use Twitter and Facebook?

Did they engage much?

I suppose we’ll never know. Whilst this open course left a huge crater in my own expectations, my thoughts, and my experience of online learning and teaching, I suppose we never even left a dimple on so
much of the educational landscape. Surely there is more we can do with Open Education to enable others to have this experience as well?

Again as I look back, this opportunity married my two key interests perfectly - OER and Social Media. The OER we used as the basis for content delivery was the stimulus for such rich dialogue, and I carry this experience with me as I look to develop my own teaching.

I would urge others to engage in such experiences. If you’re new to participating, then don’t be scared to shout out for help (use Caps Lock if you need to!). If you’re new to facilitating a course like this, then buckle up because you’re in for one hell of a ride!

References
