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Assessment challenges in open learning: Way-finding, fork in the road, or end of the line?

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Abstract

Growing global commitments to open learning through the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) are accompanied by concerns over what "to do" with that learning when learners present it to traditional institutions for assessment and accreditation. This paper proposes that established RPL (recognizing prior learning) protocols, in place at many institutions worldwide, can offer a pedagogically sound framework that supports the spirit of open learning and respects the diversity of learners' efforts.

Keywords: OER, assessment, open access, lifelong learning, higher learning, portfolios

Introduction

Innovative open, distance, and online practices are fueling both disruption and excitement as they offer educational opportunities to global audiences. The notion of open learning, once defined largely by admission parameters (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), has exploded into a rainbow of "open" concepts, all of which defy traditional notions of bricks-and-mortar centrality, ownership, restricted access, academic privilege, and educational hierarchy. These concepts centre around open educational resources (OERs), which are defined as "teaching, learning or research materials that are in the public domain or released with an intellectual property license that allows for free use, adaptation, and distribution" (UNESCO, 2011). Certainly, take-up by mammoth institutions such as MIT (Open Courseware Initiative) and the world's huge open universities (Indira Ghandi National Open University), populist and community sectors (WikiEducator, P2PU), and new collaborations (OERu) are opening the doors to new levels of educational democratization and growth through access to higher learning.

OER excitement has recently been legitimized by UNESCO's Paris Declaration (June 2012), in which 10 recommendations speak to the many aspects of open education, open access, and open resources, including the fostering of awareness, the facilitating of technological capability, strategy and policy development, the encouraging of cultural inclusion and cooperative research, and the sharing of resources. At the end of recommendation 'e' is this statement: "Encourage the development of mechanisms for the assessment and certification of learning outcomes achieved through OER." As arguably the most pedagogically oriented of the document's 10 recommendations, is this the bellwether item? Is it the canary in the OER goldmine?

The writer suggests that the answer to the second question is "no"; the answer to the first question, however, could be "yes." This paper will examine the issues and challenges framing the role of assessment in the migration to OERs, focusing on the possible impact that assessment decisions may have on the integration of "openness" into higher education.

The wisdom of open learning: Our brave new world

The foundational tenets of open learning are not new. In ancient times, Aristotle extolled learning-by-doing and Dewey (1938) later espoused the value of each learner's experience as the valid

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starting point for his or her learning, thereby giving early voice to the notion of constructivist learning. Charles Wedemeyer, cited by Shale (1987), considering the notion of openness, mused that it "is not an absolute quality but rather a range of possibilities" (p. 9), and Wenger's landmark communities of practice research opened the door to a new thrust of "collective" thought that further decentralized the didactic nature of traditional learning. Modern technology, however, has made possible the "liberation of data" (Weller, 2011) that underpins today's open learning and OER initiatives—as it likewise supports myriad social networking interactions across all facets of 21st century communications.

Theoretically, open learning's epistemology also falls into Boyer's (1990) second dimension of scholarship, "integration." Taken broadly, and from a learning perspective, integration should encompass both experiential and authentic learning, allowing learners to bring forward their experiences and interests and use that material as building blocks in both the creation of new knowledge and its application to larger or novel contexts (Conrad, 2011; Weller, 2011). Weller (2011) emphasizes not only the tenets of constructivist thought, in that knowledge is constructed rather than delivered, but also that freely available academic content removes many types of limitations on the accessibility and use of resources.

Open learning's new affordances to students parallel similar changes in knowledge dissemination. Formalized, disciplined, laborious, and often unacceptably slow journal publication processes are yielding to interactive and democratized conversations that are fluid, ongoing, and diverse.

But vestiges of the old world persist. . . .

The movement toward openness and digitization of scholarship and learning has been hastened recently by corporate and institutional sponsorship of what Weller terms "big OERs" (2011)—large-scale initiatives such as open courseware put forward by heretofore traditional institutions, such as MIT, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, University of Michigan; by open institutions, such as the Open University's OpenLearn, and by new organizations such as Peer to Peer University (P2PU), Educity, Udacity, and Coursera, an educational for-profit formed by Stanford University professors who claim that "we are changing the face of education globally" by offering "high quality courses from the top universities, for free to everyone" (Coursera, 2012).

However, as pointed out by Cormier and Siemens (2010), some aspect of traditional ways of learning remain:

> Although courses are under pressure in the "unbundling" or fragmentation of information in general, the learning process *requires* coherence in content and conversations. Learners need some sense of what they are choosing to do, a sense of *eventedness*. Even in traditional courses, learners must engage in a process of forming coherent views of a topic.

In much the same way that learners require "a sense of *eventedness*" or some coherence within which to engage in learning, so too do mainstream post secondary institutions require their own brand of *eventedness* which traditionally has taken the form of assessment protocols. Format and instruments may vary; rigor, applicability, and application may be disputed, but post secondary institutions generally depend on assessment to measure degree, depth, and quality of learning.[1] Following the successful completion of a program of learning and a requisite course of assessments, learners' achievements are recognized by the awarding of a degree, diploma, or similar credential.

Open learning models, while providing a variety of content, routes for accessibility, interaction and instruction, have not yet reckoned with the question of assessment and its corollary challenges

of portability and recognition. Cormier and Siemens (2010) outline some of the issues around assessment and discussions "about what is being learned":

> How are we to assess and accredit work when not all learners are doing the same work? How can we deal with peripheral participation? How can participants make an informed decision on how the course will help them without knowing what they are going to get from it?

These are only some of the assessment issues that will present way-finding challenges to open learning advocates, or perhaps lead them to a fork in the road. There are many others: Given the nature of open learning, *what* should be assessed? Learner presence? Participation? Resources brought to the table? Ability and willingness to share? Written work? *Writing* in what sense? Is there value in consistency or uniformity of assessment across similar courses, among instructors, within organizations? How will academic integrity be handled? *Is* academic integrity an issue? Cheating? Plagiarism? Coursera indicates that grading will be done by peers—a democratic, engaging process, to be sure, but those of us who have used peer-grading and assessment techniques in our courses know that there is often a significant difference between our judgements and those of our learners. This view, of course, rests on the assumption that some knowledge is "more correct" or more apt than other knowledge, a view that would be argued by some in the name of openness. Coursera also suggests using computer-grading, natural-language software, and crowd-sourcing as assessment techniques, where appropriate.

More realistically, Lawrence Bacow, past president of Tufts University and an online learning scholar, suggests that it remains "unclear how traditional universities would integrate the new technologies" (Lewin, 2012). In so stating, Bacow has verbalized, albeit broadly, the large elephant in the open learning room.

Exploring assessment potential

Much of the lack of clarity surrounding the integration of open technologies and open learning into traditional systems stems from the thorny issue of assessment and the closely related concept of accreditation. In traditional institutions using traditional assessment protocols, a number of assessment instruments (usually more than one) are levied on students during each course. Ideally, the assessment instruments reflect the course content and also the aims of the course insofar as mastery and/or level of achievement, deliverables, and participation. Accreditation by the institution requires that learners not only make the grade in their chosen courses but also that they have chosen the *right* package of courses to order to satisfy both program requirements and residency. That is, a hodge-podge of completed courses is unlikely to result in the awarding of a degree.[2]

Why not? It broad-brushes the issue to simply state that post secondary institutions consider it their purview to decide on "what knowledge counts" (Fenwick, 2006) and how to measure it, but that is the historical crux of it. This paper accepts that fact as status quo *only* and does not endorse the pedagogy that often supports this traditional but institution-centric reasoning. Countering this fact are issues of learner motivation that generate course-taking. Why do learners take courses? Over time, three motivations have been attached to learners' learning behaviours: goal orientation, social/activity orientation, and "learning to learn" orientation (Houle, 1961). Goal orientation, historically the primary motivator, comprises for the most part external rewards such as pay increases, better jobs, and upward mobility. In most professions, and especially in regulated and licensed professions, there exists a strong connection between credentialization and employability, and in our 21st century globally-competitive world, the need for accredited education and/or training has

steadily increased. Therefore, the concern that is raised in all discussions of open learning around issues of assessment and subsequent accreditation is of critical importance.

Mozilla, in introducing its Open Badges[3] system—a system that provides an online record of acquired competencies and skills—declared: "Learning today happens everywhere. But it's often difficult to get recognition for skills and achievements that happen online or out of school" (Mozilla, n.d.). And whereas there is no doubt a level at which Mozilla badges will serve, there is also no doubt that they will not replace post secondary credentialization in value.

Old wine in new bottles? The potential of assessment by RPL

The practice of recognizing prior learning (RPL) is a child of adult education, both long-standing and global in scope. RPL allows individuals' experiential or informal learning to be brought forward for review and assessment in various circumstances—for educational advancement, for workplace advancement, or even for personal use. Although several different kinds of products can result from a range of applications, the nature of this paper calls for a focus on portfolios used in post secondary education, specifically at university level, often called *learning portfolios*.[4]

Various sources have suggested both formally and informally—via blogs and wiki postings—that RPL processes could provide useful tools and/or processes for the assessment of open learning activities (Cormier & Siemens, 2010). A recent project, co-funded by the European Union (EU), suggests a framework "by which the assessment and recognition of learning. . . could take place in a systemized and quality-controlled manner" (EFQUEL, 2012).

This paper proposes that the adaptation of a rigorous RPL assessment process, modeled on some processes in operation at various post secondary institutions around the world, could offer a solution to the open learning assessment issue, a solution that would be academically viable, reputable, and sufficiently constructivist-oriented so as not to negate the energy and spirit already exercised by open learners. A delicate balancing act? Perhaps so, but in times of rapid, important, and disruptive change, both delicacy and the need for balancing abound.

A description of academically-focused RPL processes follows.[5] Whereas some variations exist among institutions, the common denominator across good practice is attention to pedagogy, a focus on demonstrated learning through reflection, and the involvement of academic personnel in coaching, mentoring, and assessment protocols. A strong university RPL process ideally maintains a centralized presence so that it can work with, and *for*—but independently of—the institution's various programs. RPL policy should guide its activities and quality assurance measures should safeguard its process. Academic participation and support is important to successful RPL; ideally, the process should be considered as one of several ways in which learning can occur for students. Enroling in and completing courses is the traditional way of attaining university credit, but many institutions also permit challenge-for-credit and transfer credit options.

Applicants wishing to receive credit for their prior experiential learning using RPL are usually asked to present their knowledge for assessment in the form of a portfolio. Applicants assemble portfolios in which they outline their learning histories and display the knowledge they claim to have, usually in text form, supported by documentation. The many parts of the portfolio may include a learning narrative, a resume, a statement of educational or career goals, program information, and some type of written demonstration of learning, usually written in response to stated criteria which often take the form of learning outcomes at program or course level. Situating learners within this process in an informed fashion requires careful advising and guidance, sometimes provided by specialized RPL coordinators or facilitators. RPL-awarded credit must fit appropriately into a student's program.

Generally, an institution sets limits and parameters on the type and amount of RPL credit that students can apply to their programs.

The key elements to learning portfolios are based on RPL's underlying principles: credit is awarded for learning, not experience; learning must be clearly demonstrated; learning must be at university level; learning must be appropriate and relevant to a learner's program.

Learners' engagement with cognitive process—with *meta*-cognition—during the portfolio learning process brings to the fore several important pedagogical issues, among them, authentic learning and diversity, both factors that would be recognized as important by those who have engaged in open learning. The product, the learning portfolio, forms the basis of the assessment process; process and product, together, however, give learners ample opportunity to find their voices and let them be heard. As a result, RPL learners report high levels of satisfaction, revelation, and personal growth—in addition to the credit received as a result of their efforts.

There are reservations about this approach. In a recent comparative study that looked at RPL and related assessment practices in 31 institutions, Conrad and McGreal (2012) found the same concerns shared around the world. Practitioners outlined the rigor and time-intensity of good RPL practice at post secondary level. They emphasized the necessary collaboration with faculty and other personnel within the institution. Additionally, they reiterated the difficulty in setting fair and appropriate fees and in knowing how to cost a process which is, at the same time, academic and administrative. All were concerned that a fair and equitable process be uniformly accessible to learners.

Concluding with cautious optimism

The nature of open learning means that learners coming forward for potential assessment at an institution will bring with them diverse learning experiences. The challenge for progressive and sympathetic educators who support the constructs underlying open learning is to determine appropriate assessment protocols that respect both the granting institution and learners' previous efforts and energy invested in learning activities. The promise of open learning offers new accessibility and opportunity for millions of learners worldwide. With care, it can also offer those learners the chance to have their self-directed learning recognized by a credentialing institution—still a valuable commodity in today's workplaces. Strong RPL models can provide cognitively-sound, thoughtful, and integrative assessment protocols that bridge the gap between learners' "open" accomplishments and post secondary structure. And while it's not suggested here that RPL would meet all assessment needs in all cases at all times, the author proposes that it is a very worthwhile contender for consideration, offering opportunities for more flexibility and more authenticity than do many traditional assessment tools.

Notes

1 The study of assessment is its own field. The discussion of assessment in this paper does not attempt to explore, explain, or justify types or philosophies of assessment; nor to evaluate the many ways in which assessments are conducted; nor quantify various approaches to assessment. Nor is a more detailed understanding of any of these aspects of assessment necessary for this paper's argument.

2 Traditional universities often offer a "general studies" type of degree that is more flexible than many degrees. In Canada, Athabasca University, Thompson Rivers University, and Simon Fraser University offer a Bachelor of General Studies; the Universities of New Brunswick and the University of Prince Edward Island offer Bachelor of Integrated Studies degrees. Still, these degrees require some adherence to structure and required courses.

[3] See https://wiki.mozilla.org/images/5/59/OpenBadges-Working-Paper_012312.pdf for more information on Open Badges.

[4] There are several different kinds of portfolios. The RPL portfolio is called a *learning* portfolio by some (but not by all: there is rarely consensus in terminology in the field. This can also be referred to as an *assessment* portfolio) because of its heavy emphasis on demonstrating acquired learning for the purposes of assessment. Other types of portfolios include *showcase* portfolios, a summative collection of representative or outstanding work; *performance* or *process* portfolios, a record of achievement or growth, often used for promotion purposes; and *personal* portfolios which contain personal artifacts designed to highlight life achievements on a personal level.

[5] This paper's author has conducted extensive research on RPL practice at institutions in several countries. While she forwards her own institution's practice as a prime example, she has considered other acceptable practices as well. "Acceptable" results from adhering to the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) standards for RPL assessment.

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