
BERLIN, 30 JUNE 2011

Today UNU-MERIT\(^1\) and UNU-ViE\(^2\) hosted a [workshop](#) on ‘The Why and How of Open Education: Concepts and Practices’ on the sidelines of the Annual Open Knowledge Conference (OKCon) in Berlin, Germany.

The workshop attracted 30 participants to debate the higher-level field of Open Education (OE), fed by interactive sessions to gather, review and define OE concepts and practices.

A brief [introduction](#) to the Open Education field was followed by a post-it session to identify the core components of OE. These included ‘Open Content’, ‘Open Degrees’, ‘Open Assessment’, ‘Open Learning’, ‘Open Tutoring’, ‘Open Technology’ and ‘Open Communities’.

An early question was “Why not skip the ‘Open’ instead of repeating it over and over again?” But a majority agreed that it was more than a filler and that it mirrors an attitude, behaviour, concept or desirable state. Others warned against the fetishization of the word ‘Open’, and of the risks of diluting its meaning with ‘Open Everything’.

This introduction was then followed by the two core sessions: the first asked why to engage in OE and how to provide it, the second explored possible services and how to make OE sustainable.

From the start there were numerous contributions from the attendees. Within minutes Elf Pavlik had set up an online collaborative [notepad](#), which was then used in parallel to the physical session. In a Twitter-fuelled world physical workshops can easily be augmented by virtual events, and after a few tweets we even got some further virtual participants. Click here to see how the online [dialogue](#) developed.

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SESSION 1: WHY ENGAGE IN OE AND HOW TO PROVIDE IT?

This first session on ‘why engage in OE and how to provide it’ began with a brief presentation which listed a number of reasons to engage with OE, as well as examples on how OE might look like in practice. Our premise was that traditional formal education is not only exclusive but that it resembles a Blackbox. More transparency and efficiency, with a view to improving education, were much discussed higher-level reasons for engaging with OE, though this is far from obvious in the word cloud below, drawn from the session one dialogue captured through the notepad.

What the word cloud does capture is the degree of debate surrounding OE as being a part of traditional formal education, and not a parallel education universe. The discussions explored how the different meanings of openness could help us to improve contemporary education systems.

With regards to ‘means’, there were two main tracks up for discussion. First, to consider what happens once education is opened up, what is desirable and what might be problematic. Second, to consider and discuss similar things which are already out there, including the much-cited case of Open Source Software. What was remarkable about this session was that a room full of people appeared to share a common understanding of the OE field.

SESSION 2: SUSTAINABILITY OF OE AND THE SERVICE PERSPECTIVE

The second session on possible OE services and sustainability started with a brief introductory presentation. This very heterogeneous group not only looked at OE from a business angle, but also discussed a range of perspectives, including education as a public good, ethical considerations, alternatives to monetary compensations, and so forth.

Our second word cloud does not entirely mirror all the many aspects discussed, instead suggesting that the debate revolved around ‘paid’ versus ‘free’.

One other major aspect was that of scarcity. It has been argued that so long as there is no scarcity there is no real problem in publicly funding the education system, independently of the cost involved. However, once there is scarcity, decisions have to be made on where to cut funding.

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3 There is a common distinction between Blackbox and Whitebox systems in the software domain. Proprietary software is usually referred to as Blackbox, i.e. the internal structure of the software code is hidden, untransparent and closed. Open Source Software on the other hand is commonly referred to as Whitebox, as the code is accessible, the processes are transparent, and all information is open.
Summing up, the first session explored how OE fosters transparency and enhances efficiency, and the second session demonstrated how unbundling education could help to better understand the costs of individual education positions (OE as a Whitebox – see footnote 3). OE may therefore help not only to cut the cost of education, but to better articulate funding priorities.

**OE AT THE OPEN KNOWLEDGE CONFERENCE**

On 1 July 2011, Andreas Meiszner joined a session on ‘Hacking Education’ with Philipp Schmidt from P2PU. Meiszner’s talk was deliberately provocative, entitled: *Open Education: Totally pointless or a mean to modernize traditional formal education?*

For his part Schmidt presented a number of success stories from P2PU, with a view to providing complementary means to traditional formal education. This contrasted well with the OE focus on modernizing and taking traditional formal education further. The difference must be spelled out, since the ‘free learning’ domain is characterized by motivation and enablers, while that of traditional formal education is marked by well-established structures.

How efficiently is change being handled within education? Over a decade has been spent on the ‘e-learning buzz’, or as a colleague put it: when “the IT departments took over education”. This in turn was followed by a decade of ‘OER buzz’. Despite some clear progress, 20 years is a long time given what has been achieved -- and how much remains to be achieved.

**SATELLITE MEETING: openSE**

In addition to the main proceedings, there was a project meeting of openSE, which focuses on Open Educational frameworks. At this meeting Lin Squires, Matty Smith and Elmar Husmann from the European Learning Industry Group (ELIG) provided preliminary results from their 2011 *Open Education Survey*. This highlighted the similarities between the fields of OE and Open Source Software, suggesting that sustainable models for OE will need more time to mature.

**FOR MORE DETAILS CONTACT**
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