

Open Education and virtual communities: an experience

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Abstract

In Fall 2007, Utah State University professor David Wiley held a course about Open Education. That time Dr Wiley's course was followed by an unusual group of students. The Fall 2007 edition, in fact, was available to anybody, free of charge, all over the world. The only requisite required was the possession of a blog for the completion of the weekly assignments. The present paper, whose authors attended the course, is an account of their experience. It can be considered an innovating experience from many different viewpoints and an example of how the world of the formal education can meet the demands of the informal one, in the broader landscape of professional training and lifelong learning.

Keywords: OER, Open Education, online community, informal learning

1. The “Introduction to Open Education” course

The “Introduction to Open Education” (OpenEd: INST 7150 Introduction to Open Education, Fall 2007) course is a formal undergraduate course by Utah State University (USA).

The instructor is David Wiley, Associate Professor of Instructional Technology and director of the Center for Open and Sustainable Learning (COSL) at Utah State University (<http://cosl.usu.edu/>), well known researcher in the area of Learning Objects and Open content.

The novelty in the Fall 2007 edition of the course was the opportunity of attending the course free of charge, offered to anyone in the world. The only requirement was the availability of a blog, to be used to publish weekly posts on the various topics of the course.

The course could be attended in different ways:

- *credit*: students who needed credit had to sign up for an independent study at their university and find a supervisor to whom the instructor should send a grade at the end of the term;
- *non-credit*: students could attend the course without any grading from the instructor. If they completed it they could get a certificate at the end of the course stating its successful conclusion;
- *informal*: fully non-credit attendance of the activities.

The course objectives were:

- to give a firm grounding in the current state of the field of open education, including related topics like copyright, licensing, and sustainability;
- to help locate open education in the context of mainstream instructional technologies like learning objects;
- to get thinking, writing, and dialoguing about current practices and possible alternatives in open education;
- to be able to propose OER projects locally.

2. The course contents

The contents offered by the OpenEd course were focused on Open Educational Resources (OER) starting, however, from a wide perspective about researches onto the respect of human rights in the educational field, reflections about the opportunities and limits concerning the chance to gain free access to educational resources, and considerations about weaknesses and strengths of the OER movement (http://www.opencontent.org/wiki/index.php?title=Intro_Open_Ed_Syllabus). Furthermore, it included examples of good practices in the OER, reflections from the literature on learning objects and hints about its future developments.

3. The Italian group

In January 2007 the Laboratorio di Tecnologie dell'Educazione (LTE) at the University of Florence (<http://www.scform.unifi.it/lte>) set up a virtual community of students, former students, professionals and teachers whose main objective is supporting informal learning and professional training for those who are interested in educational technology. It has been named LTEver (<http://www.lte-unifi.net/elgg>) and is based on the Open Source software Elgg, <http://elgg.org>, (Fini, 2007). Multiple blogs are the main elements in LTEver and it was just from the blog of one of its participants that some LTEver users heard of the OpenEd course and decided to enroll. Meanwhile a dedicated Italian community was activated inside LTEver to attend the OpenEd course and interact inside it.

Based on informal networks of relationships through personal blogs and the LTEver community blog, the people involved in the course have played an active and proactive role contributing efficacious proposals to improve their own training experience, in a balanced union of informality and mutual commitment, typical of the communities of practice (Trentin, 2004). The group experienced what Wenger believes are the three basic principles of an effective community of practice (Wenger, 1998):

- establishment of a 'joint venture', through the formation of a shared vision of problems and shared solutions, the negotiation of priorities among the members and the development of a common awareness;
- mutual commitment on the basis of which the members interact and share the experience that is owned by the individual in order to feed cooperative learning;
- presence of a shared repertoire represented by sets of knowledge, tools, methods and artifacts through which the collective knowledge is being conveyed and the memory of the community is being kept.

4. The collective interaction

As regards the development of the training process, three different phases took place in which the role of the collective interaction became a decisive factor:

- Creation of a starting process: the course teacher traced an outline of the training process to complete by the end of the course indicating its objectives, tools, materials and schedule. The syllabus was published on a wiki that was utterly available and open to the learners, even in its editing options. Therefore, integrations and changes to the structure of the course were allowed, for example some weekly assignments were changed to fit the needs of a group of learners.
- Emergence of the interactions: a group of participants, while completing the weekly assignments on their own blogs, shared their own ideas and experiences about the learning process that had been proposed and produced a wide and structured net of interactions with

constructive functions and cooperative learning purposes. At a first stage, the organizational and didactic structure of the course indicated an individual learning modality for the reading and the working out of the reflections, while the collective interaction among the participants was postponed to a later time, with the stated objective to spur the learners to read the posts in the blogs of their colleagues, getting them to comment on one another. An RSS feed had been arranged, but it turned out to be not very functional to the needs of the participants as the references to the comments were not included while, as many learners pointed out, the discussions that sprang from the comments were even more interesting than the posts themselves.

- Restructuring of the process: the course instructor worked on the net of interactions produced by the group, received their stimuli and restructured the development of the course proposing a final version, modified and broadened on the basis of the learners' observations. At the end of the course, starting from the learning material produced by the participants, the teacher could have the opportunity to extrapolate a new pattern for the course to re-use in the following edition, in a constant process of spiral renewal.

By means of peer interaction, inside a conception of learning traditionally regarded as an individual and passive fruition of contents, as the course seemed to develop in the first phase, we moved on to something else, namely the notion of a learning environment in which the individual who learns changes and creates the learning materials by himself contributing to determine the collective educational experience and making both the traditional learning poles (author-reader) coincide. There was an alternation between moments of individual fruition and moments of collaboration that asked for the reading of the course participants' posts and the comments on the posts that each learner considered relevant. The discussions that sprang from this process turned into such a massive instrument of aggregation that they determined a strong motivation to work out a model of learning based on a constructivist style, which acquires a quite different formative value from a traditional distance course.

We have moved from a conception of knowledge as a typically reticular structure to the development of purely connective organizations and patterns, which establish a tight connection between contents and users, towards a more and more creative and collaborative dimension (Pireddu, 2007).

5. The role of the community

The course was set up with a very open perspective. However, during the first eight weeks activities took place in a rather conventional way. The participants read the assigned materials and blogged their own answers to the assigned questions. Therefore, apart from the delivery method based on blog posts, the course appeared to be a kind of conventional e-learning course, with very little interaction among its participants. Probably, the interaction lacked initially because of the very tight schedule.

This state of affairs caused a lot of discussion in the Italian LTEver community of Open Education classmates, so that one of them wrote a pivoting post, the so called "Week X" post, to point out the weaknesses of the course. A broader discussion spread among the other classmates. The teacher proved to be really open-minded since he took part in the discussion and readjusted the syllabus according to the issues raised by the participants.

The new syllabus let more time for cross-reading and cross-blogging. Even the teacher had more time to comment on the students' posts. The lesson taught by this occurrence is that, even in a markedly informal course, a sensible attitude of the teacher is crucial. The final group of students was smaller than the initial one of about fifty people, but it was still quite heterogeneous, being composed of college students, teachers and researchers. This final group

turned out to be highly motivated since it followed the schedule of assignments regardless of the expectations in terms of final credits.

The Italian subgroup built itself around the Open Education community inside LTEver which turned out to be a very effective place for discussion and problem sharing as well as a good scaffolding tool.

The "wrap up" closing assignment was delivered by the Italian community as a collaborative work by means of the presentation tool available from Google Docs. The initiative was a natural outcome of the previous team work that had influenced all the course life, being appreciated by the teacher as well as by the other foreign course mates.

6. Conclusion

The OpenEd course can be considered a case study for several reasons:

- the nature of the course. It was a formal course, offered by a formal institution (Utah State University), but it was managed and released as an informal learning initiative. This could be a real opportunity for universities. In this way, they might open their courses at a very low cost. While discussions grow on the role of higher education institutions in lifelong learning, this is a real chance to consider;
- the course contents. They were of particular interest in Italy where there are little significant OER initiatives, not comparable to others abroad;
- the carrying out of the course. It offers a working example of a new way for professional development courses and lifelong learning. In this case, the professional community worked at different levels, almost all of them mediated by the technological system that supports the community life: 1) information; it was through the community that participants learnt about the opportunity of attending the course; 2) decision-making; because of emulation and reciprocal encouragement a group of users decided to enroll, creating a specialized sub-community; 3) scaffolding; participants supported one another, both in the cognitive and the emotional aspects, during the course.

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