Openlanguages.net – A global vision for less commonly-taught languages

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Introduction

In the last decade Open CourseWare (OCW) and Open Educational Resources (OER) have gained traction in higher education. In this paper OER to refer to the bigger whole. OER is part of a surge in innovation and in visualizing a redefined future of education. Commercial ventures and non-profit initiatives are building compelling environments to lure learning institutions. In the pre-Internet era, a commercial solution was the defaulted option. Cloud computing, social networks, mobile access and improved ease of development changed old assumptions. Some commercial solutions, once adopted, are difficult and costly to leave. OER provide open solutions. Internet environments today empowers educators to directly share their best directly with the world. This paper explores the potential that OER offers to expand knowledge and learning, and why the design of learning will have to change. This context is applied to foreign language learning, with wider application.

Why Open Educational Resources?

The Afrikaans section of the Openlanguages.net initiative, brought in unsolicited fan mail from all over to express appreciation for this gift of knowledge that is offered for free where others normally charge. With this vignette, I want to focus on what OERs can offer the world and what is possible in the generation of collective knowledge due to the culture of openness.

The value of OER will focus is on both the empowerment of the individual, as well as the power of collective development and learning.

(i) Individual empowerment – the Internet and its ever expanding richness permit millions more the blessing of sharing their abilities, talents, information, and knowledge. Consider this – if you have exceptional talent or intellectual ability, but you were paralyzed, how terrible must it feel to know that you can't share. Often no one knows that you face your captivity every day. Prior to the Internet, many brilliant contributors did not have access to publishers,

nor to the circles that would offer access to disseminate what they might have regarded as their gift to the world. The popular TV show, "Britain's Got Talent" abundantly illustrates how a new avenue of access blesses those who formally had no access to be heard or seen. A core objective of this paper is to raise awareness of the role that universities could have beyond the role of a traditional environment of learning. The enablement of the individual (students and instructors) to publish and disseminate knowledge begs of the university to fully assume the role to promote, to facilitate, and to direct students and faculty to generate, to collectively refine, and to share intellect, new thinking, and problem solving. Intellectual contributors are less beholden to traditional avenues of access, and more enabled to directly connect and disseminate information. Universities should promote and facilitate such activity.

(ii) Collective and Social – the second area of focus where universities have a significant role to play is to exploit the concept of "collective". Social networking and global real time connectivity enables sharing, discussion, evaluation, comparing, and to collectively author or develop new knowledge. The challenge is not so much about the optimal use of technology, as it is about changing social habits and getting people to allow themselves to explore new collaborative relationships. There barriers include traditional academic silos and the reticence to embrace inter-institutional collaboration and development. Debackere, Clarysse, and Rappa (1996) address the strength of ties between groups and the exchange of information – a strong motivation to move beyond the silos we have today.

Some well recognized OER examples include the Khan Academy (n.d.), Wikipedia (n.d.), and university initiatives such as Stanford University (n.d.), MIT (n.d.), Johns Hopkins (n.d.) and CMU (n.d.). In the era of cloud computing, the concept of open-access promotes collaboration, speeds up dissemination and further kindles the vision that open sharing and collaboration exponentially speeds up the cycle of progress.

This emerging reality of creative OER offerings begets the next generation of teaching, networking and learning designs. OER changes learning and its supporting environment of user-uploaded videos, audio, presentations, and social media environments, volunteer Q&A sites, real-time connectivity, etc. The focus is on the value and potential of self-directed learning – to challenge assumptions of what and how learning can be done outside of yesteryear's face-to-face learning defaults. Today's digital natives have different networking approaches to learning and problem solving. The digital networking and access make learners more autonomous in learning and networking strategies. There is less need for a live person to preside over much of the learning. An increasing number of learning tasks and modules are assigned to be acquired independently. University commitment to the OER mindset helps to bridge the gap between instructors and content providers on the one side and learners on the other. The university's OER is globally present and can attract attention to the host institution's efuture vision – making the host institution a known and attractive institution of higher learning. In line with this vision, I share steps taken with the openlanguages.net initiative to make less commonly-taught languages commonly taught.

Less Commonly-taught Languages no More

Many OCW projects is a fork of an existing course by adding view-only access to the public. In 2004 the openlanguages.net project started as a native OER project, designed as an open learning environment for Afrikaans as a foreign language, designed specifically for broad public access, addressing the needs of a wide range of proficiency levels and ages. Since Afrikaans is a less commonly-taught language, it is strategic to develop an open, rich language resource, to addresses the curricular needs of high school and college students and the public in general. The objective is to create a learning environment to replace textbooks, to provide interactive self-learning activities, and to bring users together in a socially connected environment. The question is – how do you design a site to cover the needs and interests of many age groups, many levels of proficiency, and the diverse reasons and objectives for wanting to learn the language? This paper addresses some of the key initial decisions to serve a long term product vision. Firstly I address the broad considerations about the platform, open standards and adaptability to cope with future technological advances. Then the macro modular design is addressed, explaining the differences between a linear sequential versus a modular design as the fundamental layer. Then interactivity is explored and building a social network to support each other at different levels of expertise. Finally I address customized to accommodate the development curricula at different levels of proficiency as a supra-layer, addressing several semesters of foreign language learning and covering topics of high impact, eg. the communication needs of Non-governmental Organizations.

The Technical Environment

Depending on the extensive nature of the intended development, a careful choice of the platform matters. For the semester-based courses I teach on campus, I have chosen Google Sites as my platform of choice (Du Plessis, 2011). The ease of use and the integration with Google Docs and Youtube and other tools to stream audio and video, makes this a solid offering. The inclusion of Youtube access is vital, since this open video platform is a key site in offering open educational content. In November, YouTube challenged users to increase the number of videos uploaded per minute from 35 hours per minute to 48, and they have delivered. One year ago, YouTube reported 24 hours of video uploaded per minute, and 2 billion views per day (Youtube Statistics, May 2011).

For a more expanded OER offering, it is valuable to consider a CMS (Content Management System). A CMS allows the developer to allow multiple people to edit the environment, and to create a front-end login for specialized activities, like allowing specific course participants to log in and track their own progress. This requires having webspace. Fortunately it does not require having your own server, and virtual unlimited space can be had for under US$10.00 per month. Examples would be godaddy.com, hostgator.com etc. Depending on the traffic to the site, it might have to be scaled up to a dedicated server which will cost more than $100 per month. To choose a suitable CMS, the site www.cmsmatrix.org does a detailed comparison of more than a hundred CMS options. I chose TYPO3. It compares favorably with popular CMSes like Drupal, Joomla! and Moodle. It is an open source CMS and many

companies use TYPO3 as their company's CMS. Future design will have to accommodate mobile platforms as well.

When choosing a platform you have to consider variables such as traffic, scale of the project, participant integration, etc. will have to be considered, as well as the flexibility of the environment to accommodate the anticipated future expansion of the project. The exit strategy – does your chosen platform allow you to easily export your content to another platform? Is the platform designed to localize the site to many languages?

The Macro Modular design

In contrast to a linear design, where a path is created with an assumption of the best way to proceed chronologically, the modular design centers on specific functions in each language. The categories are: general, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, culture, and communication.

Under General several syllabi for different grade and skill levels are offered. The Links section connects to other relevant sites. There is an introduction to the site, and to the language. There is a page with networking information for learners, etc.

Pronunciation is divided into two broad sections: specific and holistic. The specific section addresses each sound and the alphabet. The holistic section offers the language as is, e.g. stories, songs, poetry, etc. Learners experience the language as is to help learners hear the language as used.

Vocabulary provides a logical categorization of vocabulary lists and ways to help learn the terms. There are videos, and interactive practice tools.

Grammar has a beginners and intermediate section to offer learning at these levels. It offers a story to explain the grammar and good references and audio and video streams.

Culture addresses factual cultural information, and values and perceptions and views on life. It links to online videos and integrates other Web resources.

Communication is also divided into a beginner and intermediate section, addressing topics of discussion to help learners listen, speak and write about these topics. It has a growing offering of video and audio examples to help learners build patterns.

Modular designs offer open access to the diverse aspects of the language and the architecture allows for content to be added as needed. It is easy to update specific sections without a detrimental impact on the rest of the compilation.

Interactivity and Social Networking

For future systems to meet the needs of self-driven learners, instructional events will go beyond the presentation of information. Interactivity for learning, to verify what learning has occurred, will be available across platforms. This could include repeatable tests, practice, and comparing your own findings against that of others.

Social networks such as Google+, Facebook, Yahoo Groups or Ning would allow students to answer each other's questions, study together, find and share resources, provide and receive encouragement, and further shape the concepts of communities of practice and learning communities. Simply put, social networks are essential.

Expanding the Offering

Like with Wikipedia, will perpetually be updated and expanded, more aptly serving more communities. Openlanguages.net showcase authentic materials as a collection point for native talent – an expanding offering to many authors, including those in the public domain, to more fully express the richness of the cultures served by the language.

Conclusion

Long term sustainability is a challenge. Options to address that include advertising, selling product or specialized services, or accepting donations or sponsorship.

Many agree, the opening of educational content and learning tools, and building learning communities will be a disruptive technology to bless the world with a fuller potential of the Internet. This pioneering cause is noble to actually change lives. In this instance, for languages then, this initiative will nurture the formation of global classrooms in many languages to transform one language at a time, from a less commonly-taught language, to a commonly taught language with the rich promises offered by advances in mobile computing, ubiquitous access, cloud tools, storage capacity, innovations in interactive visual and audio interfaces.

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