Open Education: Practices

Scenario

Having once been skeptical about open educational resources (OER) and open education in general, Professor Tony Abruzzi now considers himself an advocate for open educational practices (OEP). His change of heart began when he realized that OER offered students a viable alternative to increasingly expensive traditional textbooks. To address that challenge, he started using open textbooks in one of his history courses. Gradually, he began to adopt other OER materials into the course, including openly licensed videos and images.

As he learned more about open education, Abruzzi became intrigued by faculty who reported that adopting elements of OEP was helping them approach pedagogy in creative new ways. Just as intriguing were reports that students were becoming much more engaged in their learning through these practices.

To test these findings himself, Abruzzi decided to convert a history course to an OEP approach. He identified a wide range of OER curricular materials that he considered suitable. Rather than curate the OER for his students, though, Abruzzi invited them to choose from among the materials based on what most interested them. He asked students to identify a particular question and develop a learning plan for exploring that question during the course. He also required that students update and improve the course OER, create new OER where needed, and decide how they should be graded.

Abruzzi continued to lecture periodically and retained some classroom traditions—such as occasional quizzes—but he made sure most of the course time was devoted to helping students pursue the questions they had identified and reviewing their contributions to the course OER. As part of their learning plan, students also wrote or edited a Wikipedia article relevant to their particular focus area. Success in that course prompted Abruzzi to use a similar approach in other courses he teaches. When colleagues expressed interest in what he was doing, Abruzzi helped a biologist and a social psychologist adopt OEP in their courses.

Abruzzi regularly fields requests to present about his experiences with OEP at professional conferences. Through contacts he has made at such meetings, including some in other countries, he is now sharing techniques, tools, and experiences with a growing community of OEP practitioners. On his home campus, Abruzzi was instrumental in helping the provost craft new policies for tenure and promotion that take into account work in OEP.

1 What is it?

While educators often initially embrace open educational content as a way to maximize access to curricular materials and significantly reduce their costs, many instructors leverage OER to reconceptualize and improve pedagogy and advance authentic, participatory, engaged learning. One definition describes such open educational practices (OEP) as the "use/reuse/creation of OER and collaborative, pedagogical practices employing social and participatory technologies for interaction, peer-learning, knowledge creation and sharing, and empowerment of learners." Open educational practices are seen as a means for students and faculty to develop new approaches to co-creating knowledge, assessing student outcomes, and designing programs. In these and other ways, OEP align with the principles of open scholarship.

2 How does it work?

Open educational practices seek to fully use the potential inherent in OER to support learning and to help students both contribute to knowledge and construct their own learning pathways. Embodying a commitment to learner-driven education, OEP involves students in "active, constructive engagement with [open] content, tools and services in the learning process" in ways designed to help promote learners' self-management, creativity, and ability to work in teams. OEP also provide a framework for revising the practice of teaching to engage students in actively shaping their learning (e.g., by developing personalized learning projects) and contributing to public knowledge (e.g., by creating and sharing OER). Speaking to the importance of OER in making OEP possible, the term "OER-enabled pedagogy" has been proposed to define "a set of teaching and learning practices [that are] only possible or practical when you have permission to engage in the 5R activities"—that is, practices only possible when educational content can be retained, reused, revised, remixed, and redistributed.

3 Who's doing it?

Art history students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison developed chapters to create an OER textbook based on their study of Frank Lloyd Wright architectural sites. The final assignment in a course on "Women and Medicine" at the University of Oklahoma was to create or expand a Wikipedia article on a female physician, healer, or biomedical scientist. To help

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students reach a deeper level of understanding, a psychology professor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University asked them to develop test questions rather than merely answer them. To help students take ownership for what they learn, a biology professor at Keene State College provides a wide range of OEP-related principles, "how to" information, and links to other relevant materials. Further, the professor requires students to identify topics that are of the most interest to them, how they want class time to be used, and what percentage of their grade should be attributed to various activities of their choosing. The Open Pedagogy Notebook details many examples of OEP.

4 Why is it significant?

OEP provide the architecture and philosophical underpinning for fulfilling the promise of using OER to expand collaborative, inclusive, accessible, and active learning and related pedagogy. Advocates contend that by making possible new pedagogical techniques that enable and facilitate more flexible and collaborative learning, OEP help faculty develop more agency and autonomy by providing new tools and a broader framework to help them revise, remix, localize, and contextualize pedagogy and curricular resources. OEP also give agency to students by giving them more control over the structure, content, and outcomes of their learning and by creating opportunities for them to create learning materials. In those ways, OEP broaden learning from a focus on access to knowledge to a focus on access to knowledge creation. In learning environments that adopt OEP, for example, students and faculty can collaborate on building and remixing openly licensed course materials in ways that facilitate engaged learning and the development of new course content that contributes to knowledge in a given field. A key tenet is the positioning of the learner as a central, active player in the learning experience.

5 What are the downsides?

Faculty may find it challenging and time-consuming to adapt their pedagogy to an OEP model. Some faculty perceive a loss of control when students are invited to co-create and contrib-ute to course goals, activities, and content. Students accustomed to a more traditional approach may find it difficult to adapt to an OEP-structured course. Other challenges include lack of awareness about what OEP are, confusion about the multiple pedagogic options that OEP afford, and lack of institutional support to redesign one's course to incorporate OEP. Further, many institutions do not recognize OEP in promotion and tenure policies.

6 Where is it going?

Broadly speaking, OEP are continuing to gain acceptance in the academy, and a body of research about OEP is building. Going forward, practitioners and researchers envision that the focus around OEP will evolve from a relatively narrow emphasis on development, revising, and distribution of OER to further development of related practices, architectures, principles, and policies. OEP practitioners have considerable interest in "moving beyond the textbook"—not just developing open textbooks and other OER but also pursuing broader efforts to develop, practice, and test new ways of thinking about learning and pedagogy. OEP advocates suggest the time is right for more experimentation, including developing the community—of educators across institutions and countries—that is seen as essential to mainstreaming OEP.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

OEP have the ability to reduce barriers to access higher education for multiple types of learners. More broadly, OEP have the potential to empower students to be engaged, active participants in more authentic learning than they might otherwise undertake. Further, OEP go a step beyond active learning by engaging the learner in creating and revising OER and hence contributing to the learning of the students who come after them. Moreover, OEP offer potential for new approaches to pedagogy that, by one observation, can create "a site of praxis, a place where theories about learning, teaching, technology, and social justice enter into a conversation with each other and inform the development of educational practices and structures."