

The potential for Open Educational Resources to widen participation for excluded groups: the mediated use of OpenLearn

Billy Khokhar, The Open University, UK (n.khokhar@open.ac.uk)

Abstract

Widening access to, and participation in, higher education is influenced by many factors. Not least is that some groups in society are excluded due to familial, cultural and socio-economic constraints. While access to new technologies can also be a barrier, the greater availability and relative cheapness of computers and Internet connections and the use of platforms such as OpenLearn containing appropriate open educational resources mean that many more learners can become engaged with educational courses. The key is to use the new media as a sound pedagogical intervention to stimulate further participation.

This paper reports on the results of some pedagogic interventions using open educational resources with groups of women learners of South Asian heritage in Yorkshire who have had little or no Higher Education achievements or aspirations. These learners are both excluded from engaging in Post-16 Education by their circumstances within their families and communities and are also unfamiliar with the concept of e-learning, as are most people within their communities. Their families are not averse to the notion of higher education for women but rather the mode and amount of attendance, which also has to be in a perceived safe environment. Consequently these groups have particular requirements and needs that have to be considered and addressed before any long term embedded solutions, or interventions can be implemented. These include an understanding of any real or perceived digital divide that may impact on these communities..

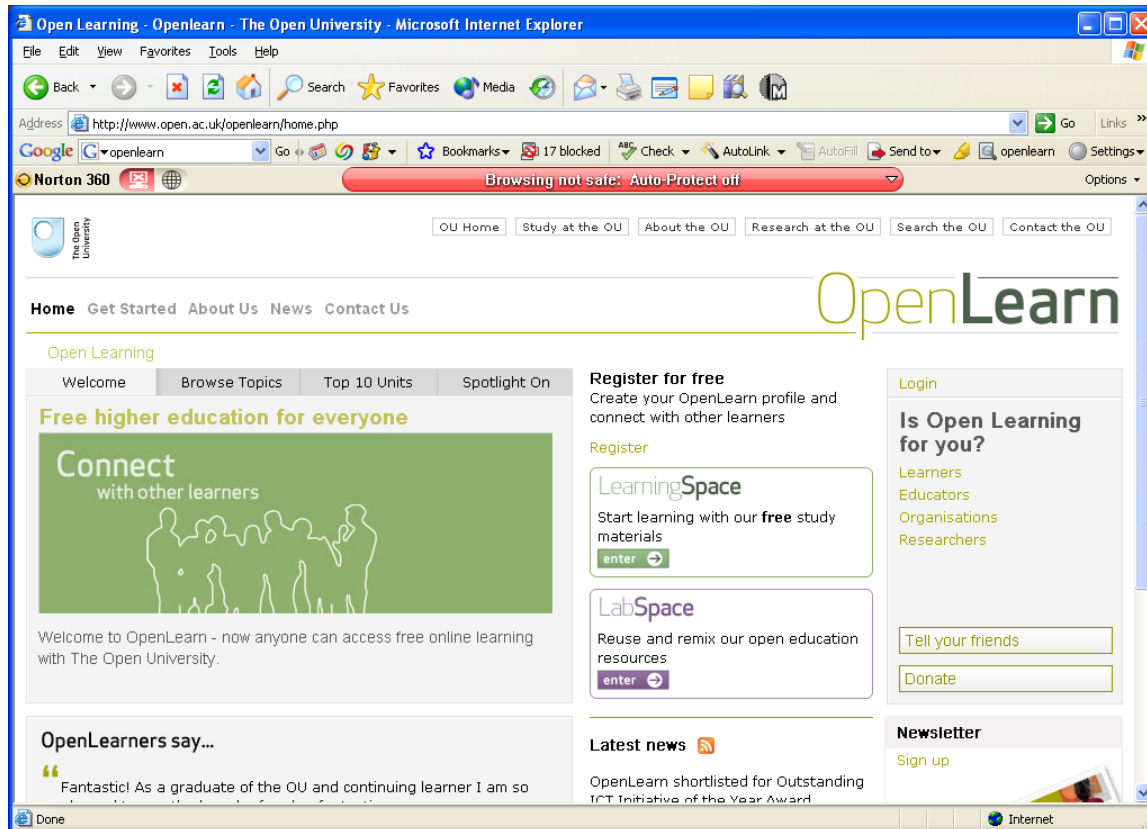
Keywords: OpenLearn (<http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/home.php>), open educational resources, widening participation, e-learning

What is OpenLearn?

The Open University OpenLearn newsletter Creating A New World of Learning (2007) describes OpenLearn thus,

“For decades The Open University has transformed the lives of people whose background and experience barred their entry to traditional universities. The OU believes that open educational resources have the potential to dramatically increase the number of lives that can be improved through education, in the UK and internationally. Through OpenLearn it hopes to achieve this. OpenLearn enables learners with limited experience and confidence to become better prepared for formal education. It offers structured learning materials and tools to support teachers working with under-represented groups. It supplies ‘reintegration’ level material for those wishing to return to higher education after time out. And it provides workers with an opportunity to upgrade their skill base and progress their careers.” (Creating A New World of Learning ,2007).

The OpenLearn Homepage



New perspectives

It is inevitable that that the extended use of information technology will bring a revolution in teaching and learning, just as it has brought a revolution in knowledge and its acquisition in the transient knowledge transfer society. The use of ICTs is in the process of transforming distance

education, in particular post-16 education. In many areas taking courses online is now a viable alternative to studying on site at a University or College and the future of learning engagement is changing and it is becoming apparent that the use of e-learning will be the dominant medium especially for institutions such as ours.

ICT based learning is also capable of putting learning tools of various kinds into the hands of students and teachers, both to broaden and to deepen the learning and teaching experiences during formal periods of study and thereafter. There is often however, an assumption on the part of some institutions that pre-supposes the ability of students to engage with these differentiated platforms (such as VLEs, Moodle, Blackboard, blogs, wikis etc).

The Open University is addressing these issues proactively. In Yorkshire Region 7 we are utilising the potential of e-learning interventions and addressing the pedagogical issues around e-learning. We have embarked on a series of `taster` events, awareness sessions and full learning programmes in community centres where we are using Open Learn as a conduit into, and catalyst for learning, especially within the Open University. We show study materials to groups of students (and individuals) for them to be able to see how electronic engagement works, what our materials look like and what is expected of them.

Even though this may be resource intensive at the outset I feel that as a form of preparedness for the students this is an excellent tool. I consider that this approach will impact positively on Institutional recruitment, retention and achievement priorities and is therefore a sound business model. Moreover it is also an academically resonant pedagogy as our potential learners (and their families) can make informed decisions about their learning journeys and take responsibility and ownership for their own education.

We have begun to embed this approach of using Open Learn into a synergic response with our partner agencies (such as Family and Parent Community centres, FE Colleges, voluntary sector organisations and eg the Youth Service) and potentially create coherent progression partnerships for our the benefits of our students.

Barriers to E learning for these groups of learners

However there are issues we must Institutionally be aware of when we try to implement online `solutions` and the following seven points by Vrasidas illustrate very well the barriers to e learning for our particular groups of students. These are being addressed coherently and systematically by the OpenLearn open education resources platform:"

- Lack of skills and knowledge needed to design and teach online classes
- Lack of support, training and help needed for planning online instruction
- The lack of face-to-face contact violated the culture of traditional teaching and raises concerns among teachers
- Lack of appropriate design and development tools that will help faculty to easily plan and deliver online instruction
- Lack of solid technology infrastructure
- Lack of time to plan, design, and teach online
- Lack of incentives and compensation needed to motivate faculty to teach online" (Vrasidas, 2004, p.911)

It is useful to note that many of these are institutional barriers, and that these need to be overcome before the needs of learners with distinct requirements can even begin to be addressed. This is where the ongoing development of OpenLearn is responding to these issues and creating a consistent rubric for e-learning for disenfranchised learners.

As a counterpoint to this are the barriers that learners themselves must face as their role changes within this technological framework. Forsyth tells us, "With course materials on the internet, the role of the learner changes from one of primarily being a recipient to one of being a participant....Just as the teacher will have to learn new tools, the learners will also have to use new tools if they are to fully capitalise on using course materials and related sources of information on the internet." (Forsyth, 1998, ch.2)

Therein lies a dilemma for the Institution and the learner, as there are issues of preparedness of the learners that need to be addressed to allow them to be able to engage successfully and not drop out because of technological and social limitations.

The Learners

There are two groups of ten Asian women students we are working with. They are 90% Muslims and all except two are married with children and cannot attend main-campus provision due to familial, cultural and economic factors. However these groups are able to access materials from home or local `safe` community centres, which are seen as the safest, least expensive environment. This attendance is applied with a combination of both home and local centre study where a form of blended learning incorporating OpenLearn can be maintained. Hurley describes very well a potential scenario of the possibilities of on-line learning programmes." Local provision is made available by a provider within a local area, typically through drop-in learning centres, community-based learning centres workplace learning centres or at home." (Hurley, 2001, p.15)

We arranged to work with the two groups of Asian women adult education students attending a neighbourhood community centre through a local College. One group was completing ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses (level 4) and the other studying health and working with children. We created partnerships with this college on a local operational level to allow us to visit these students at `pinch points` before the end of the courses to introduce our materials. Many of these women would be lost to the system as they can only go to Community centres but their next natural progression would be to main campus from which as explained previously they are often familiarly and culturally excluded. This is where we can provide the symmetry to allow progression as the colleges we are working with know that these students would be lost to academia anyway and therefore this is a complementary avenue of progression for them.

We arranged Internet access if there was none available and used Open Learn as our main vehicle to enable the students to make conscious decisions. They could also try the materials as could their tutors which then started the process of preparedness and achievement and decision making that I mentioned earlier.

All the students had computers at home that they had bought initially for their children to help with their schoolwork and thus most had broadband at home. The women had all taken minor short courses with local Colleges at their community centre but not engaged in formal Internet based e learning activity or training. They were all familiar with the Internet and used it regularly to help their children with their studies. They were aware of the concept of distance learning but

had never engaged with it themselves. This group were happy to use distance e learning if it was the only viable mechanism with which they could engage in Higher Education and academic inclusion.

They felt that if this was the only way they could do this they would have to learn how to do so. Hurley tells us, "Online and distance learning have some advantages for any people who would otherwise be excluded from education." (Hurley, 2001, p94). None of the learners knew about VLEs or how they might engage with them. However when the concept was explained to them and the possibility of use and understanding of courses via OpenLearn was demonstrated they were enthused and saw the potential of elements within it. They hoped that their children would also help them to use OpenLearn when accessing from home.

Therefore as we began to investigate the feasibility of using Open Educational resources via the mediated use of OpenLearn we started to implement a blended learning format of using OpenLearn as the main component, with tutorials as a supportive mechanism and then investigated the thoughts and perceptions of the women learners. The language we used in the research was empathetic rather than 'academic' as I feel that the 'academic' approach would not allow the respondents to express themselves fully and would in fact create exactly the type of pseudo - academic barriers that alienates students in Community settings.

Furthermore these students have had no engagement with learning since leaving school so their only experience is of the traditional classroom based interaction. This leaves them vulnerable psychologically and resistant to the online mode of delivery which is regarded as an alien concept. Salmon explains, "Many students are concerned about working online. They see reduced social contact in learning contexts as a real threat. They are anxious about the lack of stimulus and fun from their, buddies` and on the potential loss of a special relationship with their teachers, trainers and professors." (Salmon, 2004, p.5). However for the learners we are discussing they have no alternative to online distance learning and previous notions of classroom-based engagement have to be psychologically and physically discarded.

This provides the platform to allow blended e-learning to take place for excluded groups as the technical element of learning is localised thus making attendance for tutorials or technical guidance during a programme less of a barrier. Hurley points out, "If community access develops as predicted, then some guidance functions will need to be located at the community learning centre. What is difficult to avoid at some stage is the personal contact upon which mutual confidence is built." (Hurley, 2001, p.66)

The OpenLearn Solution

Colleagues from the partner Colleges and Community Centres felt that the Open Content response from the Open University was a pedagogically sound intervention in that it strives not to be assumptive or pre-suppose the student's ability to learn via this platform. The package has built into it ongoing evaluation to capture the pedagogical and practical implications that impact on the student's ability to learn effectively. Macdonald illustrates the need for clarity in e learning pedagogical design and platforms." It is time we looked at good practice in online tutoring in the context of what we know about our students, what else we do with them, how we support them, and what other opportunities they have from learning from each other."(Macdonald, 2006, p.2).

This is why the OpenLearn programme was viewed as an effective initial response for and by these students. By integrating materials that are replicable across differentiated fora an enhanced learning experience was created for these students. There is then the possibility of

greater personalisation through appropriate media and OpenLearn begins to facilitate this. Mayer explains, "The promise of multimedia learning is that students can learn more deeply from well-designed multimedia messages consisting of words and pictures than from traditional modes of communication involving words alone." (Mayer 2002). MacVay supports Mayer by explaining, "(With respect to the future of technology in distance education, the overall trend is to diversification, increasing functionality and overlapping modalities." (MacVay, 2000, p.92). However this must be directed by pedagogies based on a cognitive student-centric approach and not led by technology. The challenges that institutions face are in designing e-learning interventions that are pertinent to learners' conditions and circumstance. The pedagogies have to be considered so that a synergous, coherent use of new technologies allows the learners to engage effectively and OpenLearn begins to address this

The motivations for implementing an e-learning resource such as OpenLearn can be described within distinct scenarios. So what student/pedagogic benefits were identified?

- The provision of a rich set of e learning tools within a single environment enhanced the online learning experience and supported a range of pedagogies. There are distinct pedagogical scenarios that are feasible for this particular group of students. OpenLearn does support synchronous collaboration and also allows students to manage their learning, by structuring the activities they undertake. There was a concern here relating to the ability of these students to be able to engage with the technical elements required and this has been to be taken into consideration in the ongoing design and evaluation of OpenLearn.

Another scenario implemented was Instructor – led and one that I feel is also feasible in this context. This is an information-transfer, didactic or instructivist approach. This is the model closest to the traditional mode of education and the one that our learners would be most familiar and comfortable with. This is the blended learning model which we have used to initially facilitate the use of OpenLearn in our local study centres and was the best received by learners and their tutors in the Community.

- Through OpenLearn the student experience was streamlined and there was commonality and consistency of presentation across all courses, resulting in less time spent learning new tools, interfaces or approaches. (This is particularly important for the future preparedness of these learners as it would give confidence to progress in Higher Education through e learning platforms without `fear` of the technology)
- The ongoing analysis and evaluation of OpenLearn data helps to improve student retention, by indicating trends and behaviour patterns that may suggest issues or concerns and allows e tutors to support effectively and in time.

The use and design of open educational resources needs to reflect the pertinent needs of different socio-economic and ability groups. Obviously much of this is driven by curriculum imperatives and requirements. The excluded groups may feel that is their only feasible, acceptable mode of study and therefore VLEs and online engagement should be designed to meet the needs of each group that is required to support. Race points out that this can be problematical. He says, "One of the problems with too much of the present day e - learning provision is that it's not *really* e learning, but rather *e information*; information flows electronically to learner's screens and disks very efficiently, but does not necessarily get processed equally efficiently into *knowledge* inside their brains!" (Race, 2005, p.9) This highlights the importance of thought in the design that reflects learners' needs and also what designers need to consider when creating materials.

There is a coherent argument that distance based learning has both an economical imperative for Institutions and learners and is also a concrete form of social justice for disengaged communities. Can the use of new technologies be a conduit for learning, inclusion and achievement or are internal and external barriers insurmountable? In one response to this question Salmon (2000) cites the work of Benjamin (1994) who has an optimistic view of teaching and learning online." Every learner can at his or her own choice of time and place, access a world of multimedia material...immediately the learner is unlocked from the shackles of fixed and rigid schedules, from physical limitations...and is released into an information world which reacts to his or her own pace of learning." (Benjamin in Salmon, 2000, p.11). I suggest that this assumptive theorising can be problematical but may be widespread among the thinking of Institutions as it presupposes the psychological and physical acceptance of `new` technologies and the ability to effectively engage with them in all groups of learners. OpenLearn is designed not to fall into these pedagogical traps and the ongoing review via feedback from students such as these will be invaluable in creating a bespoke learning intervention.

The E-Tutors responsibility

The initial findings highlighted the value of having localised interventions and also the sensitivity with which tutors have to implement and maintain the blended learning element in accessing OpenLearn open educational resources. It is unavoidable and therefore both teachers and learners and their families need to be psychologically amenable to this engagement. E tutors have a responsibility to engineer and maintain a supported environment that reflects the learners' different learning styles. Indeed Race suggests that the e tutor should get to know their learners and how they learn."...However, even if you don't meet them it is surprising how quickly you can get to know at least some of them. Even when communication is restricted to written comments or e mail communication, some people are easy to get to know." (Race, 2005, p.122)

Other issues to consider manifested themselves here. The first was the technical engagement through open education resources such as OpenLearn and the difficulties this presented but was not really a surprise. Another secondary finding was the use of other electronic media such as DVDs and `modern` applications such as the use of blogs, texts, and other modes of contact the effective use of which can be almost impenetrable for certain learner groups. These modes of learning were considered to be just as `alien` as Internet based learning as none of the students had psychologically accepted (initially) the differentiated modes of e learning fora. Rosenberg tells us that," Online training is just one part of e learning. We need to be vigilant about the quality and best use of technology. We must be smart enough to know when online instruction is warranted and when it's not...The new framework for e learning, enabled by the web, is about online training and knowledge management interacting with each other. (Rosenberg, 2001, p.62)

Conclusions about the OpenLearn site

The students told us that the website was clear, concise and relatively easy to use. It has repeatable characteristics that allow them to move freely and concisely around the learning areas. The perception was that once the site systems, geography and navigation had been earned and understood then there was consistency throughout the whole programme and new elements do not keep needing to be learned.

The language within the site was familiar and not computer jargon. It was noted that the site is the same both on and off campus and functionality is not lost as is often the case when learners are working from home for example. ALs reported there was no formal feedback except in collaboration forums. These can be controlled by external `course moderators` in community centres.

The site, it was reported, does not make total allowance for users new to CBL packages or e-learning but with initial help was not `technically` difficult to master. It works on the premise that users will be able to work and find their way around. It was suggested that there could be an e-learning module which works through the general principles of e-learning within the context of this package or even a video that can be watched.

The women especially enjoyed the range of subjects on offer, many of which reflected their own interests and career aspirations. They appreciated the fact that they could study as a group within subject areas in the community centre or `take their work home` and work at their own pace or with their children. The fact that they could `taste` the materials and browse the content without any obligation was of paramount importance as they felt that the pressure was taken off them to `achieve` certain prescribed targets or academic outcomes. This let them relax into the materials and enabled them to begin to build confidence as they progressed.

Crucially when they progressed onto taking the full course / module they felt more prepared and able to articulate themselves through the materials. Their navigational skills were also improved as was their familiarity with the site and their consistency of its handling and responses. This meant that they did not waste time with technical considerations when they were studying the full course and this enabled them to concentrate fully on the materials without becoming frustrated by their navigation limitations. The ultimate outcome of this is some of the learners have gone on to `full` Open University courses and not been overwhelmed by the academic or e learning methodologies they have encountered.

What is clear is that without local tutors to initially show the women how to access and navigate the site and learn the variations within OpenLearn the resource would be ineffective in these circumstances. The blended learning approach was most useful as it allowed the women to become enabled to use OpenLearn for themselves after the initial blended supported interventions were withdrawn. With this approach the women became empowered and subsequently helped each other and newcomers to the centre. This is a very powerful model of enabling, a benefit model for the women and one that is sustainable as they become more confident about e learning and internet technologies.

The research implies that OpenLearn is a conduit into a form of educational liberation which allows these women to achieve educational advancement and also act as aspirational role models for their children and their families. The positive aspects are twofold. The mode of engagement in community centres and the actual pressure/obligation free learning environment within OpenLearn lead to a realised and contextualised learning experience.

Conclusions

The HE sector is only now beginning to explore how we can ensure that these students are not alienated in the inevitable growth of the e- learning dynamic and that they can benefit not just at the outset but as a long term commitment to learning (with the Open University or any other Institution.)

Our challenge is now to integrate this initial activity into our core practice and to systemise our approach to Widening Participation, total Inclusion, and equality through platforms such as OpenLearn.

We have started to use Open Learn as the main vehicle to attract local community ambassadors, peers, learning champions and to start to address the issue of diversity within our students and Associate Lecturer population. The intention is to enable local students to eventually become our ALs and embed continuity and congruence to excellent practice.

There are however major difficulties that have become apparent throughout the investigation which illustrate the impact of the efficacy of e learning, which for many learners could be contextualised as a deficit model. An initial concern is Institutional as the providers often seem incapable or unwilling of changing their modus operandi and remain entrenched within prescriptive rigid parameters of engagement. Learning providers should concern themselves with the mastery of the pedagogic applications and research the use of current ICTs for a wide variety of learning purposes. The `one size fits all` model is short-sighted. Providers may argue that there are external drivers which predicate change and therefore are not possible. These drivers may be curricular such as verifying, assessing, materials and quality assurance issues. OpenLearn is addressing these issues and the constant evolvement of the resource allows it to become more and more available and usable for excluded groups.

So what are the possibilities in embedding informed blended learning in these communities and what are the potential difficulties? Huang theorises "Since online learning has a different setting from the conventional classroom, online educators need to use some special techniques and perceptions to lead to success. Moreover, adults have special needs and requirements as learners compared with children and adolescents, thus online educators should know how adults can learn best because of their special characteristics. "(Huang, 2002, p.27)

Vygotskyist thinking suggests that learning is a social construct and learning is enhanced with the interaction between learners and that this interaction is a necessary and contributing part of the learning process. This is in contrast to Kant who suggests that learners have their own representation of knowledge that is based on their personal experiences. I feel that perhaps Piaget has the best representation of this learner group, as he espouses that people learn through active exploration and that learning occurs when the learner's exploration uncovers an inconsistency between their current knowledge representation and their experience.

It is incumbent upon Institutions and course developers to ensure that new technologies are transferred from being a largely unconnected non-synergous set of applications to a coherent symbiotic integrated environment with a feasible commonality in style and purpose. VLEs such as OpenLearn for example must be adaptable to changing pedagogic needs and technological possibilities. This should drive the need to address the technical requirements of learners who will be new to e-learning concepts and programmes and also examine the physical implementation of ICT within excluded communities.

There lies an inherent tension for these students. On the one hand they are excluded from mainstream education and on the other they have difficulties with the new technologies and dynamic of online learning. However most are driven by their desire to be able to access education in whatever viable form is available.

The DfES (DIUS) e strategy (`Harnessing Technology Transforming Learning and Children's Services`, 2005) paper reveals the Governments thinking on the future of e learning and should

be the institutional driver for the e learning strategies they adopt. It is forward thinking and progressive. It states, "Adult learners will have more choice of courses and learning programmes, including Skills for Life and 'first rung' access courses for those from disadvantaged groups. They could choose a college or a community setting, such as a public library, or study at home online with tutor support. Many institutions will mix formal classes with online teaching. Some people will use ICT to manage their own learning at their own pace, using e-assessment to monitor their own progress." This is a reassuring vision, however one that has to be resourced adequately if it is to be embedded in learning society.

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