COLT: A Proposed Center for Open Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The Center for Open Learning and Teaching (COLT) is a proposed interdisciplinary research consortium and network with a physical center at the University of Mississippi supporting the integration of effective Internet-based learning practices into education.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.1 [**Computers and Education**]: General, Computer uses in Education.

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Open Educational Resources, Open Educational Practices, Open Education, Wikipedia, Centers for Teaching and Learning, Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educators and education institutions are increasingly looking to engage with Open Educational Resources (OER), and with practices based on participation in online learning communities like Wikipedia, as they update their teaching practices. There is great potential in these realms, but there is a scarcity of useful, formal research and case studies to inform innovation and experimentation. COLT aims to meet this need with two complementary components: (1) a global interdisciplinary consortium sponsoring formal research into understanding and applying OER in higher education, and (2) a teaching and learning center fostering innovative education practices with OER.

2. OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND PRACTICES

2.1 Open Educational Resources (OER)

Open Educational Resources are defined by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, an early and consistent supporter of OER research, as "high-quality, openly licensed, online educational materials that offer an extraordinary opportunity for people

everywhere to share, use, and reuse knowledge" [1]. Resources include course modules, open source textbooks, podcasts, online courses, and journals. They are often produced, stored, and recombined through sites purposed for the classroom, like Connexions and WikiEducator.

2.2 Open Educational Practices (OEP)

Grainne C. Conole defines Open Educational Practices as "a set of activities and support around the creation, use and repurposing of Open Educational Resources (OERs)" [2]. Open Educational Practices often involve introducing students to online peer production communities that are independent of formal education environments, on sites like Wikipedia, YouTube, or Open Street Map. These collaborative environments offer rich content and practices well suited for teaching and learning.

3. STRUCTURE

The COLT structure will focus on relevant research in a global network, welcoming research teams from around the world to support one another's work. The global research network's structure is heavily based on the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research [3]. COLT will also focus on active open teaching and learning projects within the Center at the University of Mississippi.

3.1 Phase I: Research Network

COLT will further understanding of the benefits of OER and OEP by sponsoring an interdisciplinary research network. Teams of researchers worldwide will apply to participate in a three-year cohort, in which they will work with other teams to refine research questions, identify and execute research methods, and produce results suitable for formal peer review. COLT will coordinate semi-annual meetings for each cohort, and facilitate peer review and publication of the findings of each team; a university press with expertise in digital culture will publish the peer-reviewed results. Each year a new cohort will begin its work with a focus on a specific aspect of moving from Open Educational Resources to Open Educational Practices. We anticipate that the first cohort will focus on the use of teaching with Wikipedia in higher education, as recently begun with the Wikimedia Foundation's Wikipedia Public Policy Initiative [4].

3.2 Phase II: Learning and Teaching Center

After the establishment of the research network, the physical Center at the University of Mississippi will begin its work. Within the Center teams of tenure-stream faculty (with joint appointments in a traditional academic department and in COLT) will sponsor OER projects that replicate traditional courses, in partnership with

student learners. Faculty and students will locate emerging resources, and craft a semester-long student experience which will yield student learning outcomes equivalent to a course in the individual faculty member's discipline. Faculty will contribute to and ensure the reliability of the sources, as well as the rigor and relevance of the project in comparison to the disciplinary guidelines for undergraduate learning. Each student will author an ePortfolio to demonstrate attainment of the appropriate outcomes for assessment, as well as to articulate the integration of their experience in to a lifelong personal learning plan.

4. PURPOSE

As new technology drives knowledge production and community online, and as information becomes more widely available, the role of learning institutions is shifting. Students, who used to need access and guidance to find scarce information, now require skills in navigating the vast and varied information accessible through their computers and cell phones. A tremendous opportunity accompanies this shift in students' needs: in all disciplines, the quantity of high quality, peer reviewed open educational resources is growing. But educators are often unaware of emerging materials and practices, or have difficulty assessing their quality. Further, the traditional culture of higher education fails to systematically encourage and reward faculty for integrating developing technology in the classroom, or it does so outside the context of the teaching and learning environment.

The Center will benefit several groups of stakeholders. Students will participate in and develop an inquiry-driven, learner-centered education environment, developing important technical and collaborative skills, and getting feedback from a broader audience than is available in a traditional classroom. Teachers will benefit from the ability to offer a broader range of learning opportunities in their curricula as they incorporate and promote learning practices discovered with student projects in the Center; they will also benefit from expanded opportunities to network within their disciplines. Benefits for higher education include globalizing its approach to knowledge creation and dissemination, improving its ability to teach in an electronic age, extending the benefits of knowledge networks to multiple disciplines, and developing models for effective teaching and learning with the ever-developing OER community. In addition, the Center will perform a public service: its various activities will work toward improving the online resources involved, by helping subject matter experts share their knowledge with wide audiences online and across national and cultural boundaries.

5. CONTEXT

COLT will build on a variety of existing efforts to improve and establish OER and OEP, including the following:

The OPAL educational quality initiative aims to broadly promote innovation and quality in education and training through the use of OER and OEP. Its site identifies several important initiatives in the development of OER, such as Open Courseware, MERLOT, and Rice University's Connexions. OPAL's focus is principally on Europe; and in contrast to COLT's network-based approach, it will establish a centralized resource, the European Union Open Educational Quality Clearinghouse [5].

More focused efforts to fuel the development of OEP include the Wikipedia Public Policy Initiative and the AVO "Open Networks for Learning" project. The Wikipedia PPI was a pilot project, run by the Wikimedia Foundation, to facilitate assignments in which students write collaboratively on Wikipedia [4]. The project established sample lesson plans, print and online resources for Wikipedia-based collaboration, and a volunteer-driven support network. AVO, also known as "Open Networks for Learning," was a Finnish national project that engaged educational institutions, businesses, and public libraries to develop a guide on the use of wikis for teaching and content production, and also explored the use of the Wikiversity platform [6].

6. NEXT STEPS

COLT remains in the planning stages as it seeks funding for both stages of its project. Please contact the authors with expressions of interest in participation, especially at the research network level.

7. REFERENCES

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