Chapter 2
The UNESCO OER Community 2005–2009: From Collective Interaction to Collaborative Action

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ABSTRACT
This is the story of an international community convened to raise awareness of the growing Open Educational Resources (OER) movement. The experience of the international OER Community underlines the potential of the Internet to link people in an inclusive manner to promote collaboration – individuals who would never normally be able to meet and hold focussed discussions over a sustained period. Launched by an international organization, the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), and supported the primary champion of the OER movement, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the OER community was exemplary in its interaction, action, and longevity. From 2005, the members of the community have come together from time to time to discuss OER in what can be described as a series of virtual seminars. At two points they put forward their opinion of the priorities to advance the OER movement. Now, with support from the UNESCO Chair in OER at Canada’s Athabasca University, they are about to be invited to make another contribution. This is both the story of a community as a case study, and a personal reflection.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter describes an exemplary online community that worked collaboratively to contribute to an international understanding of Open Educational Resources though a continuing conversation in cyberspace.

Open Educational Resources is a powerful concept: sharing the world’s resources for the common good resonates with the international commitment to Education for All (About Education for All, n.d.). But no matter how laudable a concept may be, it must be known and understood before it can be considered and possibly adopted.

The Internet enables the formation of international communities, and the rational for support-
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ing such initiatives at UNESCO resides in the fundamental mission of the organization and its main functions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization was founded in 1945 with the overarching mission of fostering a culture of peace, and this mission is carried out through action in the fields of education, social and natural sciences, culture and communication is the means of carrying out this mission. The organization functions as a laboratory of ideas and a clearinghouse, a standard-setter, a capacity builder and a catalyst for international cooperation among its 193 Member States and seven Associate Members. While the organization normally carries out these functions in conferences, meetings and workshops, they can also be addressed through an online community of interest.

Through the experience of launching the Virtual Institute at the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), it became clear to me that by using technology, international organizations could involve a broad range of interested individuals worldwide in a community of interest to explore new ideas and share experiences. The approach had the benefit of being much more inclusive, bringing together those who would normally never have a chance to meet and discuss commons interests and concerns. More and new voices would be heard. The OER Community did not convene just those who are normally privileged to be invited to international meetings – it offered a place to all who were interested in the topic being discussed, and allowed them to participate as they chose. Some listened, some discussed and some argued passionately for specific issues or positions.

It was this topic, Open Educational Resources, and this possibility of an international interaction that engaged me. And engaging it was. Although having been privileged over the course of my career to have had a number of interesting challenges, convening and supporting this community was completely captivating.

Who were these people? How did they come together in an international community? What was the objective of the interaction in the community? While initially they knew little about each other, they worked together for a sustained period of time to explore a new concept and the growing movement around it. The group members discussed OER initiatives and issues. They discussed and deliberated, and finally decided on the priorities for advancing the OER movement. On their own initiative, they translated the resulting report into a number of languages to share their conclusions with others in their own geographic and linguistic communities and networks. Then they continued their conversation, developing resources to help them advance the OER movement and discussing pressing issues such as access.

The experience of the community presented in this chapter serves as an example of the power of collaborative initiatives and the democratization of information sharing at the international level as a result of technological advances. For international organizations this experience shows that it is possible to convene interest groups to reflect on and debate important issues, even when these participants never meet. By virtue of sharing an interest in the topic such groups can act as an effective stimulus for reflection and potentially a voice for change.

As convener and moderator of the community, my role was to be responsive and supportive of the group, so that the voices and interests of community members were heard and advanced in the ongoing conversation over the years. In some ways I felt like a conductor who assembled an orchestra, selected the music and waved the baton, maybe humming just a little. But in the end, the music was theirs. And although I wish to share my experience and some reflections on supporting the members of the OER Community, this story is theirs.

The story begins.

BACKGROUND

The initial members of the OER Community came together in 2005 to discuss the emerging Open Educational Resources movement. Over the