Chapter 4

Fostering OER Communities of Practice with Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is on “key issues for fostering OER communities of practice with teachers.” It is based on the successful experiences of three European funded projects: SLOOP, TENEGEN, and SLOOP2DESC. These three projects draw on the concept of open education as well as on the open and free software movements. The original idea behind the three projects was that teachers can build learning objects in conjunction with software specialists who are developing open software packages: each teacher can contribute to the development phase, as well as repurposing the learning objects to meet her/his specific needs, thus working in a collaborative environment. In order to enable this collaborative production and reuse of learning objects, the authors have introduced the Open Learning Object or OpenLO model, which combines the benefits of the learning object paradigm with the ‘Openness’ concept characterized by Web 2.0 approaches to knowledge building and sharing.

INTRODUCTION

Open Educational Resources (OER) that are produced directly by teachers represent an important opportunity for schools. The lack of readily available digital educational content is still one of the main barriers to the widespread diffusion of e-learning in schools and in many other formal educational institutions. Most popular repositories of learning objects on the web mainly contain resources in English whilst many repositories developed at a national or local level maybe in the national language. They are often based on the initiative of single institutions, and most of
them may offer a limited number of resources for schools. Some repositories sell resources developed by commercial editors, which schools may or may not purchase according to their financial circumstance.

The focus of this chapter is on “key issues for fostering OER communities of practice with teachers.” It is based on the successful experiences of three European funded projects: Sharing Learning Objects in an Open Perspective (SLOOP), Connect the TEachers to reach and teach the NEt GENeration (TENEGEN), and Sharing Learning Objects in an Open Perspective to develop European skills and competences (SLOOP2DESC). All three projects aim at improving European school teachers’ knowledge of e-learning strategies and, of the use of the Internet in general education settings. Specifically, the three projects have focused on open educational content for e-learning.

The projects draw on the concept of Open Education, on the Open and Free Software movements, as well as on the so called “wikipedia model.” The original idea behind the three projects was that teachers can build Learning Objects (LOs) whilst software specialists develop open software packages: each teacher can contribute to the development phase, as well as repurposing the Learning Objects to meet her/his specific needs. Consequently, OER can be designed, developed and shared directly by the community of teachers who will use them.

During these projects, we designed and delivered a number of online courses for teachers using a collaborative OER production process. The online courses involved teachers from different countries: Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey. Through both pilot and cascade courses, we trained around 800 teachers (from secondary-schools and higher education) in Europe in the production of OER.

The courses were created on the basis of using effective e-learning strategies and tools, which were firstly tested in the SLOOP project. These were then adopted in the TENEGEN and SLOOP2DESC projects, as follows:

- a training model based on e-learning 2.0 solutions and teacher participation in a community of practice;
- an OER model, designated as an Open Learning Object or OpenLO;
- a set of Learning Objects, called MetaLOs, based on elearning and the production of learning content. The MetaLOs have been repurposed and reused as learning content for the online courses activated in the SLOOP2DESC and TENEGEN projects.
- The Free Learning Object Management System (FREELOMS) platform, an environment for sharing and reusing digital educational resources, including features that allow the management of resources developed according to SCORM standards (ADL, 2004), and the editing of resource metadata according to the IEEE LOM.

The three projects reflect the evolution of OER communities of practices over time. Basically all the OER courses carried out during the projects guide the trainees through different online learning experiences. These highlight how the technology is changing the way we learn and is more evident in the TENEGEN project, where teachers are explicitly invited to explore the learning strategies of the net generation. Furthermore, as the technology and the environments within which learning takes place are changing over time, more and more informal learning approaches, social applications and Web 2.0 solutions have been introduced from one project to another.

In order to identify key issues for fostering OER communities of practice with teachers during SLOOP, TENEGEN and SLOOP2DESC projects, reference is made to five priorities for advancing the OER movement highlighted by D’Antoni and Savage (2009): Communities and networking, awareness raising, capacity development, tech-