Chapter 7
Adapting OER for Professional Communities: The Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa Experience

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ABSTRACT

Much is written of the potential of Open Educational Resources (OERs) to contribute to improvements in the quality of and access to education, particularly in environments such as Sub-Saharan Africa. But some of the greatest challenges lie in the processes of adaptation and re-use, and as of yet, little has been reported on how best to support user communities to harness and integrate OERs for their own systems and cultures. This chapter describes an empirically based approach to understanding and representing the OER adaptation processes as it occurred across the TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa) consortium. The authors draw on a range of investigations to make explicit the kinds of knowledge, skills, and support employed in the adaptation process, the role of the structured template in supporting this process and the problems encountered. The chapter suggests that OERs will only fulfil their promise if greater attention is given to understanding the conditions of access, motivations, and relevant skills of users, particularly in the challenging context of Sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, the chapter offers suggestions for guidance to support other users in adapting OERs for their own context, whilst maintaining the quality of the OERs and working towards self-sustaining communities of users.

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the potential of the internet to create a global intellectual resource of teaching and learning materials. Most recently the philosophy and development of Open Educational Resources (OERs) together with the rapid expansion of connectivity, particularly in areas such as East Africa, is beginning to offer unencumbered universal access to digital learning resources and the promise of improved educational opportunities in diverse, geographically dispersed educational communities (Atkins et al, 2007). The facility to amend and modify OERs makes viable the production of educational materials relevant to the cultural context and heritage of each locality; OERs have potential for celebrating diversity and to embrace the voice of the ‘local’ in resources to support learning without the creation of new original materials in each learning situation (OCLOS, 2007). Through reflected use and sharing of OERs there is the potential for constant improvement of the materials, the ‘virtuous learning loop’ (Atkins et al, 2007).

But to unlock such potential OERs have to be first located, then adapted, used and the adaptations (perhaps with commentary on the form and impact of their use) made available to a wider community; otherwise they remain just another piece of ‘content’, merely stuff rather than a tool (Cantoni, quoted in Conole & Weller, 2008, p.11). There is much eloquent advocacy for OERs and considerable funding has been devoted to their production (Casserly & Smith, 2008). But as yet there are few detailed accounts of user interaction with OER – how teachers and students approach, change or adapt OER for their own contexts, particularly in contexts with few other resources (Harley, 2008). What forms does this adaptation process take and what might be the factors that support or constrain it? To what extent is the form of original OERs influential in allowing users to legitimate their own local knowledge in adapted OERs?

Our interest is in teacher education and the use of OERs to support teacher educators in sharing their intellectual capacity, particularly in resource challenged environments such as Sub-Saharan Africa. Here, access to high quality, pedagogically sound, learning materials is frequently inhibited by the inability of African educational institutions to afford them. Consequently learning materials are scarce at all levels of the system. Thus the potential for OERs to contribute to the support, education and training of teachers is considerable, as are the challenges.

Locating appropriate OERs is a time–consuming activity for everyone; the pedagogic approach inherent in the OER is often not explicit and neither is the context of their creation. However for those colleagues working in Africa, the challenges are magnified; the vast majority of OERs available online have not been created within African contexts. In higher education, the leading arena for OER activity, OER production has been dominated by a few elite institutions in the United States and Western Europe. OERs from these sources do not transfer easily to low income countries (Kanu, 2005), major adaptation is required to ground them in the cultural, economic and technological realities of the environment of their use. For example many OERs assume continuous fast access to the web; in many of the countries in which we work it is still rare for all faculty staff in higher education institutions to have a computer and internet access on their desk and many colleagues have IT skills that are far from fluent. But even for those OERs generated within the continent we suggest that adaptation is needed to locate resources within the lived experiences of the learners who use them - their beliefs, cultural values and environmental conditions.

In this chapter we report on the highly structured and supported process of adaptation of TESSA OERs for nine country contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa. Data from analysis of the outputs of the process in three sites, along with exploration of the understandings, attitudes and
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