Chapter 14
Peer-Support and Open Educational Resources

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ABSTRACT
Traditionally, the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has focused on the production, distribution, and retrieval of open content. There is, however, more to OER than the resources alone. For OER to function properly, underlying communities are needed to support learners and teachers in the use, development, and dissemination of OER. A central question is how learners and teachers can be supported in their use of OER, while at the same time building up and sustaining the needed community. These support and community formation aspects are especially important in a non-formal context. Peer-support is claimed to be ideal for providing encouragement as well as building up of a community. In this chapter, an explanation is given of peer support in a non-formal learning context, called Ad Hoc Transient Groups. These help to foster collaboration in OER networks. Based on this concept, the chapter presents the design of a stakeholder-validated peer support service. Some related work pointing out how peer support for non-formal learning with OER can be best organized is then given.

INTRODUCTION
Before Open Educational Resources (OER) can be used, they first need to be created and stored in an open repository (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007). From this repository others can then retrieve a variety of resources, use them, possibly change them and then potentially share these changes again with another group. So, for example, a teacher may wish to construct a list of common English grammar mistakes. The constructed list can be uploaded to an open repository and, therefore, can be accessed by others with the potential of being added to over time. It is
argued that worldwide, such learning and teaching resources are remade on a daily basis. Yet most of the time, these resources stay with their creator(s) (Caswell, Henson, Jensen, & Wiley, 2008). It is easy to see how massive gains could be reached if such resources were open and shared. For example, teachers may choose to use such resources in their entirety in their lectures and classes, or they may integrate bits and pieces of several resources in material they themselves have developed over the years. Alternatively, they may be inspired by the resources that others have created. A lot of the literature produced over the last decade on the topic of learning objects, takes a similar kind of a stance. It talks about sharing, arranging and editing, and perhaps the only difference is that it does not necessarily assume that the resources are open (Littlejohn, 2003; McGreal, 2004; Sloep, 2004). Yet, the creation and sharing of OER is not without costs. Nonetheless, Downes (2007) points out that the mutual benefits may easily outweigh the individual costs. For instance, Lane (2008) summarizes some advantages of OER for teachers alone: (a) learning best practices from each other, (b) allowing a larger volume of students to study simultaneously, (c) accessing groups of learners so far unknown or out of reach, (d) providing wide recognition of the services offered, and (e) offering a worldwide reach. In this chapter the focus is on the teacher and the use of OER. The main reason is that OER often start with the creation of a learning resource by the teacher. In relation, using OER means that these teachers can have very different roles ranging from student to lecturer. Which role is assumed depends on the OER and the context in which they are used/accessed (Lee, 2008).

The challenge, however, is that merely having resources open for use and recognising possible advantages does not automatically imply that the OER will actually be reused or shared. For OER to develop and become more widely adopted, it is argued that an underlying community is needed (Atkins et al., 2007). Sharing and collaboration thus emerge as key aspects of OER, making a community approach a requirement (Downes, 2007). Yet, facilitating such communities continues to be a challenging issue for the OER movement (Margaryan & Littlejohn, 2008; Sclater, 2009). A good example of this community of practice in action can be seen in the Merlot repository, the underlying design of which has been built from a peer-review system that intends to improve the quality of the resources. Whilst this is an admirable goal the reality is that fewer than 14% of the Merlot resources are indeed peer-reviewed (Downes, 2007). The difficulty of community formation is not limited to the use of OER, it is an issue well known in the field on online learning in general (Fetter, Berlanga, & Sloep, 2010b).

The need for a community of practice becomes especially important when OER are situated in a non-formal context. Examples of such environments might be where the new learning context does not necessarily involve school buildings, lecture halls, fixed curricula or scheduled timetables. Rather, imagine a non-formal context in which people attempt to acquire particular competences to nurture a particular interest they have without any of the previously mentioned components. The learner’s interest may be work-related, hobby-related or may have to do with other personal interests. These learners may be supported by their employer or may study fully independently. Taken together, non-formal learning is learning in a directed and conscious way, outside of formal education (Colardyn, 2001). Indeed, the European Commission has indicated that Europe should embrace more lifelong learning policies lest it loses its economic privileges (European Commission, 2000, 2006, 2009). Lifelong learning, in this context, encompasses both the initial phases of learning, which tend to be experienced in the formal contexts of schools and universities, and the post-initial phases for which non-formal contexts are better suited (Sloep et al., 2011; Van Merriënboer, Kirschner, Paas, Sloep, & Caniëls, 2009); see also Billett (2010).