OEC Global Conference 2015 workshop proposal

TITLE

Who knows how and who shares what: open education practices as an inclusive social innovation

TWEET

Mapping knowledge flows and barriers between knowledge creators, brokers and users amongst global institutional actors involved in open education practices

INTRODUCTION

This 3 hour workshop follows on from previous conference-based workshops investigating what people know about the OER movement (Connolly et al, 2012; Okada et al, 2010) and flows of knowledge exchange between multiple institutional actors in particular sectors of the economy (see Oreszczyn and Lane 2012a and 2012b). In this case the workshop will be a global scoping study on knowledge flows to support institutional capacities and capabilities in open education practices which will hopefully build upon a similar workshop looking at similar knowledge flows within the UK at the OER15 Conference earlier in April 2015 (http://oer15.oerconf.org/).

This global conference brings together a blend of academics, policy makers and practitioners and thus provides an excellent opportunity to involve some of the principle movers and shakers in this relatively new ‘open education’ movement and to use them to help map out who are the main knowledge creators, the knowledge brokers and the knowledge users, and how that knowledge flows between them and where the policy and practice barriers may be most acute. This will be achieved through a visual mapping technique accompanied by audio-recording and/or note-taking of what participants say when discussing the maps they create. A report on the workshop(s) will be made available on the Conference website after the event, as well as feeding into subsequent empirical research work.

IMPROVING THE LINK BETWEEN RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

In all areas of research, policy and practice, including education, there has been growing interest in knowledge brokerage and knowledge exchange practices. This interest focuses on how to improve connections between researchers, international agencies, civil society organisations and practitioners so as to improve the relevance of research and use of research outputs (see for example, Rickinson et al., 2011). It arises from concern that large bodies of knowledge are generated for policy use or to improve practices, yet this knowledge is not always deemed useful or is being used. Equally changes in organisational structures and responsibilities can lead to fragmentation of effort across a large number of institutions and/or create complex knowledge management challenges for policymakers. Researchers are also being challenged to provide a more solid and less disparate evidence base for making policy decisions (Lyall et al., 2004; Oakley, 2001).

Open educational resources (OER) and the related open educational practices (OEP) that use them are premised on a sharing and inclusive culture whereby both the resources and practices aim to create bridges between the primary (e.g. educational institutions, teachers) and secondary (e.g. learners, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, community groups) users as active participants. OER and OEP have been likened to open innovations (see Lane, 2013).
with a social rather than commercial purpose and which involve a greater number of institutional and governance actors. Many primary users involved in OEP aspire to empower secondary users by enabling self-directed capacity and capability building. In particular OEP and related digital practices are held up as ‘disruptive innovations’ more than as influences on existing divides in access to education and to digital technologies (Lane, 2009). Nevertheless, there are still many barriers to such openness, in particular the perceived and actual capacities and capabilities of the actors in different countries and contexts and whether particular knowledge sharing techniques and systems can mitigate these barriers within and between countries with different development trajectories.

Equally, many OER/OEP projects have focussed on both the educational and developmental benefits they might bring but few have undertaken research into the full impacts of their work on both of these objectives. Even where research has taken place it has focused more on educational theory rather than development theory.

COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS OF PRACTICE, WEBS OF INFLUENCERS AND BROKERING

In recent years there has been a growing interest in Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) and Networks of Practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001) in connection with informal knowledge gathering, notably in the fields of education, management, healthcare and computer science. These concepts have been used both as an analytical framework and as an interventions tool (see, for example, Koliba & Gajda, 2009). Part of the appeal of these concepts is that they may also be viewed from a very practical viewpoint to think about ‘real world’ situations, rather than simply as academic devices. In simple terms, Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a common pursuit, activity or concern. Members do not necessarily work together, but form a common identity and understanding through their common interests and interactions. Networks of Practice concern the relations of groups of people, rather than individuals. They have the same characteristics as Communities of Practice but are more loosely connected. These concepts have proved useful in highlighting a number of features that are significant to farmers’ practices as well as a new concept of a wider ‘web of influencers’ of practice due to the distributed and independent nature and number of entities and bodies involved (Oreszczyn et al, 2010a). It is thought that education in general and open education in particular will exhibit similar characteristics.

As noted by Karner et al. (2011), the academic literature on knowledge brokerage tends to assume that knowledge is produced by formal research and subsequently needs to be ‘transferred’ to those who may make use it. This one way flow of knowledge raises questions about what counts as research and knowledge. Many of those engaged in professional practice are also actively engaged in generating new insights and generating new knowledge through their practice and experimentation with new technologies and new knowledge in their own context (‘situated knowledge’). However, learning occurs in a complex social learning system. Practitioners have to cope constantly with significant amounts of new knowledge about matters) that impact on their practice and can reduce the scope for informal and formal knowledge to be deployed. The question then is how to build knowledge systems that incorporate effective brokering and that take account of the complexity of learning systems and that better values and links the tacit or informal situated knowledge (i.e. the local knowledge that may be gained from years of practical implementation in the management of educational systems) with the explicit knowledge generated by formal research and the policymaking system.
MAPPING KNOWLEDGE FLOWS

The proposed workshop builds on previous workshops that mapped the complex interactions among knowledge brokers in different contexts – health, food and international development (Oreszczyn & Lane, 2012a) as well as more game based explorations of peoples’ knowledge about the OER movement (Connolly et al, 2012). These exercises indicated the general lack of a balanced flow of knowledge exchange in the different contexts and suggested that while some knowledge users are recognised as also being important knowledge creators and there is some knowledge flow from users to creators, there remains a tendency, for knowledge flows to operate one way - from ‘professional’ creators ‘at a distance’ to the ‘local’ users. The lack of a holistic, circular or joined up, approach to knowledge flows and exchanges in the different contexts was also drawn out as was the way knowledge flows between users, creators and intermediaries or brokers tended to be piecemeal. Not only was there a lack of opportunities for knowledge to flow from users to knowledge creators but also that there was little knowledge exchange among intermediaries. Further, intermediaries were found to operate at different scales and levels and that this may affect their ability to be effective. Intermediaries, or brokers, may exist at the institutional or individual level and have different levels of experience and different roles. Knowledge brokering was found to encompass a variety of activities some of which may be competing. For example, the knowledge intermediaries in the workshop had very particular roles, in the case of one broker, so many roles that it may limit their ability to be effective boundary spanners. Dealing with such diversity could potentially dilute their effectiveness. Our research, like that of others, has suggested the importance of establishing trust and respect from the different Communities (or Networks) of Practice that a broker/intermediary or boundary spanner is attempting to connect. This may be more difficult if the intermediary is attempting to play their role across a diversity of Communities or Networks of Practice.

By focusing on knowledge flows within the global open education system, this three hour workshop aims to consider the theoretical and practical implications for improving the ways in which knowledge about open educational practices are created, shared and used in the future. It will use a diagrammatic template as the focus for participants to firstly identify organisations that are currently seen as knowledge creators, brokers and/or users (some organisations may do more than one) for OEP. It secondly invites the participants to identify the links and capture the relationships between these various ‘actors’ and explore the different forms of knowledge (in terms of both content and medium used). Thirdly participants will be asked to indicate where there may be gaps in the system or needs for changing knowledge practices on the part of some of the actors or new modes of exchanging knowledge and experiences. Thus this diagrammatic device, created through facilitated dialogue, is itself used to exchange knowledge and help foster Networks of Practice through the participants. Through audio-recording and/or note-taking of what participants say when discussing the maps they create and subsequent analysis of the diagrams themselves (hopefully alongside the outputs of a similar UK focussed workshop at OER15) a report on the workshop(s) will be made available on the Conference website after the event, as well as feeding into subsequent, larger scale empirical research work.

REFERENCES


Lane A. B. (2009) The impact of openness on bridging educational digital divides, The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 10(5): 12 pp, ISSN 1492-3831


