Session Format: Presentation

Track: Pedagogy and Design

Title: An OER Online Course Remixing Experience.

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Goals or intended outcomes: To share an experience of remixing OER courses, in order to provide an adapted course to satisfy a perceived need in a particular context.

Intended Audience: Those new to the field who may want to embark on an OER remixing activity, and/or implement a fully online course in a developing context.

Short description: This paper describes the motivation, considerations, outcomes and lessons learned in designing a remixed course for fully online provision.

Abstract:
This paper describes the experience of remixing two existing OER courses in order to provide a contextualized OER fully online course for a particular purpose and context. The current developing country environment is stated, explaining the need for capacity development for academic staff in using ICTs for teaching and learning, and the background to the development of the original resources is provided. The motivation for remixing these into a new resource is explored and the design and development of the adapted resource is described followed by notes on the implementation, and finally an evaluation of the pilot remixed ‘Facilitating Online Learning’ course. This sharing of this experience is intended to provide support to and inform other such remix projects.

Extended narrative:

1. Background

Mirroring the current trend in developed countries, higher education institutions (HEI) in the developing world are facing the challenge of increasing access to tertiary education while still maintaining the quality of their course provision. While deploying supporting information and communication technologies (ICTs) to provide wider and scalable access is seen as a possible solution to this challenge, it is highly likely to raise additional barriers within African higher education environments. The increased desire to make use of technology enhanced teaching and learning methodologies in African universities over the past five years, has raised serious concerns around the current capacity of academic staff to undertake blended or online teaching and teaching, not to mention the limited institutional ICT infrastructure and considerations around learner access.

While many funded programmes, for example the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa Educational Technology Initiative (PHEA ETI), have undertaken to address concerns in this
area over the past 10 years, it remains difficult to propagate efforts in developing capacity throughout the region in a sustainable manner.

The increasing integration of ICTs to support teaching and learning resulted in the early recognition and identification of the multiple roles now required of the academic (Plomp, 1999), who reported that “Lecturers will become facilitators and designers of students’ learning environments, and they may take on a variety of roles such as resource person, coordinator, and often co-learner and co-problem solver. This demands a special approach to staff development, which goes beyond the training of basic ICT skills”.

Two innovative attempts have been made in recent years to address aspects of the challenge of developing academic staff capacity in online teaching and learning within the African higher education sector. In each case, the organisations undertook the design, development and publishing of openly licensed resources permitting reuse and adaptation, in order to support and enhance the capacity building of academic staff.

The first of these was initiated by the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide) who designed and developed a resource ‘Supporting Distance/Online Learners’ in three formats: initially the print-based ‘Supporting Distance Learners: a Tutor’s Guide’ was published in 1998, followed by an online web version in 2009, licensed as an Open Educational Resource (OER) under creative commons (CC); and in 2010 the OER was transformed into an online course housed within an virtual learning environment and renamed ‘Supporting Online Learners’ (Mallinson & Krull, 2013). This latter version is available both as an unmediated and a mediated course. This resource aimed to prepare educators for teaching and learning with technology, understanding the facilitator’s role in supporting the learner in the context of open, distance and online learning, activity based learning, and the use of asynchronous and synchronous communication tools.

During approximately the same time period, the Centre for Education Technology (CET) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) developed an adapted online course ‘Facilitating Online’ also aimed at African higher education institutions. The original Online Facilitation course was designed and developed by Gilly Salmon (Leicester University) and was then adapted by the Centre for Educational Technology (now Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning) at UCT and released under a CC license. It was run online by CET for the first time in 2004. Over the interim period the course has been refined and run again online in 2006, 2008, 2012 & 2014. This course is supported by a resource ‘Facilitating Online: A course leader’s guide’. (Carr, Jaffer and Smuts, 2009). The purpose of these openly licensed resources was to support the adaptation and transference of facilitation skills from face to face situations to the online environment, and equip facilitators to make informed choices concerning the use of online communication within the design of learning activities.

2. Motivation for remixing the resources

Although these resources may on the surface appear to have a similar purpose, each has a distinctive focus and scope, as outlined in Table 1. The most notable difference is that Course A (Supporting Online Learners) encompasses a wide range of elements that influence online teaching and learning, includes a focus on pedagogy and technology, and provides some good grounded activities, examples and readings; whereas Course B (Facilitating Online) focuses on the more human dimensions of achieving good online facilitation, and is highly experiential and reflective.

Table 1: Courses A and B Outlines
Both of these OER resources and their constituent dimensions are deemed to be equally important and of direct relevance to our African higher education context. They both require time and effort to satisfactorily engage in order to initiate development of the relevant capabilities required for successful online teaching and learning. With academic staff being under considerable pressure to enhance their teaching and learning using supporting ICTs, while maintaining their current workload, it is a challenge to prioritise professional development time in this area, particularly in the face of little reward on offer. In addition, academic staff who wish to engage in online teaching and learning are based in a wide variety of academic disciplines, and wish to develop a range of the required skills more quickly in order to start transforming their own courses for blended and online provision.

Consequently, the authors decided to attempt the design, development and implementation of a remixed OER course offering that would provide essential elements of each of the original recourse in a course run over just 3 weeks. The overall plan was to aim for an appropriate balance of these 2 elements, and attempt to shorten and tailor the course without losing the intrinsic value of either. We believe that these two integral changes will provide a course with a unique flavor and prove to be an attractive offering to enhance the professional development of academic faculty in African HEIs.

3. Design & Development of the Remixed Online OER Course

The design of the remixed course was also informed by experience gained as members of the Saide support team during the 5 year PHEA ETI that ran from 2008 through to 2013 at seven participating sub-Saharan Africa higher education institutions. This initiative aimed to support interventions within the participant universities to make increasingly effective use of educational technology to address some of the underlying educational challenges facing the higher educational sector in Africa (PHEA, 2009). One of the specific PHEA ETI objectives was to build academic capacity in quality online course design and delivery through use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

With both the authors having been integrally involved in the PHEA ETI as well as the re-development of course A (Supporting Online Learners) for a the Moodle VLE, and having engaged with Course B (Facilitating Online) as participants using a hosted Sakai adaptation and subsequently porting this OER to Moodle, they believed they were in a good position to make informed decisions regarding the design of the proposed remixed course.

Amiel (2013) raises several concerns around what he terms ‘design-as-remix’, which include those related to licensing, attribution, context, and technical standards. The context of our particular remix project is noteworthy in the following respects:
The primary original course resources were also developed by African educators and designed for the African context.

The freedom to reuse, adapt and remix was granted by the original sources.

The task was then reduced to a regular learning design activity for online provision for the same context.

The licenses for the online versions of courses A and B are both CC BY, although the print based guide for Course B has a CC BY NC SA license. The remixed course C itself is mooted to adopt a CC BY license. In this spirit, course C was developed for distribution on the Moodle platform – an OSS virtual learning environment.

Aspects to note of the design of the remixed course titled ‘Facilitating Online Learning’ include the retention from Course A of practical exploration of tools and technologies, aligning pedagogy and deploying activity based learning, and exploration of asynchronous vs synchronous communication. From Course B, the human elements were condensed and integrated and an assumption made that less initial uptake time would be needed to become familiar with the VLE. It was decided to loosely retain the framework from Course B, while infusing the practical and technology elements from Course A where appropriate. The result was a 3 week fully online course with 3 days start up time, a break week for mid-course catch up, and 3 days wrap up time.

For the remixed Course C, the target audience were academic faculty and educational technology support staff at African HEIs. This is the audience that inspired the remix, and we sought to serve them in the first instance. It was anticipated that persons who participated in the course were already engaging to some extent in online teaching and learning.

The teaching and learning elements to be aligned were the objectives, course materials, learning support, level of interaction / mediation, level of temporal flexibility, and the assessment structure. We planned for a high level of interaction and mediation, which dictated that we limit the participant group size to between 20 and 25, with 3 facilitators designated to provide the support and mediation.

Two modes of provision were considered: fully online provision or a blended mode. It was decided to go with fully online in order for participants to experience the entire range of implications of 100% online provision. These may include issues around online presence of facilitators and participants, reliable and stable power supplies and internet access for participants, and providing satisfactory support for the participants.

In addition, the current trend of micro-credentialing was piloted by Saide through this remixed capacity building initiative. Open digital badges are readily processed through Moodle 2.5+ and care was taken to design a Saide branded badge image, develop appropriate criteria for awarding, and support participants (earners) in exporting their badges from the VLE to an online digital open badge display & storage system such as Mozilla Backpack.

4. Pilot implementation

Following a simple email marketing exercise of Course C to the Saide partner HEIs in sub-Saharan Africa, the course offering elicited much interest but only received a final uptake of 18 participants in the pilot group. This resulted in us deciding to only use the 3rd facilitator on an ad hoc basis as and when required.
The pilot was run over the period 15 October – 19 November 2014. The VLE used for the pilot was Moodle 2.5.1, which was used by almost all of the partner institutions to whom we had marketed the course. The entire course was highly mediated as planned, with weekly individual progress reports being emailed to each participant in order to indicate completion of the assigned activities for the period and encourage participants to catch up on activities that were incomplete or had been omitted. Acknowledgement of completion was provided by the awarding of both Open Digital Badges and Certificates for completing 80% of the course activities. Despite the high level of support, only 11 of the 18 registered participants attained the awards.

5. Evaluation:
An evaluation survey was completed by participants. Participant feedback indicated that for most of the participants, this was a very new experience, but that creating online activities and exploring synchronous communication tools were the most useful learning experiences. Most participants felt that they were very well supported online. Many participants experienced challenges in devoting enough time to the course while fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities. Several participants suggested making the duration of the course longer to allow more time to catch up. Participants who were new to Moodle also felt that they needed more time to become familiar with the environment. The facilitators engaged in a reflection activity after the course to improve the course design for future iterations. The main recommendation for improvement was to increase the duration of the course by one week, and spread the activities across the 4 weeks. This would help participants to establish their online presence. To release the course as an OER, the facilitators would need to enhance the facilitation guide so that other facilitators would find it easier to facilitate their own instances of the course.

6. Concluding remarks:
With the pilot course having been completed in November 2014, the developers are now planning the revisions with reference to the participant feedback and their own experience and reflections. The revised course will then be published as an OER under a Creative Commons license. The lessons learned are shared via this paper, and it is intended that they will be of use to other OER developers who are planning to remix and repurpose existing resources. The affordance of working with existing OERs when designing a learning intervention was appreciated and exploited, validating the express intention of the OER movement. The fully online pilot course mode proved to be a considerable challenge in the African context, despite the participants having previous experience of teaching and learning online.

References: