

OERlabs: Empathy first, solutions later?

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Abstract

The project 'OERlabs - jointly training student (teachers) for Open Educational Resources (OER) use' is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research Germany (BMBF) and aims to sensitize and contextualize OER for all relevant university actors by strategically carrying out an open developmental process. This process includes organizing regular Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues (MSD) over the course of the project. This paper briefly outlines the kick-off MSD event, its methodological approach in context of the entire process, i.e. building a base for working on solutions with implicit use of OER-principles and presents the participants feedback and provides results from the event. In contrast to committee work, our MSD-approach provides participants with more space for open discussions while still working towards a shared goal. In the context of OER, these events show the importance of focusing on the participants attitudes and mindset, rather than confronting them with general OER-related topics right away, such as licensing and creative commons. The project OERlabs will organize its final MSD in July of 2018, while also documenting additional experiences in an Open Book.

Keywords: *Open Educational Resources; Participatory University Development; Open Educational Practices; Teacher training.*

1. Introduction

In order to keep up with the cycle of innovation in educational technologies and educational developments higher education institutions set off various new projects every semester. Most of these projects solely focus on their topic of interest, often losing track of the university as an institution and quite expansive organization itself. The project “OERlabs” (www.oerlabs.de) tries to avoid common pitfalls previously experienced in the early days of e-Learning initiatives in Germany (Bremer, 2010). It became quite clear that it is not enough to operate a given e-Learning platform, or provide teachers with a new technique or a certain approach. Instead one has to focus on the mindset and attitudes regarding certain topics. When combined with a shortage of time that some university projects are faced with, working towards changing the relevant actors’ mindset and attitude often seems to be a real bottleneck. This is especially true for a rather new and innovative topic such as Open Educational Resources (OER), Open Education and Openness in general.

In Germany the topic of OER was introduced at a later stage in the process compared to other countries. The first major accomplishment was only in 2016, when the first ministry-funded train-the-trainer program was initiated (‘OERinform’). On a larger scale (country-wise) this can be traced back to the structure of the central authorities for educational strategy, where each state ministry, as well as one federal ministry cover specific aspects of the educational sector. In order to reach educational mainstream, the OER landscape has to be dealt with by all relevant actors (learners, teachers, and higher education personnel) (Orr et al., 2017).

2. Project OERlabs outline

The project ‘OERlabs - jointly training student (teachers) for OER use’ is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research Germany (BMBF) and aims to sensitize and contextualize OER for all relevant university actors. Despite deriving the project title from the term laboratories, this does not necessarily relate to establishing a working base in a physical space, i.e. laboratory. At a generally large university like at the University of Cologne (331 study programs and 7177 beginner students in 2016 (Abteilung Strategisches Controlling & Informationsmanagement, 2017) it can already be a challenge to find proper working spaces, where theoretically students and teachers could meet, discuss and experiment. This issue meant in turn that the entire process of the project was seen as ‘experimenting’ and the actual term ‘lab’ could be re-defined as any (offline and/or online) space (Hofhues & Schiefner-Rohs, 2017).

Starting the process of changing mindset and attitudes requires shared common spaces where ideas and discussions can openly flourish. For this purpose universities, in this case

the University of Cologne, tend to organize committee work, where a certain group of people meet regularly to share and discuss their views. The OERlabs project on the other hand organizes multiple roundtables, or Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues (MSD) (Doods & Benson, 2013; Seufert, 2013). These MSD¹ events are not limited to an exchange of stakeholder viewpoints, but rather focused on embracing empathy and deeper discussions to connect actors across the university landscape.

This can be an overwhelmingly difficult task, because it means that a rather small project goes against the day-to-day business of university procedure. Working towards solutions on a smaller scale could hamper scientific progress at large, on the one hand leading to fewer excellent scientific results, as well as less educated graduates. The long term effects of similar previous approaches can be seen in teacher education, where student teachers, after studying for several years, are in most cases not confronted with topics related to digital-education, such as media didactics, media production, educational technologies and copyright/licensing issues, despite education existing in a period of time in which the German society at large is discussing the digital transformation and children growing up in a connected world (see JIM-study 2017 and KIM-study 2016) (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2017).

In the pages that follow, the project team attempts to give an example of how it encounter said issues, mainly presenting the first step in the solution process, while finally presenting results, i.e. feedback from the participants of the first MSD. As previously alluded to, the central theme for the project is exploring different mindsets and attitudes across the university landscape by bringing together the relevant actors and fostering discussion.

3. MSD as a symbolic lab: process of solution

During the course of the project (due to BMBF policies 18 months total based on the ministries subsidies policy (see Zierer, 2011)), the project team regularly organizes a number of roundtables, i.e. MSD (an overview of the process can be seen in Figure 1 below). This process was intended to introduce openness and new approaches in thinking to the participants by gradually making the events more target-oriented. At first, the participants were confronted with having to lay new groundwork, i.e. school utopia and the flow of knowledge at the university-level, in their relationship with education, learning and teaching. Then the project team introduced more concrete topics step-by-step, such as copyright and licensing, while also providing a real-world perspective through student

¹ In contrast with committee work, methodically these meetings were based on Design Thinking principles and focused on actively generating ideas and developing solutions.

experiences. The focal point was MSD III, where participants were asked to provide strategies and solutions to various set challenges, as well as to issues based on their individual experiences. In this part, we briefly explain the methodical approach to the kick-off event, as well as present feedback from the participants and contextualize the relevancy of these findings for the entire process.

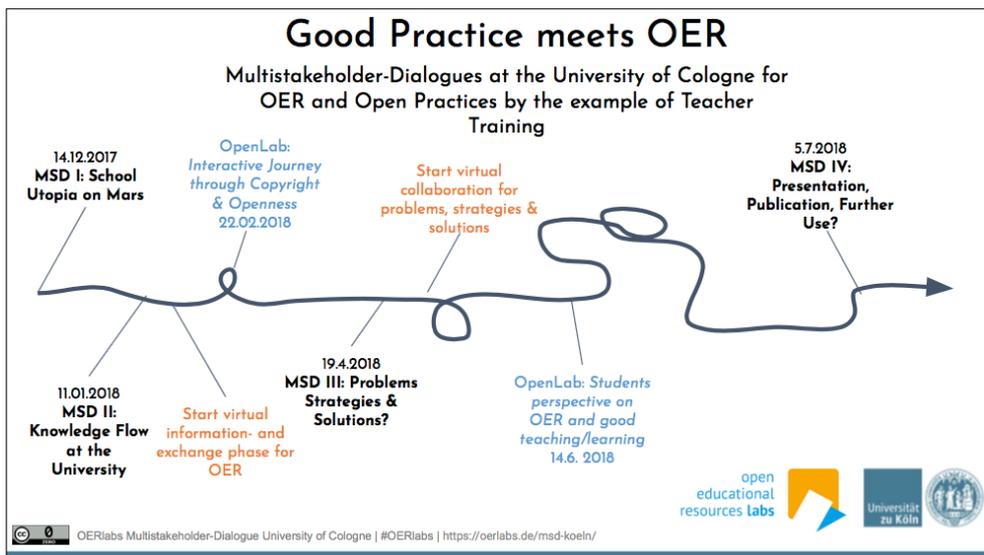


Figure 1. Good Practice meets OER – The entire Multistake-Dialogue process visualized

3.1. Kick-Off MSD: Educational Utopia as groundwork for solutions

At the University of Cologne the project team decided to take the participants to Mars on the first come-together at the kick-off event to stress ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking right away. The aim with this scenario was to loosen and break hierarchical structures between the participants by moving them out of their comfort zones and having to re-orient themselves within their new groups. By letting the participants work through a thought experiment where humans could finally colonize Mars within the next sixsix months, the purpose of having to build a school from ground up and what this entails in terms of educational development immediately became clear. The scenario was based on ‘utopian thinking’ with specific guidelines, such as not having to limit thinking about regulations, i.e. data privacy, legal regulations, architectural regulations etc. These ‘utopian schools’ consisted of four given pillars: teachers, learners, school management and infrastructure. Participants were split into four groups and each work session meant the groups were working on one of the

pillars. Each round the corkboard with the notes and ideas would move clock-wise to another group who would continue working on that new pillar.

3.2. Results and Feedback considering MSD I considering MSDI

At the end of the first session, which lasted around fourfour hours, the project team contextualized the work sessions for the participants. It was decided upfront to leave out specific discussions about copyright, creative commons or best practices, which otherwise would be common for any OER-related event. Instead the project team decided to implicitly include OER practices such as collaboration, re-use and re-mixing, which is why each group was assigned a specific color (i.e. pens, markers, sticky notes etc.), so the participants would be able to gather which path ideas take, not unlike creative commons licensing (e.g. CC-BY). Finally the participants were asked to complete a so called ‘One Minute Paper’ (Angelo & Cross, 1993), containing three questions, see table 1 for the answers.

Table 1. Feedback gathered from One Minute Papers.

<u>N</u>	<u>What did you like the most?</u>	<u>Which topic would you like to investigate further?</u>	<u>Is there something you would like to tell the OERlabs?</u>
1	Motivated participants.	Licensing	Encourage even more exchanges between teams.
2	Exchanging ideas with participants. Thinking about school vision.	OER as “space” for school development	
3	Open discussions in the group.		
4	Good leading questions. Good interactions, great ideas on the corkboard.		
5	Exchanges in the group and different perspectives. No strict conten given, great degree of freedom.	Licensing	Very interesting and well structured.
6	Real utopia, really	Does OER help school	Was surprised how

	cool.	utopia? How do open schools treat OER?	little groups engaged with other groups' cards #realitycheck.
7	Cause irritation and making people think. Different methods lead to fruitful and fascinating dialogue.	General expectations for the dialogue, i.e. exchanging ideas and content, is still to be determined.	Thank you for the organization.
8	Keynote, open space for discussions - enriching.	OER best practices.	Lot of energy und willingness to connect different perspectives.
9	Entry point for discussions (regardless of previous experiences) and open discussions on eye-level.	Licensing and OER repositories (i.e. tagging, etc.)	Continue doing this type of work.
10	Collegial environment among participants.	Dealing with open student made products. Development of participation in education.	Aspects of educational utopia should definitely be picked up again during the next meeting. It offers a great base for discussing the university.
11	Open utopian discussions, great ideas.	Teachers become learners, and vice-versa. necessitates school/university idealogy.	It was not entirely clear how much it was allowed to engage with other groups ideas, but great discussions.
12	Method for discussion. Room for open exchanges. Balance between given content and open discussions - ratio structure/freedom during discussions.	University/Teaching of the future. University as knowledge space 4.0.	Well done.
13	No long lecture. Lot of interaction among	How is OER connected with the University of	More adverstiments. OER movement should

	participants. Good catering and organization.	Cologne? What does the “lab”-approach entail? Does this mean workshop in English?	be more visible at the university. How are students involved?
14	New input. Exchanging ideas. Open participation.	Remixing, everybody can adjust and add something.	
15	Very much liked the open and appreciative discussions, as well as willingness to accept different standpoints.		

4. Conclusion

Generally the feedback received after the kick-off event revealed a need for better networking across the University landscape, a need for open discussion spaces and opportunities, because participants were relieved to be able to talk and disclose their personal views, which in stark contrast to committee meetings, where statements are often made on behalf of the department or institutional viewpoints. It is important to design such events more and more target-oriented as the process moves along.

Although participants were content with the open structure and open discussion format, they nonetheless expressed a desire to be able to focus more on detailed questions regarding OER, such as licensing, best practices and future educational developments, which in turn lead the project team to methodologically focus the following MSD events toward specific issues: e.g. the flow and exchange of knowledge at the University, where participants had to focus on student teachers, teacher training and beginner teachers in detail and how knowledge is shared, transferred and/or exchanged among these stakeholders throughout the entire process of becoming a teacher (MSD II); thematically the project team also offered ‘OpenLabs’ where participants could learn about copyright, licensing and OER, as well as opening up space for students to share their own experiences; finally MSD III (the last work session), participants were specifically asked to provide solutions and strategies to challenges and problems they encountered at the University.

Taken together, the feedback from the participants and the findings worked out at the events strongly support the need for structured networking opportunities at larger

Universities, especially when it centers around fairly new topics such as OER, Open Educational Practices and Openness. University actors and stakeholders are individually aware of many issues, and can often provide solutions, but otherwise lack opportunities to connect and collaborate across institutions. Inciting organizational change is a challenging process, but by opening up the developmental process and enabling university actors to network in an open setting, mindset, attitudes and structures will eventually start to change from within.

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