OER for online teacher training: promises, possibilities and strategies

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OER for Online Teacher Training: Promises, Possibilities and Strategies

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Abstract

Teacher education of today needs a change in vision and action to cater to the demands of changing societies. Reforms, improvement, and new approaches in teacher education are need of the hour. Online training of teachers using OERs is a new approach in this direction. This approach is based on the assumption that online training will facilitate mass training of teacher trainers/trainees and will be helpful in filling the huge gap in demand for skilled teachers. The other assumption is that being OER-based training, it will be easy to adapt it to different cultures and languages. Considering these assumptions, the present paper discusses about promises and on-going initiatives of online training of teachers about the art and science of teaching; underlines benefits of using OER for training of teachers; focuses on possibilities of using OER to make teacher training more relevant and up-to-date to fulfill socio-economic expectations; and offers useful strategies for effectively using OER-based courseware for initial training and continuing professional learning of teachers.

Keywords: OER, Teacher Education, Online Teacher Training

Background

The system of teacher education as we know and practice today was started more than a hundred years ago. Basically it has remained almost the same. Now, after the first decade of another century, we are seeing the waves of modernizing and upgrading of teacher education from North America to Australia, South America to Africa, and from Europe to countries of Asia. Furthermore, the demands on teachers are becoming more and more complex and this represents true challenges to the profession. Talking about these new demands and challenges, a document of European Commission (2007, p.4) illustrates, *"As well as imparting basic knowledge, teachers are also increasingly called upon to help young people become fully autonomous learners by acquiring key skills, rather than memorising information; they are asked to develop more collaborative and constructive approaches to learning and expected to be facilitators and classroom managers rather than ex-cathedra trainers."* Teacher education systems across the globe are expected to deliver in backdrop of all these expectations, changes and challenges (Misra, 2014).

In backdrop of one of the most crucial observation about teacher training, *"The quality of training a teacher receives affects their teaching throughout their career. It affects the achievements and life chances of their students"* (DFES, 2004, p.4), reforms, improvement, and new approaches in teacher education

is need of the hour. Online training of teachers has emerged as a new approach in this direction. The reason is that unlike a residential face-to-face course, learning online gives one the flexibility to set own study hours and save money on travel and accommodation. Considering this, a number of initiatives have been taken across the globe to offer online training to teachers. Georgia Department of Education offers a badge-based course named, Effective Online Teaching for instructors' to master online teaching skills essential for educators to teach 21st century students. This course can be accessed by anyone, anywhere and participants may earn a set of self-awarded badges for free or choose to have their work verified.

Michigan State University's Virtual University Design and Technology website offers text-based lessons in topics including pedagogy and best practices, online course content, enlivening techniques, course structure and design, and hybrid courses. The Learning to Teach Online project of College of Fine Arts from University of New South Wales is designed to support time-poor teachers in a practical and easy to access format. This project offers video- and PDF-based episodes to examine specific successful online teaching strategies from many different disciplines, offering tips, guidance and pointing out the potential pitfalls to both novice and experienced online teachers. Besides, more than 50 lessons of this project can be accessed for free through ITunes. As another initiative, University of Pittsburgh discusses online course planning and design, interaction, giving students' feedback, assessment, getting feedback from students, and new technologies. While online instructors from Seven Pace University, give their advice about being an effective online educator. To get this advice, one has to visit iTunes U's Pace University page and select "Faculty Contributions" to access different useful videos.

MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching) provides a large, peer-reviewed collection of online curricula and other resources, as well as forums and publications aimed at online educators. One can search the MERLOT database for "distance learning" to find links to material to plan and design effective online classes. The Sloan consortium's effective practices site act as a useful source for educators to share techniques, strategies, and practices in online education that have worked for them. IH Online Teacher Training (OTTI) learning platform provides teachers with online teacher development courses. This platform has courses for every stage of a teacher's career, from an initial pre-service qualification to DELTA level and beyond. A recent initiative in India, 'Euro Varsity', a virtual university aims at providing programs to develop teaching skill sets. It uses the mode of e-learning, so that that the teacher trainee can learn from home or any other place of their convenience.

These ongoing and upcoming online teacher training initiatives may get further boost in terms of quality and delivery by using and adopting Open Educational Resources (OER). This argument is based on the assumption that OER for online teacher training will facilitate mass training of teacher trainers/trainees and will be helpful in filling the huge gap in demand for skilled teachers. The other assumption is that being OER based training; it will be easy for teachers across the globe to adapt these resources to different cultures and languages. In fact, the use of OER for online training of teachers will be a right approach to fulfill the vision of OER movement where it is highlighted that the purpose of using OER in education is to enhance learning, notably a kind of learning that enables the development of both individual and social capabilities for understanding and acting (OECD, 2007).

Promises of using OER for Online Teacher Training

The OER have been produced for educational use, and teachers are primary users of any educational content or resource. Teachers are vital to promote and facilitate the adaptation and use of OER, as observed by Albright (2009, p. 68), *"The key component of OER is the educational content, and the essential source is the instructor who provides that content and agrees to make it freely and openly available. Whether OER is driven by 'top-down' institutional systems or 'bottom-up' individual or community initiatives, the creation of the educational substance depends upon faculty members."* Talking about the benefits of using OER for enhancing both teaching and learning, Misra (2012, p.3) argues, "*Use of OER for various teaching learning purposes can support teachers in many ways like making their teaching meaningful; accelerating changes in the traditional teaching learning process; and developing a culture of independent study among their students. The OER also helps teachers to teach digital natives in technology dominated world of teaching and learning."*

At present there are two main challenges regarding training of teachers. First challenge is offering initial teacher training to large number of teachers particularly in developing countries. Second challenge is to keep them professionally update by providing them different opportunities for continuing professional development. Agencies promoting OER are of the view that OER based online teacher training can do well on both fronts, as underlined in a call from ICDE (2013), *"Open, distance and online learning is rapidly expanding in universities and colleges in Africa and Asia, but faculty training has not caught up with the speed of development. Online training of teachers using OERs will facilitate mass training of teacher trainers, which again will facilitate trained teachers in filling the huge gap in demand for teachers in Africa."* This call further highlights, *"By using OERs, courseware can be adapted to different cultures and languages."*

Advocating for use of OER in online teacher training and perceived benefits, Park (2009) suggests that OER training will help teachers to learn how to use OER according to its license status, and realize that the commons of open educational resources is vast and global, open to be adapted, derived, and remixed with other OER on the Internet. This training would enable teachers to see open courseware as part of a larger world of open materials and communities, rather than as an institutional initiative. Considering these promises, some institutions have already started OER based training for teachers. For example, The Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources (OER) assists faculty who are developing online courses for community or junior colleges in finding and utilizing free online textbooks, learning modules, and creative commons resources for distance learning courses.

Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) offers teachers a collaborative professional development model centered on engagement with Open Educational Resources (OER). Since 2009, ISKME has trained over 1,500 teachers from 25 countries in its program focused on collaborative innovation and social learning using open curriculum and open teacher-led approaches. This programme focuses on developing and iterating on a model for professional learning for teachers that positions ISKME-facilitated peer-led engagement with OER as an innovative strategy for supporting creative collaborative practices for teaching and learning. This programme also provides opportunities for continuous improvement of teacher professionalism, as well as improving the quality, relevance, and accessibility of resources. But such types of programmes are few and limited. The reason is that OER is a people driven initiative and has limited institutional support or backup. Whereas, the established culture of academic and higher education institutions does not particularly foster the creation, sharing and re-use of OER (Geser, 2007).

Strategies for Using OER-based Courseware for Initial and Continuing Training of Teachers

It has been observed that OER can play a very significant role to prepare teachers to excel in teaching profession and develop among them a number of competencies and practices for benefit of teaching learning process (Misra, 2012). In fact, online training of teachers using OER offers various possibilities but not many initiatives have been taken in this direction so far. Therefore, it becomes imperative that main stake holders of teacher training namely International organizations/ institutions (UNESCO, COL, WORLD Bank, ICDE, European Union, etc.), governments, teacher education institutions, and teachers themselves must come together to offer and promote online training of teachers using OER. In this backdrop, following strategies may be useful to promote OER based online teacher training for teachers across the globe:

(i) Make OER a part of initial teacher training curriculum

Initial training of teachers is instrumental for effective utilization of OER for teaching learning tasks, as suggested by Daanen and Facer (2007), *"If educators are to shape the future of education (and not have it shaped for them by external technical developments) it is crucial that we engage with developments in digital technologies at the earliest stages. We need to understand what may be emerging, explore its implications for education, and understand how best we might harness these changes."* But observations reveal that majority of teachers taking initial teacher training in face to face mode settings usually lack knowledge about OER and its application in various educational settings. Considering this scenario, the International agencies and governments are required to make efforts to introduce OER as part of existing teacher training curriculum particularly in developing countries. Introduction about OER at initial stage of their professional training will help teachers to use it throughout their careers for personal and professional development.

(ii) Establish repositories of OER teacher training materials

In present circumstances, teachers are required to find and adapt efficient measures for learning about and using OER , which are bound to grow well beyond what they may envision today (Misra, 2012). But it is not always easy for teachers to search and find useful OER related to various aspects of teacher teaching. To overcome this problem, agencies and institutions at national and international levels are supposed to make efforts to develop repositories of OER teacher training material for teachers who are at different stages of their careers. These repositories will help teachers to search useful OER at one place and use them for their personal and professional development. Beside teachers, these repositories will also help teacher educators and teacher training institutions to identify useful OER and employ them as per needs of teacher trainees.

(iii)Use OER based courseware for teacher training purposes

Like any other courseware, OER-based courseware also includes different type of contents and activities as part of larger learning modules or complete courses, depending on different educational needs. The main difference between traditional courseware and OER-based courseware is that former uses licensed and copyrighted material while later uses different type of open digital publication of high quality educational materials (Open Course Ware Consortium, 2012). Use of OER-based courseware presents a number of professional learning opportunities for teachers like resources for classes/ self-directed learning/training, web sites that offer interactive tutorials, material such as live classes conducted over the Internet, and videos for individual use or as part of classes (Jing,2005). Keeping these benefits in view, different agencies and organizations may ask teacher training agencies/institutions to identify suitable OER-based courseware and deploy them as integral part of theoretical and practical tasks of teacher training.

(iv) Produce OER for online teacher training in different local languages

The majority of producers of resources and OER projects are located in English-speaking countries in the developed world (OECD, 2007). As resultant, most of the produced and available OER are in English language, whereas, majority of teachers live in countries where English is not native language. Whereas, OER produced in different regional and local languages will be more useful to fulfill the teaching learning needs of teachers. Here a very important question arises that who will come forward to produce OER in different languages. As per the available information, individual teachers and researchers use and produce OER on their own initiative and most of them do not get any monetary benefits for this work. Therefore, stakeholders must come forward to motivate and pursue teachers and researchers particularly from developing countries to adapt and develop useful OER based on local content, culture and language. These locally and indigenously adapted and produced OER will certainly help a large number of teachers to participate and get benefit of online teacher training activities.

(v) Promote OER based continuing professional learning among teaching community

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers has become a major policy priority within education systems worldwide. Highlighting about the importance of CPD, a report from OECD (2009, p.49) observes, *"No matter how good pre-service training for teachers is, it cannot be expected to prepare teachers for all the challenges they will face throughout their careers. Education systems therefore seek to provide teachers with opportunities for in-service professional development in order to maintain a high standard of teaching and to retain a high-quality teacher workforce."* Echoing the same sentiments, Donaldson Review of Teacher Education in Scotland suggests, *"Teachers should have access to relevant high quality CPD for their subject and other specialist responsibilities"* (Donaldson 2011, p.75). OER based online training can help teachers a lot in this respect. For this purpose, stakeholders are required to come forward to train and motivate teachers to use collaborative learning tools like blog, wiki, facebook,

twitter, etc. to learn and share different OER for their continuing professional development. This OER driven initiative will help teachers to learn on continuing basis and keep them update as per social and professional requirements of teaching profession.

(vi) Establish OER supported online learning communities for teachers

All over the world different` communities, associations and organizations are working to improve teacher training practices. Parallel to these efforts, we need a new initiative in the form of establishment of OER supported online learning communities for teachers at local, regional, national and international level. These OER supported learning communities for teachers can be established online as well as in the form of traditional organizational establishments. Regarding these learning communities, the role of OER experts and organizations will be to establish and provide technical support, while teachers will be required to take care and run these communities. These establishments will act as connecting link for teachers to fulfill their teaching learning needs by using online OER materials. These establishments will also provide a forum for teachers to showcase their expertise and experiences for development of new OER and share many useful professional practices on collaborative basis.

Conclusion

OER are seen as a means to help people across the globe to acquire the competences, knowledge and skills needed to participate successfully within the political, economic, social and cultural realms of society (Geser, 2012). These observations seem equally applicable or even more applicable to would be and present generation of teachers. Online training of teachers using OER is viewed as a beneficial and promising strategy to promote innovation and bring qualitative and quantitative improvements in existing teacher training practices and approaches. We can hope that adoption of proposed ‘strategies’ will help teacher education departments/institutions to produce proficient and skilled teachers to use and produce OER, and these trained teachers will ultimately ensure the maximum benefit of open access movement for individuals and society.

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