Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

User Education and File Standards Best Options to Ensure Open Educational Resources are Truly Open

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Abstract

Objective – To describe common technical challenges of open educational resources (OERs) and recommend solutions.

Design – Descriptive study.

Setting – Online open educational resources in higher education.

Subjects – Open educational resources.

Methods – Drawing from the literature and his own experiences, the author explains the necessity of accepted standards of "openness" and describes the many ways OERs fail to meet these standards. The author also describes common technical challenges that impede openness, then proposes solutions to address these challenges.

Main Results – Technical limitations often prohibit OERs from being truly open. Providers can design their resources to encourage reuse, redistribution, revision, and remixing. Three strategies for addressing technical challenges in OERs are user education, open file standards, and using Git to facilitate distributed version control.

Conclusion – Git is a compelling option for distributed version control, but entails its own technical challenges. User education and

established open file standards are the best strategies to ensure that OERs are open in both a legal and a technical sense. The article concludes with the author's opinions about how OER directors may most realistically implement these solutions.

Commentary

Libraries have embraced openness as a guiding ideal in the Internet Age, but in 2020, what openness looks like is far from a closed question. Today, work toward a positive open paradigm continues on many fronts: linked data technologies and BIBFRAME seek to liberate bibliographic data from the rigid shackles of MARC; research data management aims at greater transparency for published studies in all disciplines; scholars remain cautious of predatory open access publishing. As the author demonstrates, there is a gap to bridge between openness in theory and openness in practice in many areas of librarianship, and OERs are no exception.

The article is not a systematic study of the technical challenges of OERs *per se*, and did not lend itself to evaluation using a typical critical appraisal checklist, such as Glynn's (2006). Instead, the article addresses, in broader strokes, the incongruities between an accepted conceptual standard of openness and the realities of implementation, where technology creates barriers in spite of our goodwill and desire to maximize access to materials. The author introduces and describes this standard—the Four R's: reuse, redistribute, revise, and remix—and dedicates roughly a third of the article to demonstrating how OERs can, and do, fall short of it. While, as mentioned, the article is not a systematic study, the problems described will be so familiar to the average internet user, and the paper is so well referenced with citations to open access authorities such as David Wiley and Michael W. Carroll, that there is little reason to seriously doubt the article's claims.

The article's solutions remain speculative as they are not, strictly speaking, tested. Nevertheless, the author's propositions are well-informed, based on previous research,

and offer a clear starting point for a researcher or OER director looking to practically address certain issues. User education and document formatting standards may prove to be relatively easy to test and implement. The other solution, "a graphical tool that harnesses the complexity of Git while shielding users from that complexity," may prove more difficult.

While libraries will certainly find specific points about OERs relevant, there are more general lessons to heed. The article illustrates the necessity of perpetual realignment with ideas as they evolve. Despite our best intentions, materials will remain "open in theory but closed in practice" if we do not work to keep pace with technological and theoretical developments. We might find, for instance, that what passed for open in 2010 doesn't pass at the decade's end. We are reminded, too, that this upkeep is not simply in adherence to some arbitrary ideal, but is in the service of our patrons.

References

Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, 24(3), 387-399. https://doi.org/10.1108/07378830610692154