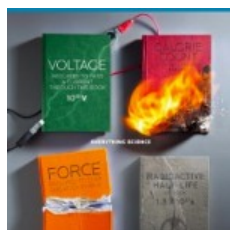


OER in the mainstream – South Africa takes a leap into OER policy

2012 looks as if it might be the year that OER and open access reach the mainstream, globally and in South Africa. In the last few months in South Africa, the national department responsible for schools had announced the take-up of a major OER science and maths resource and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has included in a new Green Paper a recommendation for the widespread use of open educational resources.



Open science

A notable shift in the mainstreaming of OER has been a decision in late 2011 by the Department of Basic Education (which is responsible for schools) to adopt open science and maths books for countrywide distribution to all schools. This means the distribution of millions of print books and the availability of an online version of the text plus additional resources under open licences. [Mark Horner, Shuttleworth Foundation Fellow](#) and the brain behind [Siyavula](#) and [Free High School Science Textbooks blogged in late 2011](#) in a state of justified excitement:

'Openly-licensed, Siyavula textbooks are being printed and distributed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) for all learners taking Physical Science and/or Mathematics in Grades 10-12 in the whole country for 2012! I don't know of any country doing anything like this before.'

The Minister of Basic Education has now formally alluded to this venture [in a major speech](#) announcing the school-leaving examination results, as [Arthur Attwell](#) has reported. Arthur hailed this move as a game-changer and a potential turning point in the provision of school textbooks in South Africa. He points out that publishers, who have known about this venture for a while, are very concerned that the provision of these books might undermine the sales of officially selected textbooks, although the Department says that they are intended as supplementary material. It would seem from the Minister's speech that she sees this move as a model for potential private/public partnerships between the State and a range of non-profit and commercial partners.

The angry reaction of the publishing industry, on the other hand, seems to rest on the perception that the regulated process for the accreditation and distribution of textbooks – to which, to do them justice, they have contributed considerable sweat and tears – has been bypassed.

Although this is not the first time that pupils have been provided with supplementary materials by the national department, my impression has been that in the past these have been workbooks, not necessarily in competition with textbooks. The books being provided through FHSST, on the other hand, are building on a long and careful collaborative textbook development programme at the Shuttleworth Foundation. I do not see this as a matter of state publishing: the FHSST programme was developed independently and was picked up by the Department of Basic Education after its completion.

Horner describes the extensive consultation that took place with the Department in order to agree on the necessary revisions and the hard work that followed in delivering to the departmental brief. The books are now freely available on the web, as [Everything Science](#) and [Everything Maths](#). The licence (CC-BY-ND) governing the use of the materials is accompanied by a clearly articulated statement of what is allowed:

You are allowed and encouraged to freely copy this book. You can photocopy, print and distribute it as often as you like. You can download it onto your mobile phone, iPad, PC or flash drive. You can burn it to CD, e-mail it around or upload it to your website. The only restriction is that you have to keep this book, its cover and short-codes unchanged.

One benefit of this open licence is that the online versions of the textbooks are now available beyond the borders of South Africa, and could be of great value to pupils and teachers in other African countries. It will be very interesting to see how widely they are taken up and what further ventures arise from that potential.

The books provide a rich resource, with the conventional PDF/print text supplemented by video materials, for students and teachers, links to support services and to a wide range of open resources, with further enrichment and support material due in March. This should provide a level of interactivity absent from conventional textbooks and potentially a higher level of support in an educational system badly in need of upliftment. The open model should allow for this potential to be leveraged as widely as possible.

Arthur is right about the disruptive potential of this venture. One level on which the disruption plays out is that this venture is being undertaken at national level, allowing for the printing and distribution of millions of books for countrywide distribution. The normal textbook provisioning and distribution model for books purchased from publishers, although based on a national catalogue, is a painfully fragmented provincial process, full of grief for publishers and booksellers, as the latest issue of the bookselling industry magazine, *Bookmark*, spells out.

Another disruptive aspect of this venture resides in the availability of digital enrichment materials and additional online resources. It would be interesting to compare the Siyavula digital material with the teacher resource materials provided by the publishers. My guess would be that the Siyavula material is likely to be richer, taking into account the interactivity and social networking potential of the Web. Another telling comparison would be with the resources available in the higher education system, in open source online learning systems such as [Vula](#) at the [University of Cape Town](#) (a member of the [Sakai consortium](#)), underpinned as they are by high levels of pedagogical and research skills.

The latter comparison becomes even more relevant in the light of another bold move in the SA educational system. No sooner had we got on top of the implication of OER in school education, than the DHET Minister announced the launch of a consultation period for a new [Green Paper on Post-school Education and Training](#). In this document, an argument is made for national support for the development of OER resources as a capacity-building exercise, drawing on the existing digital learning environments already available in many universities and citing mainstream national initiatives by UNESCO, the Commonwealth of Learning, and the initiatives by the governments of Brazil, New Zealand, and the US as role models.

[T]he DHET will support efforts that invest a larger proportion of total expenditure in the design and development of high quality learning resources, as a strategy for increasing and assuring the quality of provision across the entire post schooling system. These resources should be made freely available as Open Educational Resources (OER) for use with appropriate adaptation. This would be in line with a growing international movement, supported heavily by organizations such as UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) that advocate the development of OER (p. 59).

Key motivations for OER, the document argues, lie in 'the potential improvements in quality and reductions in cost'. What is proposed is that DHET will:

Determine ways to provide support for the production and sharing of learning materials as OER at institutions in the post schooling sector. In the first instance all material developed by the promised South African Institute for Vocational and Continuing Education and Training will be made available as OER.

Consider the adoption or adaptation, in accordance with national needs, of an appropriate Open Licensing Framework for use by all education stakeholders, within an overarching policy framework on intellectual property rights and copyright in higher education.

This is heady stuff and we are certainly in for a turbulent year. The question going forward will be how to make the potential of open educational resources and open textbooks work alongside the commercial provisioning model, which represents a considerable investment in materials development in South Africa, particularly in the schools system. As the publishers point out, the country needs to preserve the variety and choice that is provided by a successful industry, in the interests of quality education. But how ready are commercial publishers to break out of their conventional space to take risks with new models?

Then, to complicate things, yesterday provided another wild card: announcement by Apple of their new textbook venture – the topic of the next blog.

2012 certainly looks like a year of radical change in educational publishing

by Eve



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