Practical perspectives on building sustainable and caring open education practices in culturally aware and inclusive ways
Anna C Page

Script for OER20 conference presentation

Slide 1 - Introduction
My OER20 presentation is about practical perspectives on building sustainable and caring open education practices in culturally aware and inclusive ways.

Slide 2 - UNESCO SDG4
The ambitious UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (UNESCOa, n.d.) offer challenges to educators to find ways to develop caring, inclusive and sustainable educational practices which improve equity and better support for diversity in different cultural settings.

Slide 3 - OER/OEP inequalities
Open Educational Resources and Practices (OER and OEP) could be regarded as ideally suited to helping achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for Education (SDG4):

Andy Lane discussed this at OER17, explaining that

“Open education, in the form of resources and practices are both seen as contributors to SDG4” (Lane, A. 2017).

In their 2016 paper ‘Women’s empowerment through openness: OER, OEP and the Sustainable Development Goals’, Perryman and de los Arcos, noted that:

“OER and OEP can give women a voice, access to information and education, and the opportunity to connect with peers and train others” (Perryman & de los Arcos, 2016)

However, their research findings also revealed the

“extreme inequalities in digital empowerment and extensive technological barriers to digital participation” (Perryman & de los Arcos, 2016)

experienced by many, especially women, in different cultures and countries.

Taskeen Adam’s recent research highlights the dangers of assuming that technology can solve the inclusion paradoxes of open education, as some OEP unintentionally excludes because OER and MOOCs are hosted on Global North developed platforms with the assumption that

“technology provides an unproblematic solution to educational demands” (Adam, 2019)

This can be magnified when insufficient guidance on participation and learner behaviour is given to bridge cultural deference to Global North knowledge, leading to

“dependency and inequality” (Trotter & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2018).

Different cultural norms between Global North and South, along with generations of colonialism, which may have ingrained inequalities and traditional expectations of the roles of teachers and learners as givers and receivers of knowledge can make it difficult to introduce new pedagogic methods because of the OER/OEP inclusion paradoxes.

Introducing OEP can provide new pedagogic methods but could also unintentionally perpetuate colonial thinking if done in ways that impose rather than critically inform meaningful and realistic adjustments to existing pedagogies being used locally.

Therefore, the challenge is to adopt caring approaches with open educational practices. This means OEP projects need to be conducted thoughtfully and critically, with feedback and evaluation practices built in from the beginning.

OEP can help develop and improve critical thinking and digital literacy skills in supportive, culturally aware ways, assisting Global South participants to find their collaborative, online voices to demonstrate that

“I too had something to contribute” (Rye & Stokken, 2012)
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Slide 4 - introducing the project

In this presentation I use an international development project led by the Open University as a case study to illustrate evolving open education practices being tried and adapted for a local, post-colonial context.

This project has given me my first experience of teaching in Myanmar with the help of interpreters and has also highlighted how dangerously easy it is to assume that knowledge and practices are readily transferrable to other contexts and cultures without critical reflection on their practical application and contextual relevance.

Some background:

There is a demand for skilled graduates in Myanmar, where traditional teaching practices, introduced when Myanmar was a British colony, as well as local cultural norms, reinforce the roles of teachers as subject experts, and students as knowledge receivers, and a reliance on rote learning rather than critical thinking skills.

The Myanmar Ministry of Education wants to improve Higher Education and make it more widely accessible following years of under-investment. In recent years new Distance Education Universities have been set up in Myanmar as part of the education reforms.

Since 2013 there has been an explosion in smartphone use in the country, with mobile devices often being the only access many people have to the internet, especially in rural areas, with coverage uneven and power cuts regular.

The UK Aid funded TIDE project: ‘Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education’ is gradually introducing new approaches to teaching and learning in Myanmar via a 2 year evolving programme for Higher Education teachers and support staff, aspiring to help realise the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals in Myanmar education.

The TIDE project has run online and face-to-face events since May 2018 for Myanmar Higher Education staff, in a series of education programme cohorts. These events include webinars, residential schools and repurposing existing OER.

The topics covered are selected in collaboration with the universities; they are mostly taught in English which is a language of instruction in Myanmar.

The face-to-face twice yearly Residential Schools have two strands of instruction:

- The Academic strand focuses on environmental management and climate change topics.
- The ICT support strand focuses on online and distance education teaching practices and assessment methods.

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Slide 5 - about the Residential School
Some data about the November 2019 Residential School hosted by the University of Yangon.

- There were 5 days of lectures and workshops in a lecture theatre and classrooms.
- Attendees were 150 higher education staff learners from several Myanmar Universities.
- 73 were ICT support staff and 77 were academic staff.
- The ICT support strand had 6 ICT tutors and 4 Academic tutors for Assessment methods.
- The Academic strand had 11 tutors.
- Some sessions were combined, with both academic and ICT learners working together.
- There were 19 interpreters because the TIDE experience from previous Residential Schools indicated interpreters were essential to improve communication between tutors and learners, who were mostly bilingual but not fluent English speakers.
- All the tutors came from 3 universities in the UK (The Open University, Oxford University and University of Manchester), with one being a Myanmar national who works at a UK university.
- A large number of the learners, especially the ICT support learners, were women. The Myanmar Constitution supports equal rights to education, though further progress towards equality and women’s rights is ongoing.

The TIDE project approach is to introduce collaborative learning practices for learners to try which they could potentially adopt for their own context.

In theory, this could change the traditional dynamics between teachers, learners and technical support staff.

In practice, it is hard to reduce educational colonial bias in a session, when there is a lot of information to share in a way which does not impose, but informs and enables learners to critically review in light of possible application in their context.

When planning sessions before the Residential School, tutors practiced collaborative approaches they were planning to introduce, including reflection on the previous Residential schools, with tutors who had attended before sharing their experiences with the new tutors.

The tutors were encouraged to use collaborative group activities to make the sessions more interactive. Some tutors requested feedback from learners and other tutors during and after sessions, in addition to what was being collected officially via surveys, to inform further adaption of activities for subsequent sessions.

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Slide 6 - introducing ‘other useful terms’ activity
I was one of the ICT tutors at the November 2019 TIDE Residential School.

The ICT support tutors paired up to run the sessions, taking it turns to be lead or assistant educator. We observed and helped each other, and made reflective notes in a shared Google document.

At the beginning of the week, educational themes and concepts were explored with academic and ICT learners working together.

One of the activities explored the meanings of some useful educational terms, such as Accessibility, Digital Literacy and Plagiarism. However the paper resources we had brought for this group activity were prepared too late for translation and were only available in English. The learners were invited to match various definition cards to the educational terms, with some suggested definitions correct while others were not. The verbal instructions I gave (with the help of the interpreter who was unfamiliar with the activity and the terms) were not clear enough, whereas in the other classroom the activity was being lead by the UK-based Myanmar national who was able to successfully guide her groups through the activity, especially as she was able to immediately translate the definitions for those who were less fluent English readers.

The definition cards needed English on one side and Myanmar language on the other. Instructions for the activity would have been better written out in advance and translated.

This could have been done as a flipped learning session, with materials provided electronically to learners before the Residential School, therefore using the session for whole class and group discussions about the various terms.

As a result of observing how this activity didn’t work as planned because of language difficulties, I thought about how it might work as a short interactive online activity. I set up the 10 terms and definitions as an online quiz (unfortunately in English only) in the TIDE project collection on OpenLearn Create. The intention is for this to be translated, to make a Myanmar language version.
Slide 7 - introducing Assessment for Distance learning session

The mid week ‘Assessment for Distance Learning’ session was planned and run by OU Academic and ICT tutors collaboratively, for the Academic and ICT learners in the 2018 cohort who were learning about online assessment methods.

The Academic tutors introduced various online assessment methods including multiple choice quizzes and encouraged the learners to write a quiz question, in mixed academic/ICT groups from each university. They chose one of three question types which were described in the session.

It was an ambitious plan in the time available, as writing and building online quiz assessment was new to many of the learners and they were getting used to working collaboratively with people in other roles.

Tutors noted some deferential hierarchy between the academic and ICT support staff learners, as well as respectful deference to the TIDE tutors.
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Slide 8 - about the quiz building workshop
While the Academic learners explored Assessment methods further, the ICT learners were asked to build the online questions, using OpenLearn Create, a Moodle OER platform owned by The Open University.

I lead the quiz question building activity.

I had written step-by-step guidance for each question type based on an OER called ‘Hands-on Moodle quiz’. This guidance was translated and printed in learner handbooks.

We moved the 31 ICT learners to a separate classroom where they crowded at desks with their laptops and draft questions written on paper to build into online quizzes.

Some of them were unfamiliar with Moodle and none of them had set up quiz questions before.

With the help of an interpreter, I demonstrated how to set up a Moodle quiz. I spoke a sentence, which the interpreter translated before I spoke again, time-consuming but necessary especially for those whose English vocabulary, especially for specialist terms, was limited.

It took practice to achieve the right balance of speaking and translation. If I said too much, it was harder for the interpreter to understand, remember and translate.

I asked learners to build their questions, referring to the instructions in the handbooks. They worked in small groups, while the interpreters and tutors circulated to answer questions.

When learners wanted one-to-one help I showed them what settings to configure and discussed with them why a question might need rephrasing, or choosing a different question type.

I discovered that everyone was making the same configuration mistake so I demonstrated on screen why it was a mistake and how to correct it.
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Slide 9 - about adapting the hands-on workshops
The ICT learners had a planned follow-up session that afternoon so they could continue building their quiz questions.

By the end of the follow-up session, some learners had succeeded in building working quiz questions for demonstration to the Academics the next day rather than at the end of the original workshop session.

Moving the demonstration was an ‘on the day’ adaption to the programme in view of the time it took to build the quiz questions, it was not simple, even with the help of a pre-translated guide and engaged interpreters.

The quiz building sessions provided me with insight into the ideas and misconceptions learners had about the purpose and good use of online assessment methods. They also informed how I approached the Moodle Masterclass the following day.

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Slide 10 - train the trainers for sustainability
TIDE is actively identifying learners from the cohorts who could teach others what they have learned about online distance education to make the programme sustainable beyond the life of the project, this is the ‘Train the trainers’ strand.

The ICT learners had a Masterclass session to learn how to configure other Moodle tools, such as a forum, blog, wiki, book and glossary.

I lead this session with the help of two other ICT tutors and several interpreters, with the bonus that as part of her ‘Train the trainers’ role, one of the 2018 cohort did some of the demonstrations at the beginning, speaking in Myanmar language with English slides.

The Moodle Masterclass hands-on session went well, with learners actively engaged in asking questions and willingly trying to configure the Moodle tools, while I was doing whole class demonstrations on screen, even without referring to the pre-translated guidance. All the Moodle editing menus were in English because the Myanmar language pack for Moodle is less than 1% complete.

Peer support was noticeable in some groups, with learners clustering around laptops and discussing what they were doing, more fluent English speakers translating menus when needed, and learners proudly demonstrating to each other what they had succeeded in configuring, including an excited gathering around the ‘Train the trainer’ learner as she demonstrated what she had set up.
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Slide 11 - adapting and learning from each other
It was hard to overcome the strongly ingrained practice of learner deference to expert teacher, though tutors, interpreters and learners were eager to learn from each other, with tutors trying to rebalance the learner / teacher relationship with new approaches.

Hands-on activities provided popular opportunities for learner engagement, which started to empower them to collaborate, question and debate with each other and tutors.

These sessions would have been almost impossible without the interpreters, who facilitated friendly, constructive listening and understanding between tutors and learners.

Slide 12 - acting on feedback and moving online in a global pandemic

Verbal and online feedback collected through the week from learners, interpreters and tutors provided a number of proposed revisions to pedagogical approaches for future face-to-face Residential Schools.

It is important to brief the interpreters properly beforehand so they are familiar with the material and activities to be covered, possibly pairing them up with tutors via email to build familiarity.

The feedback showed that providing unambiguous written translated step-by-step activity guidance is essential, because it can be used during the session and later.

However, providing such guidance without testing it with a few learners first, potentially perpetuates colonial education practices, hence the need to design and share draft versions which are pilot tested with some learners and interpreters, using their feedback for revision before translation.

The resulting open educational resources can subsequently be used as flipped classroom resources before another face-to-face learning event and as standalone resources which learners can use, critically evaluate and adapt for their local context in their own time.

This is important in light of the current global health pandemic which is severely restricting international travel. Therefore, TIDE and other international education projects need to swiftly yet sustainably develop online robust and supportive online methods to provide caring pedagogies at a distance while working from home, which is providing a large percentage of Open University staff with immediate experience of distance working and learning for the first time.

My plans for creating and OER course on quiz question design and building needs to be done via online workshops with my OU team colleagues and TIDE project participants rather than via the planned combination of face-to-face meetings and online collaborative methods. This will provide continuing professional development and new learning experiences for both the OU team and the TIDE project participants, with the aim of producing an OER which supports the Sustainable Educational Goal for Education in caring, culturally aware and inclusive ways.