

Panel of Specialists on Copyright in Open Educational Resources

In October 2006 the COL Editorial dealt with the increasing interest in Open Educational Resources (OERs). (The editorial is available at <http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/4151>)

OERs are learning materials that are offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use, adapt and re-use for teaching, learning and research. They are typically digitised materials that an institution stores in its own database, sometimes called a "learning object repository" (LOR). Institutions that make their OERs accessible to indexing engines like the COL Knowledge Finder allow other educators to quickly find and download resources.

There are many benefits arising from creating, using and adapting OERs. For example, there is increased collegiality and online co-operation among educators who share in the development of learning resources and increased quality as learning materials move out of the private classroom into the public domain. More importantly from COL's point of view is the potential of OERs to provide knowledge and learning resources that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

OERs also offer developing countries a level playing field for collaborating in the creation of learning material. Educators in industrialised countries have few advantages over those in developing countries when they collaborate online. Materials can be infinitely customised, providing that the appropriate free content license is used. The OER movement thus enables developing countries to lead developments and contribute to the global knowledge community as active partners and not passive consumers of others' "knowledge". In other words, this development has the potential to empower educators in the smallest countries and democratise the creation of knowledge itself.

One of the issues surrounding OERs that the 2006 COL editorial discussed was the need to attach appropriate copyright licences to OERs to allow users to adapt and distribute them. The licences that most creators of OERs use are those provided by Creative Commons. Since the 2006 COL editorial more educators have been licensing their works as OERs using terms like "CC-BY-SA" and "CC-BY-NC". It seems, however, that those who create the OERs are not always clear what the licences mean and what are the differences between the different licences. Equally, those who want to use the OERs others have produced and licensed are not always clear what they can do with it. Some of the uncertainty is because those using the Creative Commons licences are not sufficiently familiar with them. But there is also some uncertainty about the meaning of the licences.

COL has been in touch with Creative Commons about what the different licences mean for educators and Creative Commons is looking into the questions. COL has also published on its website a paper that is an introduction to the open licences that are of interest to educators. The aim of the paper is to ensure that creators of OERs choose the appropriate licence for their material and that users know what the different licences mean for them.

The panellists will be a representative of Creative Commons, a representative of an educational institution that makes extensive use of OERs and the authors of the COL paper on open licences. They will be prepared to share their experiences working with OERs and open licences and answer questions about licensing OERs.

It will be helpful if those attending the Panel Discussion can look at the paper on the COL website (a revised edition will soon be posted on the website) and familiarise themselves the Creative Commons website.