

ICDE's interview with Susan D'Antoni, IIEP:

Since 1995, Canadian Susan D'Antoni has been working at the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) which is the UNESCO's centre for training and research specialising in educational planning and management. Being one of the top experts in new technologies and education, Susan is currently head of the IIEP Virtual Institute .



Previously to moving to France, Susan D'Antoni led the Canadian government's Correspondence Education Project, and she was Chief of Projections and Analysis in the Education, Culture and Tourism Division of Statistics Canada. Subsequently, she became Director of the Division of Research, Policy and Planning at the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

Susan D'Antoni is currently working very actively in the field of Open Educational Resources. ICDE met Susan in Paris on November 12 and 13, in conjunction with the launching of the ICDE Global Task Force on Open Educational Resources. Here is a transcript of her opinions:

1. OER is an importance resource that has the potential to expand the offer of higher education, what are the main benefits OER offers to individual learners and to institutions?

In 2005, the UNESCO world report entitled, *Towards Knowledge Societies*¹, was released. This report puts forward several key ideas:

- Diminishing the digital divide is crucial, but not enough -- because it is most often coupled with a much older and deeper knowledge divide.
- Knowledge plays an increasingly important role in economic growth, in both North and South. It is also one of the keys to human and sustainable development.
- Knowledge societies will accomplish their mission only if they succeed in fostering an ethic of collaboration and become knowledge-sharing societies.

The report also has a message for the higher education sector:

¹ UNESCO. 2005. *Toward,Knowledge Societies*. Paris, UNESCO Publishing.

“Institutions of higher education are designed to play a fundamental role in knowledge societies, based on radical changes in the traditional patterns of knowledge production, diffusion and application.”

Making educational resources openly available to individuals and institutions is expected to have a number of benefits. Individuals will gain greater access to information and knowledge from a range of sources. Prospective students will be able to assess the program of study at the university to choose both the program and the university that best suits their needs. OER can be used to supplement a course that a student may be taking in a face-to-face or distance learning mode. OER can also serve both as a framework for self-guided independent learning, and as actual learning resources.

OER allows universities to showcase their materials. Universities play a crucial role in society as transmitters of knowledge and creators of new knowledge, and making that knowledge available as OER is a means of contributing to the sum of knowledge that is freely and openly available to all.

2- Why do you think is it mostly private initiatives and originating in the USA (such as The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation) that support large OER projects?

Change can be promoted by many different factors. In the case of the Open Educational Resources movement, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has played a very important role. Because of its vision and program to support OER and the significant resources that it has allocated to a number of both large and small projects in the area, the Foundation could be seen as playing a role in steering development. However, I think it would be more appropriate to consider the fact that in financing a number of initial projects, it has stimulated the development of a movement which now has its own impetus. And although the initial projects were undertaken in the US, the foundation now supports a number of projects worldwide – such as, the African Virtual University, China Open Resources for Education, the Commonwealth of Learning, the Dutch Open University and the UK Open University.

There are already initiatives in many other countries, and as awareness of the OER movement spreads, there will be more initiatives worldwide.

2. It is often mentioned that OER has particular relevance for developing countries. However, there is little awareness of their availability and potential, so resources will be difficult to exploit. What kind of actions are UNESCO and IIEP developing to cope with this problem? Is there any “awareness campaign”?

The UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning has indeed undertaken an awareness campaign. With support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, IIEP has put in place a two-year strategy to raise awareness of OER at the international level and to create a Community of Interest on OER. It has three specific aims:

- To foster an international dialogue and exchange of information;
- To link people who might never have a chance to meet – either in person or virtually – to come together and participate in information sharing and debate on OER;
- To create an International Community of Practice on OER to support collaborative development and use.

Three specific activities were elaborated:

- A first awareness raising Internet forum;
- Ongoing informal discussion of key issues in a Community of Interest;
- A second forum on the results of an OECD study of OER.

As of November 2006, the Community of Interest includes more than 600 participants from more than 90 countries around the world, of which 60 are developing countries. And since the first forum in October 2005, the community has exchanged almost 2000 messages.

In addition to discussions in the two forums, the Community has addressed three topics identified by the members:

- The definition of a research agenda for OER;
- The exploration of what would be needed to create a Do It Yourself/Do It Together portal;
- Free and Open Source Software tools for OER, and lessons of the FOSS movement for the OER movement.

Each of the forums and the informal discussions in the Community of Interest has a background note and a summary report. These documents have been made widely available by means of the IIEP website and the IIEP OER wiki. In this way, the resources created for the discussions, along with the reports capturing the interaction of the Community can be accessed by anyone interested in the topic.

The address of the website is <http://www.unesco.org/iiep/virtualuniversity/forums.php> and the wiki can be found at http://oerwiki.iiep-unesco.org/index.php?title=Main_Page. And anyone who would like to join the OER community is invited to send a message to virtual.university@iiep.unesco.org.

3. What kind of institutional changes will imply the introduction of OER? What policies should be put in place?

The introduction of OER in an institution will imply change, which in turn will necessitate new or revised policy to support the creation and use of OER. Both questions will depend upon the institution – its context and its specific mission and the policies and procedures currently in place. In order to support reflection on this important question of policy development, IIEP has produced an initial draft of a policy framework as a starting point. If open educational resources are to reach their potential to share information and knowledge, and enabling policy environment needs to be put in place at a number of levels – institutional, local, provincial/state, national, and international.

The draft framework is currently under discussion in the IIEP Community of Interest on OER, and will no doubt be refined and elaborated through that process.

<i>Level/</i>	Institutional	Local	Provincial/State	National	International
<i>Issues</i>					
Promotion/ Awareness					
Motivation					
Faculty support/ Recognition					
Localization/ adaptation/ translation					
Copyright/ Intellectual property					
Quality assurance					

Technology/ Infrastructure					
Guidelines/standards					
Financial support/sustainability					

In his book, *The Wealth of Networks*², Yochai Benkler comments on the Information Society and the importance of policy choices.

“We are in the midst of a technological, economic, and organizational transformation that allows us to renegotiate the terms of freedom, justice, and productivity in the Information Society. How we shall live in this new environment will in some significant measure the end on policy choices that we make over the next decade or so. To be able to understand these choices, to be able to make them well, we must recognize that they are part of what is fundamentally a social and political choice – a choice about how to be free, equal, productive human beings under a new set of technological and economic conditions.”

His words underline the importance of the policy choices that face us in determining our future society and education and knowledge sharing are central.

4. Which role will faculty play as users and producers of OER?

Faculty members are central to the OER movement. It is their materials – those produced to support face to face or distance education in the institution – that can be made available as Open Educational Resources.

Faculty members are also central to the process of preparing those materials for release as OER by the institution. One important activity is the identification of third party copyright materials used in their own instructional materials, for these must either be cleared for use, or removed, or replaced. In addition, some faculty would use of the opportunity to revise material so they can better serve as Open Educational Resources. Released on the web for all to view, these materials have a high visibility and represent both the faculty member and the institution.

Open Educational Resources can be used by faculty members to supplement or enhance their own courses, or as a basis for reflection before preparing a new course, or used directly – perhaps with adaptation and translation to make them appropriate to the local environment.

5. There is an institutional reticence to openness in an increasingly commercial setting in Higher Education today. Are there any sustainable business models that will reward institutions for adopting the OER principles?

Sustainability is indeed one of the challenges of the OER movement. This is a topic treated in the current study of OER undertaken by the OECD Centre for Research and Innovation CERI). Stephen Downes has prepared an analysis of potential models for sustainability. His paper can be found at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/3/5/36781698.pdf>.

6. There are a lot of educational materials published on the web, but it is rarely organised in a way to actually help increase the quality of instruction. Quality is a

² Belkler, Yochai. 2006 *The Wealth of Networks*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

central topic. How can users (independent learners) be sure about the quality of the materials available when they do not come from a renowned institution? Are there any quality assurance mechanisms?

Quality is an important issue for all OER initiatives, but it is true that it is of particular concern for users of 'grassroots' initiatives – open collections that anyone can contribute to. Many OER initiatives have some form of informal quality assessment, for example, through reputation management systems, which allow other users to comment on and rate materials, and can help to orient users towards materials that others have found useful. Peer review is another, more traditional academic method of assessing quality, which can be applied to OER.

It is important to remember, however, that 'quality' is subjective; 'high quality' materials in one context may not be considered equally 'high quality' the world over. In response to this, Rice University's Connexions initiative (<http://cnx.org/>), to which anyone, anywhere may contribute material, has developed a tool through which different users (individuals, institutions, professional societies, etc.) may set up their own review processes. Those users may then view Connexions through their own 'lens' (or portal) that selects and displays only the materials that meet their quality standards.

7. In your opinion, are there any lessons that the OER movement can learn from the Open Source Software?

Yes, there are many lessons! The IIEP Communities of Interest on FOSS and OER have recently come together to discuss this very question. In particular, the OER movement could learn from the FOSS development model, with its emphasis on open, collaborative communities, where the conditions for membership are enthusiasm and programming skill (rather than academic credentials and reputation), rigorous documentation and quality control through peer review and regular testing.

Another important lesson is that the most successful and innovative open source software often comes about as a result of a developer 'scratching an itch', in other words, creating software that they needed to make their own job or life easier. The lesson for OER development is that teachers and academics should recognise the importance of creating materials that fit their own teaching needs first and foremost. Materials that are proven to be useful in at least one learning context are more like to be of ultimate value and use in others.

Finally, OER creators can learn from the licensing choice of FOSS developers. The success of FOSS can, in part, be attributed to a strong commitment to open licenses that safeguard ongoing collaboration and sharing, and facilitate progressive development of software. FOSS advocates in our group discussion argued that the OER movement should have a similar commitment to open licensing to safeguard the shared principle of openness and freedom of knowledge and resources.