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# **Obstacles to creating and finding Open Educational Resources: the case of research methods in the social sciences**

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**Abstract:** The field of Social Research Methods is shared not only by the social sciences, but by many other disciplines. There is therefore enormous scope for the creation and re-use of open educational resources (OERs) in this area. However, our work with social scientists on a number of recent projects suggests that barriers exist to OER creation and use in social research methods teaching. Although there are now a number of national and institutional projects creating learning resources in research methods and making them openly available for teachers and students to use, many still use licences that restrict re-use and, in particular, modification. We refer to these as grey OERs. We also found that, in contrast to the well-developed practice of citation in research work, academics and teachers had a narrow notion of licensing and copyright of teaching materials, consistent with a limited experience of sharing teaching materials. Academics saw potential users as mainly other academics who were subject experts like themselves. That meant that they gave little weight to the role of broad description and metadata in making resources findable. At the same time, when academics looked for resources, the provenance, quality and relevance of those resources and the ability to judge that quickly were paramount.

We discuss two approaches that attempt to tackle these issues: first, the development of a mapping tool that supports those creating OERs to identify a range of classificatory and metadata in a way that gives those looking for resources a much wider range of ways of finding them; second, the development of a website, based on Web 2.0 technology, that exploits the contributions of academics using and reviewing research methods OERs. We suggest that the activities on a blog-based website create a cultural context which constitutes an element of a community of practice of social science academics. Users can find resources by quality, pedagogy, and other metadata as well as content and through vicarious learning about the use and reviewing of resources by other academics, they may develop better practices in their own re-use and attribution of OERs.

**Keywords:** OERs, metadata, community of practice

## Introduction

As social scientists we have for some time been struck by the individualised and essentially private nature of teaching practice amongst our academic colleagues. There seems to be a range of unacknowledged, taken-for-granted or unquestioned understandings about teaching practice that stand in marked contrast to colleagues' much more open and explicit research practice and which militate against a widespread sharing of educational resources. In the work we have done in the last few years we have investigated these taken-for-granted views and in this paper we report on our results in a case study of educational resources in social research methods and describe two solutions that we have worked on which go some way to addressing the issues our investigations raise.

The UK-wide Open Educational Resources programme, currently in its third year, was launched in April 2009 as collaboration between the Higher Education Academy and JISC, with funds provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This paper adopts the definition of OERs offered by this programme. The key elements are that OERs encompass a variety of teaching resources, are free at point of access, can be re-used by anyone and do not require formal affiliation with educational institutions. Importantly, OERs are highly customisable and shareable given that they either reside in digital media collections in the public domain or have been released under a license (most commonly a Creative Commons (CC) license) that permits free use and/or repurposing (Atkins et al., 2007:4). Mackintosh (2011) has broadened this definition to incorporate three interrelated dimensions: educational values (in terms of barrier-free access to the resources), pedagogical utility (anyone accessing OERs should be able to reuse, revise, remix and redistribute the resources) and technology enablers (i.e. OERs should be in a format which ensures that they are "meaningfully" editable). This means that potential (re)users of OERs are positioned not as mere consumers but as active participants in the process of creating and sharing the resources (Tosato and Bodi, 2011).

Initiatives such as the UK OER Programme have highlighted a number of issues including an increasing interest in using OERs. Masterman and Wild (2011) found that there is growing interest amongst academic staff in using OER to support their teaching and learning practice. The drivers behind this increasing uptake of OERs seem to include the need for better transparency in the quality of teaching and learning (McGill et al., 2008) and the need to challenge the threat of monopoly on scientific knowledge held by commercial publishing houses (OECD, 2007). It is also possible that a growing public interest in lifelong learning has heightened interest in OERs (Yuan et al., 2008).

However, a number of authors identify discrepancies between the rising culture of openness and the experiences of teaching practitioners. Institutions are often resistant to providing support (in terms of time, institutional policies etc.) for academics wanting to create and re-use OERs (Carey and Hanley, 2008; Sclater, 2009). Another area of challenge for academics is copyright. As Nikoi et al. argue, the current model of OER production within academic institutions seems to be one where academics are repurposing materials which were not originally created with openness in mind and where initially creators worked on the assumption that permissions from third-party copyright holders are not necessary for materials intended solely for face-to-face teaching context (Nikoi et al., 2011). At the same time, other authors stress that individual attitudes towards OERs are just as crucial and that academic buy-in is essential for OER take-up (Browne et al., 2010). As Masterman et al. point out; the decision of an individual academic to engage with OERs depends on their belief about teaching

and learning as well as their overall disposition towards sharing and reuse of resources (Masterman et al., 2011).

Whilst there are clearly institutional factors that affect the creation and use of OERs there are also many issues that have their origins in the academic culture and the daily practice of teachers and their taken-for-granted assumptions. It is in this context that we believe the notion of a community of practice (CoP) is a fruitful one to explore. The classic definition of a CoP is of 'a group that coheres through 'mutual engagement' on an 'indigenous' (or appropriated) enterprise, and creates a common repertoire' (Wenger, 1998:125-126). This could be seen as a mechanism whereby practitioners reinforce and inculcate novices into essentially conservative practices. But Wenger see the potential for a CoP to be a site for practitioners to respond collaboratively to challenges and for the development of novel solutions. Thus, the creation, use, adaptation and acceptability of OERs by academics seems to demand the development of new practices and repertoires in a CoP. Yuan et al. (2008) recognise that building and enhancing existing communities of practice is becoming an important theme in OER initiatives and, according to Iiyoshi and Kumar, 'the key tenet of open education is that education can be improved by making educational assets visible and accessible and by harnessing the collective wisdom of a community of practice and reflection' (Iiyoshi and Kumar, 2008: 10). In terms of the promotion of OER, Burgos and Ramirez discuss the advantages of taking the CoP framework as a starting point for developing an OER initiative in Latin America, where this framework allowed for better sharing of experiences of all partners involved in the project (Burgos and Ramirez, 2010). Thus the use of the notion of a CoP is widespread amongst those involved in the UK OER programme. The term is applied to embrace a diverse body of stakeholders from different backgrounds (higher/further education institutions, subject centres, professional associations, the student body) involved in the joint enterprise of developing open educational resources and exploring the meanings of openness (Chin, 2010; Tiedau, 2010). As Koohang and Harman argue, 'promoting communities of practice is vital to the health and sustainability of OERs', especially when it comes to long-term maintenance of OERs once the project funding runs out (Koohang and Harman, 2007:541).

## OER in Social Research Methods

The subject matter of social research methods is unlike many of the other topics that social science students encounter in their degrees. It is strongly based in the acquisition of skills and techniques such as undertaking social surveys, interviewing, ethnography, statistical analysis and running focus groups and for that reason, *prima facie*, might seem to be a good candidate for the creation and use of shared resources for teaching and learning. Research methods courses are a compulsory element of many social science degrees and related subjects. Most social science benchmarks mention it as a core element and at postgraduate level the ESRC has made holding a masters qualification in research methods a prerequisite for its PhD bursary support. So there is a very wide demand across the HE sector and at levels from first year undergraduate to postgraduate for teaching and *a fortiori* for OER materials in social research methods.

The wide range of disciplines using and teaching social research methods can make use of materials generated by a number of sources. For example the ESRC NCRM promotes training courses, seminars and educational resources that can be used by teachers and students of research methods. Some universities are also making a large number of resources available to support students learning research methods such as [Methods@Manchester](http://www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/) <http://www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/>. Individual teachers also create many resources: data sets, videos, case studies etc. Currently most of these materials

are hidden behind password protected institutional VLEs however some material is finding its way to open repositories such as Jorum and Merlot.

With so much material now available produced by funded development projects and individuals, a number of new challenges have become apparent reflecting the academic culture in social sciences.

## **Emerging challenges to incorporating OERs in research methods teaching**

Over the last two years, the authors of this paper have been involved in a number of studies that throw light on the use of OERs in social research methods teaching. As part of a UK-wide Open Educational Resources programme [UKOER] from April 2009 to April 2010 the C-SAP (Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics based at University of Birmingham) undertook a project, 'Evaluating the Practice of Opening up Resources for Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences'. [1] This project worked with 6 social science academics, called 'partners', in assisting them each to create 60 credits worth of open educational resources including a substantial amount of social research methods material. (Hereafter referred to as the 'Pilot study'). The work, including the tool we developed and the evaluation we undertook, focussed particularly on the taken-for-granted assumptions and conceptions held by the partners and highlighted a number of the issues and challenges faced by academics creating educational resources in the social sciences. In the last year we have worked on related projects and have undertaken two online surveys and focus groups looking specifically at the issue of sharing resources in social research methods. One survey, undertaken in early 2011 examined teachers of qualitative research methods (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and received 94 responses from over 25 different social science disciplines[2] (hereafter referred to as the 'Qualitative survey'). Responses were received from all parts of the world (though principally from UK, USA and Europe). The second survey, undertaken at about the same time, received 99 responses and focussed more broadly on the use of social research methods resources and the discovery of resources by UK social science academics[3] (referred to here as the 'Research Methods Survey'). Both surveys used the Bristol Online Surveys tool. The focus groups were held in April and June 2011 and consisted of a range of discussions, interviews and hands-on trial sessions with a total of 14 UK academics who were each very experienced in creating and using educational resources including OERs, textbooks, video materials and data sets. The aim was to investigate the discovery and use of digital and OERs in research methods' teaching. All discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

These investigations have revealed several issues that affect the creation and use of educational resources in social science research methods. They include i) sharing and copyright and the related question of the openness of resources; ii) how potential users can establish and judge the quality of materials in an efficient way; iii) how academics and teachers might discover appropriate learning resources.

## **Attitudes towards sharing and copyright**

An earlier survey of e-learning materials and practice undertaken in 2008 by C-SAP found that social sciences practitioners in general are interested in OERs and, at least in theory, were inclined to share their own resources (Marsh et al., 2008). This must be slightly attenuated by the concerns raised by some participants in the focus groups about intellectual property. They were not keen on releasing resources, which had taken them a lot of time and effort to prepare, in an uncontrolled way.

In fact, we have found considerable ambiguity among academics regarding copyright. There is no shortage of advice and toolkits on how to handle IPR (e.g. JISC, 2009), yet we found in the Pilot study that partners were unaware not only of the tools, but even of the issues. Academics are well used to the careful use and attribution of materials in their research work, yet when it comes to teaching, our partners would use media and documents in their teaching without any concern for IPR, believing that as long as they were being used only in education, there was no problem. Copyright issues were often seen as irrelevant. However, when it came to making publicly available their own materials (containing such media), they were immediately more cautious. Nor had they given much prior thought to how their teaching materials might be used once in the public domain. In part this reflected the fact that most of these materials were hitherto hidden behind institutional VLE passwords, but they also believed that universities, in general, would not object to making teaching materials public.

Our more recent investigations in the Research Methods Survey and the Focus groups confirmed the view that copyright was not perceived as a significant issue in higher education. 55% of survey respondents agreed with the statement that, 'I don't really pay attention to the licensing of the resources as I only intend to use them for educational purposes' and a further 12% agreed that 'I don't think it is necessary to ask for permission as the resource is online'. In the case of the Focus group participants, although they assumed that copyright was not an issue when using materials for educational purposes, participants expressed a concern that sharing materials online could breach copyright.

Such attitudes towards copyright may partly explain the Focus group participants' reluctance to openly share teaching resources under a clearly specified Creative Commons license. As long as sharing happened informally between academics, they felt safe in re-using materials that contained elements of potentially questionable provenance in terms of copyright (for instance, images of popular culture icons taken from the Internet and used to illustrate relevant concepts). However, once the material was due to be released into, for instance, an educational repository and issues of copyright had to be clarified, many academics from the Pilot study, the Focus groups and the Research Methods Survey suddenly realised both the need to address copyright issues and their lack of preparedness to do so.

## **'Grey OERs' and research methods**

Those producing educational resources in social research methods often show similar uncertainty about copyright and licences. Many bodies, such as the ESRC and HEA, fund such projects on the basis that the material created is freely available to other academics, researchers and teachers. For example, the ESRC funded NCRM (National Centre for Research Methods) and its nodes have produced high quality resources such as toolkits which explore such diverse methods as using walking interviews, analysing blog data and using participant-produced video; all of which are high-quality, expert-produced resources. Yet



the materials rarely show any clear licensing conditions and often the best reference to this is to a generic university licence for the web sites where they appear. These do not make it clear if the conditions relate to just the website and its design or to any video, audio, documents or other learning resources stored there or accessible from the web pages. In some cases, such as the archived sites conserved under the NCRM Restore project, the copyright is explicit, but in this case it is vested with the University that created the materials. A right to free educational use of the material is granted, but no licence to change without permission or use the materials without attribution. [4] The resources undoubtedly are being shared in one way or another by those who know about the work of NCRM or access the website through recommendations from their colleagues. At the same time, those resources have not been designed with openness in mind as they lack clear information about open licenses or pedagogical descriptions that would encourage re-use.

Such educational resources are now very common in the social research methods area. We have coined the term 'grey OERs' to denote resources that have been created and/or deposited with the intention of being shared within an institutional context, yet lack the distinctive features of OERs such as a creative commons licence.

This situation is not helped by the fact that Web2.0 platforms, which are often used both for finding and depositing teaching resources (including those intended to function as OERs), fail to address the issue of copyright and licensing in a satisfactory way. For instance, YouTube, which is popular with users and depositors of research methods resources, does not have the option of easily indicating that a resource is CC-licensed. While depositors and/or creators of video resources can embed that information within the video itself or add information about copyright to the description field, there is currently no way of searching specifically for CC-licensed resources. At the same time, this functionality is provided within some platforms that are being used for hosting research methods resources, such as for instance Slideshare.

## **Judging the quality of materials**

The concern with the quality of OERs was a recurrent theme throughout our research. Some Pilot study partners worried about the adverse impact on personal reputation if materials are poorly repurposed, especially if the resource is used without proper credit or permission. Many feared that their resources were not good enough to be shared openly and that by releasing teaching materials they were making themselves vulnerable to receiving overly critical feedback from their colleagues. Those fears were magnified if their institution did not value teaching (on the other hand, as colleagues located within an HE in FE context argued, there exists a potential of recognising OERs as proof of engagement with teaching). Fears about the quality of resources are also related to issues of trust, which has particular relevance in terms of research methods teaching.

In the research methods survey, there was a clear concern with quality in finding and judging educational resources before using them. In answering the survey question, 'What is important when searching for learning resources online?' the major themes that respondents mentioned were quality, 'fit for purpose', and usability. Ideas associated with quality were the most commonly cited criteria for online searches. Respondents used terms such as 'high quality', 'academically rigorous' and 'well informed' to describe this element. 'Clarity', 'accuracy' and 'reliability' were also referred to. The phrase 'fit for purpose' sums up a series of responses that related the appropriateness of a resource to a particular need or purpose. As well as 'fit for purpose', survey respondents referred to 'relevance to topic' 'quality of fit with teaching requirements' and 'fit

to my needs'. Usability considerations referred to how easy a website was to use and how easily resources could be located. Many respondents also mentioned 'ease of access', 'easy to find', 'user-friendly' and 'readily accessible' as characteristics of resources they were seeking.

The concern with quality was also a central theme of the focus groups where it was articulated in the broader concept of trust. A strong preference was expressed for materials from their own institution and those from a limited number of sources (including named universities, NCRM and publisher websites) because they were considered to be trustworthy. In this context, 'trust' related to assuring quality, believing that links would remain active and that the range of resources on offer would supplement course materials. This a concern held in common with those from other disciplines. Masterman and Wild found that OER users were strongly influenced by the provenance of resources they accessed and expressed their preference for materials originating from higher educational institutions and other trusted organisations such as research institutes with established reputations (Masterman & Wild, 2011).

A preference for in-house materials was emphasised by participants who had to teach data collection and analysis using qualitative data sets. They felt it would be difficult to use data created by someone else as analysis using coding would be difficult to teach without familiarity with the data. Furthermore, relying on their own data also meant that they had detailed knowledge of the process from initial coding stages through to the final write-up. Nevertheless, while participants felt it was difficult to engage with a resource created by a different academic because of the 'messiness' of the research process, they simultaneously indicated the need for open teaching resources addressing precisely this issue.

Participants in the focus groups were also concerned about how their use of OERs might impact on the perceived quality of their work. Academics felt that there was an expectation that in research-led institutions especially, teachers should use examples from their own research and that course materials should be 'owned' in some sense by the person teaching the course. In a financial context where students expect value for money, the participants expressed the view that presenting research methods materials created by another academic would not meet professional expectations. Moreover, some felt that using resources such as videos within an academic context would not be acceptable because such resources do not have the same perceived academic value as books and journals. Most respondents in the Research Methods survey and in the Focus groups admitted that they mainly used educational resources such as online interactive exercises and videos as supplementary resources for their students, or even simply as guidance for constructing their own courses.

## **Find-ability and usability**

Despite these misgivings, all respondents emphasised the need to be able to find appropriate resources quickly and easily. There was a clear bias in favour of the use of simple Google searching. The Qualitative teachers' survey found that 74% used Google to find resources for their teaching. 10% used other search engines and most of the rest tended to search within their own institution's repositories. Very few used other ways to find educational resources. Only 7% used Jorum and 6% Merlot and only 11% used any kind of social bookmarking website. Knowledge of dedicated research methods sites was better, with 24% looking at the NCRM, 19% looking at the Sage Methodspace site and 13% using Intute. A similar result came from the Research Methods survey where respondents were asked which search sites they used to look for learning resources. Google and Google Scholar were cited by 81% and 75% of respondents respectively. This was followed by YouTube (40%) and Wikipedia



(32%). Intute was the only specifically academic site mentioned by more than 20% of respondents.

The focus groups similarly showed a preference for popular search engines such as Google. During a user-testing exercise participants were asked to find resources on the topic of 'qualitative interviews' within OER repositories and search engines including JORUM, Xpert, Merlot and Connexions. Participants expressed major reservations about all the results they got from these sites because of a perceived lack of relevant results, lack of information about a potential resource before committing to download and poor usability. Participants tried the same search strategies using Google and argued that the results (although not necessarily giving information about license conditions) were more useful for their purposes rather than those from the OER repositories. Upon questioning, participants argued that Google presented results in a clearer way than OER sites which enabled judgements to be made about the quality of the resource. For example, the URL was cited as one means of identifying the provenance of a resource so that participants were able to identify various organisations and universities quickly. The Google results page also gave an indication of the type of document (e.g. PDF, PowerPoint) and the short accompanying text was found useful. This summary text contextualised the search terms and participants felt it gave some indication of the content of the resource. However, the most important reason given for the preference for Google was the higher proportion of what were perceived to be relevant results. The OER repositories were judged negatively because of the high frequency of results returned that did not seem to be related to the search terms. The limited number of resources within the OER repositories and inconsistent metadata means that search results are unlikely to compare to that produced by Google. Moreover, the user-testing session demonstrated how such results weaken the trust in OER repositories such as JORUM.

## **Metadata and usability**

Despite the preference for Google shown by participants and respondents, the approach is limited. What this search is good at is finding content - of web pages or of learning resources. But it was clear to us from our previous work on the Pilot study that much more information than just a summary of content was needed to make a learning resource usable. What was needed was a range of metadata covering issues like the specific skills addressed by an OER, any assessment or feedback it contains and what kind of pedagogy it instantiates and in which it can be used.

In working with the partners in the Pilot study, we found a number of taken-for-granted assumptions embedded within their academic practice which failed to give weight to a range of information about the resources they were depositing. While informed by institutional contexts, the production of teaching and learning resources within social sciences tends to be an individualised and 'private' enterprise where teaching staff draw on broad disciplinary frameworks in developing what they consider to be relevant material for their particular teaching and learning activities. Overall, social sciences disciplines are only guided by Benchmark Statements, which allows individual tutors a great deal of discretion in determining relevant materials for learning and teaching. Furthermore, teaching materials will often be chosen with particular students, settings or assessment(s) in mind, reflecting the changing nature of disciplinary content material. This individualised manner of the production of teaching and learning resources means that the ways in which they are used in and out of the classroom are often unrecorded. For example, the teaching materials (such as PowerPoint presentations, lecture hand-outs etc.) will usually omit the spoken instructions with which they are presented in the classroom. If resources are to be available for sharing and re-use as open educational resources, those implicit

understandings embedded within the materials - including the institutional and pedagogical context in which the teaching process takes place - might have to be revealed and shared openly.

Just as with the focus group participants, partners in the Pilot study assumed that a Google-like, free-text search or at least the use of the course name would be sufficient for others to find their resources. Partners were generally unaware of the forms of searching and classification available in Jorum, where the materials would be deposited. This reflected the common assumption by partners that users would be similar subject experts to themselves who would, by detailed inspection of the resource, be able to tell its level, pedagogic approach and its potential for modification. In general, project partners did not really consider the possibility that users from different disciplines might like to find and re-use material for their courses - a particularly salient issue for research methods.

## **Recommendations for a Collection**

Both the focus group and the research methods survey indicated that awareness of licensing remains low and few academics engaged in methods teaching seek out materials on the basis that they are OERs. The most important theme to emerge from both the surveys and focus groups was the concern with finding high quality materials. Both the survey respondents and focus group participants expressed a desire for a collection of resources related to methods vetted by subject librarians or other specialists similar to the Intute model. However, in discussion, the focus groups recognised the financial constraints that might make this impractical in a context of ever-increasing online resources. Suggestions for a collection stressed the importance of classifying materials according to a range of dimensions. This included conceptual and pedagogical descriptions such as theoretical, historical, case studies, data-sets and seminar plans. Being able to search either through subjects or methods was considered important and the focus groups expressed a preference for using tags.

Respondents to the research methods survey were asked for suggestions for a collection of resources. Several individuals expressed a desire for certain Web2.0 features such as the ability to 'like' a resource on Facebook. However, in general the emphasis of respondents was on finding relevant high quality resources during a search rather than engaging in dialogue about the resources. The widespread use of Google in finding resources suggests that the quality judgement is one that academics are comfortable making themselves providing they are presented with a set of transparent results that seem relevant to their need.

## **Possible solutions**

In the light of these problems of quality, IPR, metadata and finding and quickly assessing educational resources we believe there are some approaches that, whilst not total solutions, will contribute to their amelioration.

### **A mapping tool**

A module mapping tool, was developed as part of the Pilot study in which each of six partners produced 60 credit modules-worth of material as OER. The majority of credits were deposited as PowerPoint files of partners' lecture sessions along with relevant course documents such as reading lists and assessment details. Partners envisaged that the future (re)users of the resources would be subject experts like themselves who were either creating new courses from scratch or were seeking supplementary material to revise their existing courses. Importantly, neither academics from outside of partners'

immediate disciplines nor students in general were seen as an intended audience.

Partners' experience in developing the learning resources and in mutual peer review of their content revealed the need for a more structured approach to creating metadata for the resources. Depositors were all university academics who had used the materials in their own teaching and already had some experience in creating metadata from the need to specify aims, objectives, assessments and learning outcomes as part of the standard validation process in UK universities. However, it was clear that not only was there some significant variation in how this was done but that many depositors were not experienced in the essentially librarian task of thinking through how potential users might try to find their resources. For example, potential users would need information about the pedagogic decisions made by the depositors and it was clear that it would also be helpful if they could be informed about potential re-use of the materials. This would be of particular value to other teachers seeking to embed the resources in their own teaching.

The tool <http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/OER/toolkit/mapping.html> is a stand-alone, Flash-based interactive website that allows for mapping an individual's teaching practice and making explicit the tacit elements embedded within their teaching materials. Overall, the project team followed the metadata guidelines for the OER programme (Campbell, 2009). A set of appropriate keywords and tags was devised for the purposes of the project, on the basis of existing pedagogic vocabularies such as JISC e-assessment glossary (JISC, 2006) and Higher Education Academy Vocabulary (HEA, 2007). Furthermore, the project team strove to align the release of resources in accordance with key criteria from the relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements.

The elicitation/mapping process supported by the tool draws out the following information from depositors.

- **Overview** This includes standard information on the author, their institution, the JACS [5] code for the content, the level of the content and its description and a short list of content oriented tags.

- **Pedagogy** This is essentially a free text area where depositors are encouraged to give details of the elements of the resource (lecture, seminars, exercises etc.), how to use the resource, any prerequisites and need for independent learning. There is also advice for students using the resource.
- **Relevant Subject Benchmarks** (selected from the full set for the disciplines)
- **Outcomes and assessment** (selected from a range of assessment types). This is essentially the detail any UK academic is familiar with producing for university validation events.
- **Content** This is detailed and broken down session by session, with an indication of the hours of study attached to each session. Lists of background reading/study may be included for each session.
- **Comments** These are about the utility of the resources and/or the potential use of the OER. Again it is free text, where depositors are encouraged to explain, with hints, how the resource may be used in teaching and with any warnings of pedagogic problems that might arise. It may also include lists of extra resources (books, journals and websites) that may be available to learners and recognition of the need for regular updating if material dates rapidly. Some depositors also included student comments and reviews of the material.

This ensured that there was some consistency in how the metadata and free text descriptions were specified - in particular ensuring that certain issues like pedagogy were included - although there was still some variation from resource to resource e.g. in the comments section.

It also had the added benefit that potential users could not only seek resources by key word or topic, but also by pedagogic approach, activity or assessment. One of the taken-for-granted assumptions of depositors was that, most commonly, potential users would be other experienced academics like themselves who would already have some knowledge of the topic but who wanted guidance on overall structure or ideas for particular content or activities. Use of the tool after population with resource information means that such potential users can focus in more directly on the specific kind of resource they need (a class activity on a particular topic, for instance). Given the issues of different disciplinary use of research methods discussed above, this is an especially important issue for how users may find resources about research methods. At the moment, major OER repositories, like Jorum, categorise deposits mainly by topic or subject matter (e.g. using the JACS code to identify subject) along with limited word search (in word processing and PDF files). This is particularly problematic for users trying to find resources about research methods that are used across many disciplines and where the principal metadata points to the specific topic content rather than the method.

## **Web 2.0 and Communities of Practice**

Whilst this mapping tool goes a long way to ensuring that comprehensive and well structured metadata accompanies the educational resources it still leaves aside the more intractable issues of quality judgements, modification, pedagogic adaptation and the adoption of the resources. As we suggested earlier, we believe this might be addressed by harnessing the change potential and learning focus of a CoP. As Schwen and Hara argue, communities of practice foster the articulation of 'everyday problems of dilemmas of practice' (Schwen and Hara, 2003:167). Such dilemmas would include the taken-for-granted assumptions we discovered in our surveys and focus groups. We were interested in the potential of Web 2.0 technology to foster and develop new practices in the research methods CoP. Results from our surveys and from the focus groups

had made it clear that Google was a preferred search tool and also that whilst academics had clear, well-established practices of recognition and attribution in their research practice, this did not carry across into their teaching practice. What we wanted was a kind of forum where teachers could become aware of good quality resources and experience good practice in their selection and use. The CoP we hope to engage would thus learn, for example, by seeing others writing reviews and using and appraising OERs through a process of vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Some authors have already noted the link between CoPs and vicarious learning (Mayes et al. 2001; Fowler and Mayes, 1999) though their focus was on students' learning rather than that of their teachers. Their argument was that students learn not just from active engagement in learning conversations but also from seeing others' attempts at learning. We believe that social science academics' vicarious experience of others' evaluations and utilisations of OERs will begin to address the cultural barriers to the wide use of OERs and will enable academics to address the limitations of their taken-for-granted assumptions about depositing, finding and using OERs.

The idea is not without precedent. Lee et al. (2007), writing about a volunteer community of translators who formed around an OpenCourseWare education initiative, argue that the electronic forum that the group used offered a space for sharing ideas and providing mutual support and thus served as a channel of reification. As Wenger (1998) emphasized, different forms of reification at the organizational level help sustain the energy and help build the collective sense of identity as a group.

Thus the second solution we have developed is the use of Web 2.0 tools to enable peer review and commentary about research methods educational resources in a new methods gateway website <http://methods.hud.ac.uk>. Without creating yet another repository for OERs, this goes some way to addressing the desire expressed by focus group participants and research methods survey respondents for an Intute-like resource that included some of the additional information and commentary about the resources that Intute includes. However, what was needed was some way of assembling this information that was sustainable and did not rely on a large and long-lasting pool of experts to create it. The idea was to harness the benefits of social networking and of the kind of CoP this creates to support peer review and commentary.

### **A reviews blog**

After reviewing various Web 2.0 methods related sites we decided that the best solution was offered by a new site designed around a blog as this gave both the flexibility to use classification, tags and text content in finding resources or reviews but also was designed to lever the power of the community of research methods academics to sustain the site and its content <http://methods.hud.ac.uk>. However, since blogs take time to become known within any community, we have also included a range of open resources related to social science research methods. These include:

- Video of the week (selected from a list we had created)
- Reviews and invited reviews
- Listing of major sites containing resources
- Google to search repositories for particular related resources

These elements have been chosen following insights gained from the Research Methods survey and the focus groups. We also exploited the potential of blogs to promote a stronger sense of community (Yang, 2009). A distinctive feature of blogs is that they encourage user-generated content which we hope will

contribute towards sustainability once the funding for the project is ended.

The 'video of the week' element showcases video-based teaching resources. The section is populated via a database compiled by the project team and includes a variety of videos across social science disciplines. The database was developed to address a need identified in the context of the Research Methods survey, since according to respondents a research methods collection should include the following:

*'Short videos (or other material, but something visual would be useful) demonstrating how to use software such as SPSS. But not being big, just very small, max 5 min. on specific features of SPSS, so that we can pick and choose the ones we need. This is the sort of material that can take a long time for individual lecturers to prepare; but which would be very useful to support teaching'.*

Similarly, participants of the focus groups felt that videos were particularly useful for illustrating the 'messiness' of research practice (including examples of both good and bad research) or signposting students to examples of applying specific research methods to real-life case studies. Furthermore, participants noted that they would often share recommendations of particularly useful video clips with their colleagues but at the same time, found it very difficult to add to those collections because of limited time for searching and having to wade through dozens of potentially irrelevant search results. Thus the 'video of the week' element would provide access to good quality teaching materials which were in high demand by the research methods teachers.

To enhance trust in resources posted on the website, the project team has introduced a section on the methods website devoted to reviews of research methods resources. In the first instance, the reviews would be produced by the project team and participants of the expert workshop as well as members of various networks connected to C-SAP. We see the reviews as a key element of the website since they directly address the fact that trust is a key issue when it comes to use/re-use of resources; they also fulfil the often stated preference of lecturers to have access to fewer but personalised resources.

Within the methods website we will be signposting users to high quality content produced by institutions whose work focuses on research methods, hence the section with links and resources. Finally, a customised Google search feature (the search will be performed within selected OER repositories) will give users the opportunity to find relevant OERs by using a platform that they generally trust and so overcome the frustrations that we have observed during user testing in the focus groups. Overall, we believe that the combination of four elements embedded within the website (i.e. a video database, personalised reviews, links to relevant resources and customised search) will offer a workable yet low-cost equivalent of a solution identified as ideal by the community, that is, a research methods gateway. While creating and maintaining such a gateway would be well beyond the capacities and the resources at the disposal of the small project team, nevertheless, we believe that our methods website provides a low-cost yet sustainable and workable solution to the issues and challenges related to finding and reusing good quality research methods resources.

## **Conclusion**

Our aim has been to examine the taken-for-granted nature of social science academic practices in the context of producing, sharing and (re)using digital resources, particularly research methods OERs and our work has identified a number of areas where those tacit assumptions prevail. These include, attitudes towards copyright (also an issue in the number of 'grey OERs' found in the



area); the reluctance of lecturers to share their own teaching materials outside of informal networks; mistrust of materials deposited within educational repositories and over-reliance on a few chosen platforms such as Google when it comes to finding online resources. Our solution has been to build a metadata elicitation tool and a research methods website. The latter responds to the challenges identified through an exploration of academic practices and prevailing attitudes towards OERs; where the key elements of the website are designed to demonstrate the good habits of a CoP. We hope that social science academics will learn to treat OERs like research ideas and papers; give their authors proper credit - with proper referencing and acknowledgement - but nevertheless feel able to use them without the need for apology. We believe that academics need to develop an approach to OER use that separates learning resources from the pedagogic context in which they are used. So we can use resources from a range of sources but still take pride in and get credit for our pedagogic contribution to the education of students.

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[1] The project was led by C-SAP (Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics based at University of Birmingham) as part of UK-wide Open Educational Resources programme [UKOER]. The programme had the aim of enabling higher education institutions, consortia and individuals to share learning materials freely online. The programme supported universities and colleges in exploring processes and policies, intellectual property rights, cultural issues, technical requirements and data management issues.

[2] This was part of the HEA supported project, REQUALLO - Reusable Qualitative Learning Objects, which has created a range of video and audio resources on how to undertake qualitative data analysis and which are embedded in the Online QDA website <http://OnlineQDA.hud.ac.uk>.

[3] This survey and the focus group are part of the activities in the JISC and HEA supported project, 'Discovering Collections of Social Science Open Educational Resources' which is part of phase 2 of the Open Educational Resources Programme.

[4] The ESRC Restore site contains the following license:

*'Unless otherwise stipulated in the terms of conditions related to any particular resource, or on any other notice attached to a specific material located on this website, a non-exclusive perpetual licence is granted to access, download, print, copy and use, without adaptation, the content available on this website, or parts of it by the further education, higher education and specialist college sectors for*

- 1. *non-commercial activities; and*
- 2. *research and teaching activities*

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[5] The Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) is used by UK academic institutions to identify the subject matter of programmes and modules. JACS codes do not indicate the level of study, as the same codes may be used for undergraduate, postgraduate, research programmes, and continuing education.