# The Human Factor in the Acceptance of OER
## *What determines readiness to share?*
*by Wilfred Rubens and Wim Didderen*

Wilfred Rubens (wilfred.rubens@ou.nl) works at the Dutch Open University's Centre for Learning Sciences and Technologies (Celstec). He is the OpenU project coordinator and an e-learning adviser, and concerns himself with ICT and learning.

Wim Didderen (wim.didderen@ou.nl) also works at the Dutch Open University's Centre for Learning Sciences and Technologies (Celstec). In 2012, he coordinated a study of OER in Dutch higher education (Boon et al., 2012) and he has also worked in various places on developing and implementing OER.

**What determines the readiness of instructors to share open educational resources (OER)? To put that question more defensively: what stops them actually incorporating OER into their teaching? We approach that question from the perspective of change. Based on various sources, we identify a number of reasons why people are resistant to change (see for example Nathans, 1994; Moss Kanter, 2012; Cuban, 2011; Grush, 2011). To what extent are these reasons relevant to the use of OER? And what can one do to counter them?**

## Resistance to change

The implementation of OER in Dutch higher education is currently shifting from the pioneering phase to a phase of broader development (Boon et al., 2012). This is a phase in which – following in the footsteps of the genuine trailblazers within the organisation – a broader group of pioneers – the "early majority" (Rogers, 1983) – come into contact with the innovation concerned. This phase raises questions, concerns, and also resistance among instructors. We will consider a number of types of potential resistance in the context of the implementation of OER. Here are a number of possible situations.

### (1) Undermining of autonomy
The changes run counter to instructors' autonomy. They are therefore afraid of losing control of matters, something that can happen, for example, if the institution obliges them to make use of OER. This kind of resistance can be avoided by involving staff in the decision-making regarding OER, and by giving instructors freedom of choice within the framework of the change. This promotes a feeling of ownership.

### (2) Uncertainty
If OER policy is formulated without any concrete objective or perspective, it leads to uncertainty, which the majority of people do not like. This expresses itself in a number of different ways. A recent survey of OER in the Dutch educational landscape (*OER Hollands landschap*, Boon et al., 2012) shows evidence of a Catch 22 situation that is typical of the pioneering stage of innovation:

- If there is no established OER policy – which was the case in 2012 at more than 90% of Dutch higher education institutions – then individual OER-related activities become vulnerable and susceptible to being classed as a "hobby" or "illegal". That does not invite more and wider sharing.
- As long as no substantial (quantifiable) benefit or added value on a broader scale has been demonstrated, development of an OER policy will enjoy only low priority.

A second possible cause of uncertainty is concern about a loss of quality. The promise is that OER will in fact lead to improved quality because of the extra transparency resulting from the options for providing feedback on resources and for adapting materials (Feldstein, 2009). At the same time, however, there are concerns about a loss of quality (Richter & Ehlers, 2010; Boyd Myers, 2011; Bates, 2011), particularly if the materials concerned are not reviewed and filtered by experts.

By making OER available, those involved in educational development place themselves in a vulnerable position. This too leads to a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty. As a result, instructors share educational resources with one another within a closed and secure environment. This is probably more frequent than it would appear from investigation of OER in Dutch higher education (Boon et al., 2012).

Fourthly, a feeling of insecurity may be caused by the fact that OER can contribute to students having greater control of their own learning process (Grush, 2011). Many instructors find this a scary idea, for one thing because they believe it will reduce the quality of the education provided. They believe that students will be unable to handle such control.

Fear of uncertainty is difficult to deal with. A system of quality assurance can remove some of the concerns about the quality of the resources. Support from the institution – a centralised approach, policy development, training – has a positive effect (Masterman, 2011), but this kind of support is often lacking (Boon et al, 2012).

### (3) Losing face

People are afraid to lose face. In fact, they are often tied to the old, i.e. that which is specifically subject to change (Kanter, 2012). This reason for resistance is closely related to the question of quality. Instructors are afraid to lose face if the quality of OER turns out to be substandard, or if remarks are made about the quality of their educational materials. This obstacle can be overcome by showing sincere appreciation for their work and for their being prepared to place themselves in a vulnerable position. Having a system of quality assurance – with professional development for instructors forming part of it – can help prevent any loss of face.

## (4) Surprises

People generally don't like surprises. One therefore needs to be careful about springing innovations on them. Kanter (2012) advises, for example: "It's better to plant seeds — that is, to sprinkle hints of what might be coming and seek input." Although the adoption of OER is only taking place very gradually, this factor is also relevant to OER. This is because the managers of an organisation sometimes turn out to have different reasons for adopting OER than they originally announced. For example, an executive board may talk about idealistic reasons for investing in OER – greater access to education, better quality, etc. – but it may then turn out that the real reasons involve marketing or cost-cutting. It is better to clarify the real reasons from the very start.

## (5) Familiarity

People may feel that everything is changing and that they are being forced to completely abandon everything that they were familiar with (Kanter, 2012, Nathans, 1994). This factor will be less relevant if OER are introduced gradually, given that they will not then replace everything all at once. There will then be sufficient scope for old habits and practices.

## (6) Need to meet new demands

People are sometimes afraid that they will not meet the new demands that change involves (Nathans, 1994). Guidance and professional training can help overcome this kind of resistance. This is relevant where OER are concerned given that instructors frequently dread having to adapt to using them. Adapting requires specific expertise and sometimes technical skills, for example being able to deal with various different file formats. Richter & Ehlers (2010, p. 6) note, for example: "Revealing such adaptation needs is a far too complicated task and so, the teachers always feel like sailing close to the wind." This reason also plays a role in situations in which using OER requires didactic changes.

## (7) Unfamiliarity

The fact that instructors are often unfamiliar with OER is an obstacle to their development, use, and reuse. Despite the fact that OER have been around for more than ten years now, by no means all instructors are aware of their existence. When instructors share resources online, they often forget to state explicitly that they can be reused and adapted (Richter & Ehlers, 2010). Communication and information are important tools in this context.

## (8) More work, increased costs

Changes often initially involve extra work (Kanter, 2012). That is certainly the case with OER. If one has up to now used resources that are subject to copyright, materials will need to be adapted or newly developed. For instructors, quickly finding useable OER is often a complicated matter (Richter & Ehlers, 2010). Where innovations are concerned, educational institutions frequently demand additional efforts on the part of staff, without any extra remuneration in return. Moreover, these additional efforts are not always demanded of all staff to an equal extent. Remuneration needs to be considered, but it does not always need to be material remuneration: public recognition and appreciation are often enough. Daniel Pink (2009) emphasises the importance of unexpected rewards in promoting intrinsic motivation (rather than "if…then…" rewards). Outlining realistic expectations is also important.

**(9) "What's in it for me?"**
Instructors do not always think that they have a personal interest in the change (among others Nathans, 1994). According to Cuban (2011), they often assess innovation proposals from an entirely different perspective to policy-makers or managers. They look primarily at the practical impact on educational practice, whereas policymakers and managers often have more abstract aims in view, of a higher order. The same applies to OER. Instructors often find the ease of use aspect disappointing, and for less common topics not much is in fact available (Masterman 2011). A lot of instructors wonder why they should share materials with other people which they consider they have developed in their own time, without getting anything back in return. It is therefore a good idea to make clear how OER can ultimately save them time.

**(10) Ripple effects**
Changes also have an impact on departments and processes located further from the centre of innovation (Kanter, 2012), as when one throws a pebble into a pond. It is therefore a good idea to involve all parts of the organisation that are affected. Where introducing OER is concerned, this means identifying which departments and people will be affected by the use and reuse of OER and what role they can play in the process.

**(11) Unresolved past**
Changes often open up "old wounds". According to Kanter (2012), these need to be healed before the organisation goes any further. This may apply to the introduction of OER. For example, has the OER project coordinator previously coordinated another educational innovation that ran into difficulties? Have instructors been told previously about changes that weren't ever in fact implemented? The managers of the organisation can tackle this reason for resistance directly: this time they will need to stay on course.

**(12) Threats**
In some cases, there is a genuine threat (Kanter, 2012). Changes may lead to people losing their job or status. If policy-makers argue for OER as an efficiency measure, instructors may interpret this as a cost-cutting measure, which may be at the expense of their job by saving on educational development. We also assume that instructors may perceive that their role as an expert will be impaired if OER are used that have been developed by other people. Managers need to be honest about aims that instructors may perceive as a threat to their status.

**Conclusion**

Now that the Dutch higher education sector is proceeding beyond the pioneering phase of OER, resistance in the workplace would seem to be becoming more apparent. We have attempted in this article to explain this resistance in the light of attitudes to change. The main ones are: a lack of institutional support, fear of a loss of quality and a loss of face, a lack of skills among users, and insufficient or unclear personal interest on the part of instructors. OER will be used sustainably if institutions develop and implement policies aimed at acceptance, support, and quality assurance. It all begins, however, by taking people's resistance seriously.

Support and backing from the management are essential. Ingrid Mulder (2008) applies the metaphor of the tango to change processes. The dancer who leads does not say what has to be done but indicates the direction. Only when the follower picks this up does he go in that direction. That metaphor also applies to OER. The management of the organisation indicates the direction for policy development and cultural change, and the instructors then pick this up. Active support from the management helps, as an impact study in the UK shows (Masterman,

2011). This presents a nice task for higher education institutions and instructors, including here in the Netherlands.

**Bibliography**

Bates, T. (2011). OERs: the good, the bad and the ugly. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://www.tonybates.ca/2011/02/06/oers-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/

Boon, J., Bitter-Rijpkema, M., Rutjens, M. en Didderen, W. (2012). Een OER-Hollands Landschap. Onderzoek stand van zaken Open Educational Resources in het Nederlandse Hoger Onderwijs Heerlen: Celstec, OU. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://www.surf.nl/nl/publicaties/Documents/Onderzoek%20CELSTEC%20stavaza%20open%20educational%20resources%20hoger%20onderwijs.pdf

Boyd Myers, C. (2011). How the Internet is Revolutionizing Education. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://thenextweb.com/insider/2011/05/14/how-the-internet-is-revolutionizing-education/

Cuban, L. (2011). Teacher Resistance and Reform Failure. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2011/04/30/teacher-resistance-and-reform-failure/

Educause Learning Initiative (2010). 7 Things You Should Know About Open Educational Resources. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7061.pdf

Feldstein, M. (2009). ITOE: Motivations for Open Education. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://mfeldstein.com/itoe-motivations-for-open-education/

Grush, M. (2011). OERs open the door for students to take control of the learning process. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://campustechnology.com/articles/2011/03/01/student-driven-content.aspx

Moss Kanter, R. (2012). Ten Reasons People Resist Change. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://blogs.hbr.org/kanter/2012/09/ten-reasons-people-resist-chang.html

Mulder, I. (2008). 'Docenten durven ICT-vraag niet te stellen in de klas'. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from http://www.scienceguide.nl/200804/'docenten-durven-ict-vraag-niet-te-stellen-in-de-klas'.aspx

Nathans, H. (1994). Adviseren als tweede beroep. Deventer: Kluwer Bedrijfswetenschappen.

Pink, D. (2009). Drive. The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us. New York: Riverhead Books.

Richter, T. & Ehlers, U. D. (2010). Barriers and Motivators for Using Open Educational Resources in Schools. In Open ED 2010 Proceedings. Barcelona: UOC, OU, BYU. Retrieved 9 January 2013 from https://oerknowledgecloud.org/sites/oerknowledgecloud.org/files/Richter_editat2.pdf

Rogers, E. M. (1983). Diffusion of Innovations. New York: Free Press.

Masterman, L. & Wild, J. (2011). OER Impact Study: Research Report. JISC Open Educational Resources - Programme Phase 2. JISC, Oxford, 2011.

Rubens, W. (2011). Reflectie op businessmodellen Open Educational Resources (#in #SA_OER). Retrieved 9 January from http://www.te-learning.nl/blog/?p=50