

RaPAL/NIACE/UCU Conference Workshop Summary

Exploring how Community Open Online Courses (COOCs) Can Empower Learners to Become Teachers

Workshop presenter: Peter Shukie

Rapporteur: Amy Burgess

This workshop introduced a website which has been created to foster the development of learning and teaching where the roles of learner and teacher are open to anyone. It offers Community Open Online Courses (COOCs) and has been developed by Peter Shukie with funding from LSIS. The website can be accessed at <http://www.coocs.co.uk/>.

Peter began the workshop with some historical background, drawing parallels between contemporary society and Britain at the time of the Industrial Revolution. He noted that during the Industrial Revolution there was a love of new technology and a belief in its potential to improve society, but new industries actually resulted in great human deprivation. Then as now, the government tended to see education mainly in terms of preparing people for work. However, organisations such as Trades Unions, Music Societies, working men's clubs and the WEA offered alternative forms of learning which aimed to foster personal and community growth. COOCs are intended to continue this tradition in the digital age.

Peter explained that he was driven to create his website because of his dissatisfaction with some of the ways in which new technologies are currently being used in educational contexts. As an example, he described MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) which receive a great deal of attention and – in some circles at least – are promoted as the means to an educational utopia where no-one is denied access to learning. However, Peter pointed out that in his view MOOCs actually privilege people who already have an academic background to the extent that they mimic conventional educational institutions. For instance, they tend to be taught by 'star' lecturers and they follow a traditional academic approach in terms of language and format. Both these features, he argued, make them intimidating spaces for the uninitiated.

As an alternative to MOOCs, Peter proposed COOCs, which are designed to be accessible to everyone. Anyone can offer to teach a course on any subject they know about and there are no assessments. After someone has developed a course and it has been uploaded to the website, other people who are interested can sign up. Peter described a couple of examples, the first involving a group of young people in Blackburn who made a video teaching people how to smoke a shisha pipe. The second example was of a beekeeper who runs a short course for three to four participants on how to keep bees.

After Peter's presentation workshop participants discussed some of the potential advantages of COOCs and possible ways of using them in their own practice. People were very interested in the idea and made a number of suggestions about ways of using COOCs to empower learners by enabling them to draw on their own funds of knowledge and adopt the role of teacher.