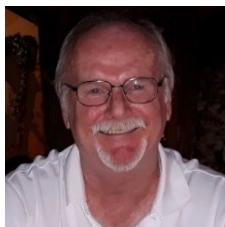# encore+

European Network for Catalysing Open Resources in Education

Interview Series on 'Credentialing and OER'

Interview #4

Don Olcott Jr.

Dr Don Olcott Jr, FRSA is President of HJ Associates, specialising in global open and distance learning; and Professor Extraordinarius of Educational Leadership and ODL at the University of South Africa and Senior Fellow with EDEN Digital Learning Europe. He has long experience in OER, often working with institutions to create repositories, and working with management and staff to establish policies and facilitate adoption. He was 2021-2022 Chair of the EDEN Council of Fellows, Past President & Chairman of the Board of the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA).

Dai Griffiths is a senior researcher at the Research Institute for Innovation & Technology in Education (UNIR iTED), Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR).

Dai Griffiths. What credentialing approaches and methodologies for OER are you aware of?

Don Olcott. Everyone likes to reference MIT when they talk about OER. I learned the reality about this when I asked an MIT employee years ago "Why were you so willing to open up all your content for free?". He looked me and said "Because we really don't give up anything. We don't offer an MIT credential, and they don't get MIT credit." He said it was the best marketing ploy we've ever had, and we don't need it because we're MIT, but it gave us great exposure. I'm not suggesting at all that MIT's content is not valuable, but the people who are who are accessing content are not the people we intended. We wanted this to be open to developing countries, but we've got people who already have degrees coming in, getting what they need, and leaving. In the last couple of years, I have been engaged with Rory McGreal, and others, in this whole micro-credential arena. Micro-credentials now are a direct response to both students and employers needing alternative credentials that lead to work, increase mobility and give employers a skill pool with unique skills.

Historically, universities have offered two products. First, credit based, such as certificates and degrees, and second, non-credit, such as training or short seminars, workshops, even conferences. Typically the quality was quite varied, some were good, some were not. But going to a seminar on a Saturday for three hours with nothing to document whether the student learned anything is not going to cut it as a micro-credential going forward. In the same spirit, the OERs that compose micro-credentials will need a level of rigor and quality, because if you want to stack these micro credentials

onto, let's say, a credit certificate, then you're going to have to convert them within some context. In Europe, most countries have qualifications frameworks, and Australia is well known for having a national qualifications framework and dealing with the issues around OER's and micro-credentials. On the other hand, Canada and the US do not have national qualification frameworks. They never will, it's just not part of their state and provincial based education systems. The States and the provinces in Canada and America are autonomous to run education the way they want. The key point is that, one way or another, OER's going forward are going to have to meet that criteria, getting everybody to agree on what constitutes quality and how much credit or equivalency we give it.

Dai Griffiths. Have you got any examples where people have exhibited the kind of rigor that you're talking about?

Don Olcott. We've been doing competency-based education many decades. What is new is moving it outside of technical and occupational areas and trying to make competency-based training and education applicable across the board. A good example is the European MOOC Consortium who are trying to figure out the best way to recognise quality and rigor. I suspect the partners in the MOOC consortium would not classify every-thing that they offer as open per se, but most of it is. They're basing their quality standards on typical European Higher Education Area (Bologna) credit standards. That's OK to start with, but I think we're still going to have to deal with that conversion process, when it isn't so clear how many academic credits or ECTS credits you should be assigned for these non-credit micro-credentials and OERs. That's

a pretty good model, and I think these institutions have the talent to take us into the future and come up with good ideas.

In the US, Western Governors University is a competency-based institution that is doing very interesting things around OERs, integrating them into micro credentials as well as into basic certificates and degree programs. Michael Sankey has written a lot about micro-credentials and OER's in Australia. OERu, Wayne Macintosh's organization, has done very interesting work building partnerships with different institutions and coming up with agreements on credits and openness that create more transparent and seamless collaboration. These agreements often deal directly with this stackability or combining of credit and non-credit into higher level credentials. Europe is trying to go down the road of standardising micro credentials across EU members and industries. This is ambitious and although it's too early to assess these unique efforts, I think they're making a mistake. I think you'll have to make it so broad that it just won't be flexible enough to deal with the diversity that exists within each of the countries – and within and across industries from employer to employer.

Dai Griffiths. I'm interested in what you're saying about North America, where the states run their own education system. Of course, that's really equivalent to the European Union, where our national states run education. You're suggesting that a standardised approach is never going to fly in North America, but, somehow, we think it will fly in in Europe. Is there a comparison there?

Don Olcott. I think it's a good analogy. So many times, partners coming to the US, or

institutions trying to do business in the US, get it wrong. They don't understand. They think because there's a U.S. Department of Education, it operates the same way as in a European country. But it's a very limited federal department with some regulatory oversight, minimal grant programs, and financial aid for students. Pretty much all the other decisions around education rest with the states. And yet, it's worth noting that the U.S. remains the strongest HE system in the world. The oversight is there but it is complex across states, national and specialised accrediting agencies, industry councils, professional associations, and more. In sum, the multiple oversight agencies may protect quality and standards better than a single standard system that is cumbersome to monitor and enforce.

Don Olcott. What do you think the best repository model in Europe is right now?

Dai Griffiths. I don't have a clear 'best', but Lorna Campbell of Edinburgh University was telling me how they have a very clear division of concerns between authoring materials on an institutional repository, distributed publishing of OERs on the Web, and MOOC platforms for combining OERs with assessment and certification. That seems reasonable, given those distinctions. It depends how tightly you want to tie these things together.

Don Olcott. I would argue that you still need all the functions of good management and leadership to run this thing, however distributed it is. One of the key elements of the micro-credential world is that it's going to be online. We need a transcription service, maybe using blockchain, that is separate from

university transcription, because university transcripting in general has historically been very poor. Until Bologna and the diploma supplement ideas were brought in, degrees didn't say much about what a student would learn, or what skills they had. So, yes, it's all virtual, it should be accessible in a distributed way, but it doesn't mean you couldn't have two or three institutions that have backup of the entire system.

Dai Griffiths. You mentioned blockchain, and that started me thinking about what we need in place to run these things. Can you say something about the infrastructure we need that could make this vision function?

Don Olcott. I'm not an expert on blockchain. My concern is the argument that it needs to operate outside of the typical university transcripting process. I can live with that, but let's not create an autonomous new entity that's disassociated from the parent organization, because I can give you lots of examples of models like that that never worked, universities that have tried to create for profit entities for their online activities. There's also been quite a bit of criticism about blockchain technology. Not everybody agrees on what it should not and what it should be, what it should do, and who should have control over that and how it should be managed. I'm reminded of an article I read recently, where the authors argued quite persuasively that digital transformation is not about technology, it's about business models. I could list the technical pieces, but that doesn't really help you. The bigger question is that institutions have to take a look at their entire digital services continuum and find

ways to build an integrated system that can serve micro-credentials, degrees, OER's. That needs joint planning, so that they're not doing what universities are notorious for: having a separate department for every damn thing in the institution. I don't know how to do that, but I know it's the right way to go.

Recently, in an article that Rory and I published[1] we made the case that if you dealt with your online programs, your micro-credentials and open content as a tri-dimensional delivery matrix of what you offer in these spaces, and then go backwards and start asking management questions, structural questions, financing questions, you may find that you can consolidate resources and structures, and create a more seamless institutional synergy for these digital offerings. However, this is complex because when you start changing structures, the staff and personnel you need may also be different. You can break down the business model structures that you need for that to work, and the technology systems and personnel you need.

Dai Griffiths. If the important thing is the transcript, is there something that needs to happen to make those transcripts more effective or more interoperable, or is that not the issue?

Don Olcott. Oh, absolutely, that's the whole basis of it. The most important thing the transcript does is document the specific competencies and levels that somebody must perform to demonstrate a particular skill level and then subsequently to be certified. A good analogy for the type of transcript would be the

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[1] McGreal, Rory, and Don Olcott Jr. 'A Strategic Reset: Micro - Credentials for Higher Education Leaders'. Smart Learning Environments 9, no. 9 (2022): 1–23.

Diploma Supplement that came out of The Bologna Process.

Dai Griffiths. To what extent is that in place?

Don Olcott. I think we're in early stages, to be perfectly honest. To be pragmatic, I don't think this is going challenge the transcript authority of the university. Most university administrators will see it as a value-added service that we provide to employers, certifying agencies, other entities who assess skill levels and training levels that are needed for workforce and economic development. It'll probably accelerate quickly because governments may tie funding and resourcing to it.

Dai Griffiths. Presumably OER could tag onto that. Is that what you're suggesting?

Don Olcott. It can be an integral part of it, and it's going to be rather transparent. It's not going to be looking at a transcript and saying, "It's really great, except for those eight courses you took online, the institution will not accept those". If we have a credential that includes OERs we're not going to identify the areas that are OER per se. You want to give credit to the authors of the OERs, of course, but you don't have to put it up in neon lights. It's the credential that we're doing, and sometimes flying under the radar can be a good thing. There's great potential to integrate OERs into to all aspects of what we do, micro-credentials, degrees, certificates, it doesn't matter.

Dai Griffiths. Does the same apply to work-based training and learning? Are there any special aspects of that which we need to mention?

Don Olcott. Whoever is providing the training, will have to communicate with employers and show that the training will enable their employees to do A B and C; some kind of verification that they are purchasing quality training and recognized skill development. Because that's mostly what it's going to be, you know, we're not training them to be theoretical physicists. More than anything else, this affords us a great opportunity to invite employers into the discussion, and, let's be honest, employers don't always know what they need, and universities very often don't know what they need either. Whether for the repository or for the designing of the training, the more people you have around the table that are stakeholders with a vested interest in good quality training that's recognized and certifiable, it's going to benefit everybody.

Dai Griffiths. What are the big barriers to moving this forward?

Don Olcott. An unwillingness to commit by leadership to embrace open content as a core value of the institutional culture. Until you do that, you will have universities who spend more money on ensuring that the flowers and the sidewalks look beautiful than they do on open content. What universities value in their vision and mission statements usually can be found in institutional budgets as well. When a university clearly allocates funding in the annual budget, then we know we have an institution that is serious about OERs.

Dai Griffiths. So, what can we, or anybody else, or national or supranational organizations do to resolve or mitigate that problem? Whose responsibility is it to fix this, if anybody's?

Don Olcott. To a large degree my experience with creating repositories in institutions involved trying to get people organized or working with Deans and department chairpersons and trying to create some kind of incentives to get faculty to say "Yeah, I'll participate". But for 200 years we have told faculty their mission in life is to push back the frontiers of knowledge. Even more importantly, we have evaluated faculty and told them their promotions and tenure are directly tied to creating new knowledge, publishing and dissemination, and now we're going to change the rules of the game and tell them to create new open content and give it aways for free. This is what happens when you have people who do not understand the academic process. I'm not arguing for that process. I think you might agree that tenure and some of those things could be obsolete going into the future with the way higher education is evolving. But the fact of the matter is they still exist, and as long as they exist faculty are going to do things that they get rewarded for, and that is research. If there's any message from me today, I guess that would be my biggest one: **find better ways to embed the idea of open content into the culture of the institution.** Faculty may actually be willing to participate, but they want credit for promotion and tenure. You asked whose responsibility it is, but I would ask is "Who's the most important group in making this happen?" My answer would be the academic deans. Not the VC's. Not the PVC's. No. The people who really have oversight for content in their schools. If they don't support it, why are their faculty going to support it? Just not going to happen.

University presidents sometimes ask me to help them get into micro credentials. When I break the news to him or her that no, you're not necessarily going to make any money off of this, and, oh, faculty aren't going to make anything from it either… I think you get the idea. If you can't sell the benefits, why would a leader go down that road? The answer is that every institution does not need to do full-scale micro-credentials. Maybe open content isn't a focus for your particular university. It doesn't mean it's not important. It doesn't mean we don't need it, we just may not need everybody on the block competing with each other. Which goes back to what I said earlier that figuring out some kind of collaborative arrangements with a consortium is probably smart and reduces risk for institutions as well.

Dai Griffiths. How can trust in the credentials achieved through OER best be developed?

Don Olcott. I think I've already given you the answer: you've got to get everybody at the table. Also, if you look at the history of the diffusion of innovations, a significant amount of the data was about change processes and adoption in agriculture. What they found was farmer Joe went down to farmer Bill's farm and said, "Why did you buy that tractor?" And Bill replied, "Well, it's because it saves me this and this, and I'm able to plough…". Where I'm going with this is that if we can find some ambassadors who understand the broader benefits and challenges of open content, they are the best people to be communicating to other faculty. It doesn't mean we can't do advocacy as well, but I think our institutions are still structured and set up so that their peers are an incredibly important part of what they value, what they do and the workload activities that they choose to engage in.

Dai Griffiths. In an email you talked about money and incentives for faculty to create OER. Would that come from a grant programme, or some institution?

Don Olcott. No. Over the last 15 years, most of the monies that have supported OER, OEP's, open content, have come from foundations, corporations, and from government agencies. They're not going to do that forever. They may support it for a few years, but then we're going to have to come up with other alternatives to do this. This goes back to what I said about embedding open content into the culture of the institution, because if the institution values it, they will fund it. Maybe not at the levels that we would hope they would, but it's a start. The monies are given to the academic Deans, and they can determine how that is used within their school. Because the truth is amongst a particular school's departments, there may be four or five that are more amenable to infusing and integrating open content. I don't want to see us going down the road of student fees for OERs, that's not going to cut it. We need to make this part of institutional business, and that's not easy. Shifting the culture is almost, what do they say? "It's easier to move a cemetery than a faculty". Well, it's not always true…

Dai Griffiths. Can credential learning through OER help us in keeping up OER production and management?

Don Olcott. Absolutely. The more ways we can use OER's that are part of mainstream credentials the easier it is to defend, the easier it is to ask for new monies, the easier it is to partner with sister institutions, the easier it is to go to corporate employers and say,

"we're infusing these OERs into our new training program in that skill area that you said you needed for your employees". If you can show that it works in one mode, then you can build on that. I think we've made great progress in the last ten years, though not as much as some would like to tell us. Open content has a great future, but we still have a number of barriers. You know, we all talked about the viability of open content and MOOCs for those in the developing world. That's clearly not been the case in terms of who's been accessing and engaged in them, and there's a lot of different reasons for that that are beyond the scope of our discussion.

Dai Griffiths. You mentioned business models, and there are various business models that you could have for credentialing OERs. Do you see these different approaches being having different impacts on sustainability, or some being more feasible than others?

Don Olcott. I spent the early part of my career in outreach and continuing education. I had to generate enough money through credit partnerships with the colleges, through non-credit, whatever it might be, to create a budget to hire the people I needed, to pay for marketing, to do all the things that go into running an outreach organization. We have always charged for non-credit training, and when you offer it, you'll have to set a price. Part of the cost of creating that training will be the integration of open content, so part of the revenue that is derived from that should be recycled back to designing OER's, integrating OERs, just as it should be put into the learning design process in general. It's very unclear right now where micro-credentials, will show up along this continuum. They could be highly

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technical, and in those areas they won't be cheap. I think that's a natural model.

Dai Griffiths. I guess the cost also depends on the type of certificate, on the cost of the of assessment process.

Don Olcott. Oh boy, all across Europe, people are talking about micro credentials, and they talk about it from the macro view. It's NOT easy when you have to sit down and identify all those competencies and minimum skill levels and performance levels. It is a laborious and detailed process that requires very talented assessment design people. Their time is valuable. So yes, I agree with you that that some of these will require high level assessment. And all of this costs money – for the institution and for the employer and ultimately for the student. Remember, the most admirable impact of OERs to date is probably the reduction in textbooks and other material costs which in turn have reduced unnecessary costs for student to pursue a university education.

Dai Griffiths. What closing suggestions to you have for our colleagues working with open content, OERs and credentials?

Summarising what I have said in response to your questions, I think the main actions to keep in mind are:

- Develop a change strategy and embed open content into the institution's core values and mission. If it is valued by all stakeholders, recurring funding will be allocated annually.
- Align open content management with online delivery and micro-credential creation and delivery – all digital delivery under one umbrella operationally, fiscally, and strategically.
- No Deans' support = no faculty support = no programme. These two groups above all drive support by all other stakeholders.
- Remember your most effective OER ambassadors are other faculty members.
- Prioritise high demand programmes and courses amenable to open content use.
- Develop a broad-based institutional benefits continuum that open content brings to all stakeholders (faculty, students, colleges, employers, partners, etc.).

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