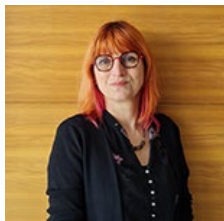# Interview Series on 'Credentialing and OER'

Interview #7

Deborah Arnold

Deborah Arnold has been involved in digital education in Europe for over 20 years, as project manager, teacher and more recently researcher. In her current role at AUNEGe[1] – the French digital university for management and economics – she works with members to support academics in OER production for the Université Numérique[2] repository and recently coordinated the Erasmus+ project ECCOE[3] (Euro-pean Credit Clearinghouse for Opening up Education), focusing on digital micro-credentials.

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

Dai Griffiths. What we're interested in today is how people can gain recognition for their learning with OER, whether that's a degree, or something tiny, or anywhere between. What approaches and methodologies to credentialing OER are you aware of, taking these in a broad sense?

Deborah Arnold. I would put a caveat about "credentialing OER" because I don't think you can apply credentialing or micro-credentialing to the OER itself. Because a micro-credential, what does it recognize? It recognizes a person's ability to do something. You can certify the quality of an OER, but that's a whole different process. If we're talking about credentialing or micro-credentialing, then we have to look at the way the OER is being used. It's easier to see how you would deliver or issue a micro-credential for recognition of the use of an OER within a course, because there you've got the pedagogy, you've got the learning, you've got the demonstration of their competence, you've got the question of how that competence has been assessed or that knowledge has been assessed. But I wouldn't say that you could actually issue a micro-credential for the OER itself. I mean we used to talk about learning objects, didn't we?

Dai Griffiths. Can the credentialing be wrapped up with the object?

Deborah Arnold. If within the object there are explicit learning objectives, which takes us to the whole granularity issue raised in a presentation here at OEG 2022 in Nantes: they showed a photo and said, "this is an OER that I found". Would you deliver a credential to somebody for having looked at the photo? I would be looking at whether there are learning objectives or learning outcomes

embedded in the OER itself, and I would also look at how those learning outcomes are assessed, which takes us back into a pedagogical process of learning. Now, even if you're looking at learner-centred or learner-directed learning, is the learner themselves in a position to say, "Well, do I have that competence"? It's a matter of proving the skills and competence, or the learning. That might be embedded into the OER itself, it might have a self-assessment component. You're going to have the whole spectrum. Has it been embedded in a course where there's a teacher present? Is it peer assessed? Digital micro-credentials should provide all those layers of information.

I'm not saying there's a hierarchy of validity, it's different types of validity. People still ask, "what's the difference between a digital badge and a micro-credential?". Part of it is that the whole badging movement is very much community-based, giving community recognition "I will recognize you for this". It's very horizontal, very democratic. The micro-credentialing movement is more institutionalized. It is more private training companies, and higher education institutions looking at how they can break down their big whole degree offers. But they're not really thinking about the place of OERs in that, which is why I find the question fascinating.

Dai Griffiths. So, there are two quite separate conversations that are intersecting in some way, right?

Deborah Arnold. Yes. Where have seen micro-credentials taking off is in MOOCs. For the most part, it's the paying component of the MOOC where you have free access to all the content, you pay for the assessment, and then

you get a micro-credential based on that assessment. But then that is shifting away from the whole notion of OERs, and it may not be very micro either. You probably know about the European MOOC consortium who have decided that their micro-credentials are equivalent to five ECTS. When I'm looking at other learning opportunities, I'm probably looking more at the level of one ECTS for 20 to 30 hours of learning, which from a pedagogical standpoint is probably what you need. Other people want to deliver a micro-credential for a 1/2 day or weekend workshop, but then that is the learning activity, so again it's taking us away from OERs. I think OERs can be a support for micro-credentials, but embedded in a wider designed learning experience which includes that element of assessment.

Dai Griffiths. You're describing a complicated landscape. Is there any practice within that you think is interesting or significant?

Deborah Arnold. I can give you a concrete example from Open Virtual Mobility [4], an Erasmus+ project that AUNEGe were partners in a couple of years ago. The whole idea was supporting students to look beyond their institutional offering and to find open education opportunities abroad that could give them an intercultural experience of mobility. We designed a series of 24 mini-MOOCs, using OERS to create the learning experiences. Then those were validated by a badge and by a certificate. So that's a perfect example of how you can orchestrate, collate and curate OERs into a learning experience and then deliver a certificate. But it was based on self-assessment as you would in a in a

MOOC. Peer assessment is very good, but there is a barrier in a massive open environment, because everyone is entering at different times and it's very difficult to have enough learners at the same stage in the learning process to do the peer assessment. It was a challenge to orchestrate that, as we needed that peer-assessment component to make the micro-credential as valid as possible. It wasn't just a learner doing a few quizzes and saying, "I have that competence", which I think probably works more easily for knowledge-based assessment than competency-based assessment.

Dai Griffiths. Is that assessment aspect part of the OER, or is it a separate activity?

Deborah Arnold. It's a separate activity as part of the MOOC.

Dai Griffiths. Do you think that, as you have kind of suggested, this is an inevitable architecture?

Deborah Arnold. We've come across this in in all our experience of producing OERs in France. Different people want different things. The learners want a whole course, they want the OERs orchestrated into a learning experience. The teachers want micro-resources. Somebody in engineering wants, I don't know, a one-minute sequence of how a spring works and they want to put that into their course. But they don't necessarily want to share their whole course as an OER. For a learner looking for resources, they can see the simulation of the spring, but not really understand it until it is embedded into some kind of progression. There are lots of learners who revise for their exams through YouTube

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[4] https://www.openvirtualmobility.eu/

videos which might not be exactly what is taught on the curriculum, but they watch the videos at twice the speed. There aren't any learning objectives explicit in a YouTube video, so are you going to give a micro-credential to a student who says, "I've watched a YouTube video and I understand"?

Dai Griffiths. You were talking about the difference between competence and knowledge-based resources. Can you expand on that?

Deborah Arnold. As an example, I can take the ESCO framework, which is currently being developed by the European Commission, which is the European Skills, Competences and Occupations repository[5]. Everything in the repository is categorized as either knowledge about something, or skill as the ability to perform. The really fine details of the difference between the skill and competence and transferable competences work in English but don't work in French. It's the same word for skill and for competence. So those finer points don't come into it. But yes, knowledge is a student acquiring knowledge about something, facts, things. Competence, skill, is all about showing that they can perform an action, based on knowledge but also doing something.

Dai Griffiths. Are you also implying that assessing whether somebody can do something is a harder thing to encode than assessing whether somebody knows something?

Deborah Arnold. Absolutely, yes, and much of traditional assessment in higher education is still adapted to assessing knowledge rather than assessing skills. It's a huge question for all of us when we're looking at assessment.

Dai Griffiths. Are there any repositories that you know of, or people who are building collections of OERs, that are linking them to assessment and credentials?

Deborah Arnold. Not OERs per se. I'm coordinating ECCOE the European Credit Clearinghouse for Opening up Education. That should actually be the credential clearinghouse rather than credit, and this is, again, a language issue. We are collating a repository of learning opportunities. So not OERs, but courses which have learning objectives related to the contents and then which have the assessment.

Dai Griffiths. So, the repository of learning opportunities includes closed degrees, for example.

Deborah Arnold. We analysed degrees and other offerings for examples of how learning opportunities were described, then selected the more granular offerings such as short learning programmes for inclusion in the catalogue. But OER wasn't the focus of our project.

Dai Griffiths. But as you're involved, I'm guessing you are interested in the OER aspects.

Deborah Arnold. Yes, absolutely. We have a whole collection of MOOCs in there, but we also have more closed opportunities as well, because we're interested in the credentialing side rather than the nature of the contents.

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[5] https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en

Dai Griffiths. You've been saying, I think, that it's all very well talking about OER repositories that provide credentialing. But if you do that, then you have OER plus assessment plus credential, and then you've created something different from an OER at a higher agglomerated level, a learning opportunity.

Deborah Arnold. A learning experience? Yes. But it could just be one OER that that leads to that if it is packaged. I don't like the word 'package', but yes, if it has an associated objective and corresponding assessment method. That's my view, but I'd love to hear about people who have an alternative!

Dai Griffiths. A lot of this is about strategies, it's not that there's a right or a wrong.

Deborah Arnold. Well, that's another thing I was going to say, that one of the questions you have to ask is "Why?". When people start talking about micro-credentials, I always quote an esteemed colleague of ours, Mark Brown, who asks "What is the problem that micro-credentials are trying to solve?". Is it access to education? Is it recognition of learners' achievements and learners' competences that they can't get through traditional means? So, it's the why and for whom. If it is helping migrants and refugees, who are escaping war and climate disasters, to have their qualifications and abilities recognized so they can work and integrate in the society, then that's a very important and valuable why. But it's centred around the person and not the OER as the object.

Dai Griffiths. Which approaches or methodologies to credentialing learning through OER are, or could be, the most effective in providing a service to work-based learning and training as part of professional development?

Deborah Arnold. When I was exploring this whole area of micro-credentialing I was put in touch with an association, non-governmental organization in the US[6], who were supporting disadvantaged people in their community. They were asking where the employment opportunities were in their region, and working with the potential learners, the companies, the universities and other civil society stakeholders, to decide what skills were needed. Not just the technical skills, but the transversal skills as well. Then, together, they decided on three priorities, and not only did they rework the job descriptions that the companies were putting out, but they also reverse-engineered the training to fit the needs. I think that is an applicable model, because you could extend it to co-designing the OERs that will give those learners that opportunity. That's not work-based learning, it's for access to employment, but the same principle could apply. So, it's about engaging the stakeholders and getting everybody around the table, and asking "OK, what do we need? Do we have what we need? If not, let's create it". Getting those stakeholders to create the open educational resources and to share them with the community has value in itself.

Dai Griffiths. This seems a transparently good idea, so why doesn't that happen?

Deborah Arnold. Traditional silos, I mean we know about silos in higher education. You've got silos between academic staff and professional staff. You've got silos within

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[6] Education Design Lab: https://eddesignlab.org/microcredentialing/

departments in higher education. You've got higher education, that thinks of the outside world as technology transfer, but not necessarily as a partner in designing learning opportunities. There's resistance on the academic side to industry influencing what is taught. So, yes, traditional views. At the moment, everybody is tired because of the pandemic and all of the emergency remote teaching. Plus, it needs skill in facilitation to get those people round the table and have the conversations.

Dai Griffiths. I was very impressed by the OEGlobal 2022 keynote given by the President of Nantes University making a very clear statement about public service. Her view was clearly that taxpayers are paying for our jobs to provide this.

Deborah Arnold. Yes, there is that belief in public service.

Dai Griffiths. But the Anglo-American view is not quite like that, it's much more...

Deborah Arnold. "Can we make a business out of it? Yes, "How can we meet our KPI's?". It's another level of barrier. Those are like systemic barriers on the political side, and also a reflection of what the society that you live in values. But that's all part of the OER debate that's been going on for years about intellectual property. Our argument is, well, put a Creative Commons License on it, then if somebody does use your content, you've got something to fall back on, because if you don't do anything…

Dai Griffiths. How could we make the linkage between credentialing and OER work better?

Deborah Arnold. I think perhaps by refocusing on values. I don't know if you know the work of Lou Mycroft. She comes from further education and talks about bringing joy into the education process. She has developed what she calls the practice of values[7], that I think sits very well with the open education movement and OER. You express your values, maybe 'inclusion', or 'democracy'; let's take inclusion because it's very dear to the hearts of those of us who work in open education. Then you take a practice, let's say credentialing, or credentialing OERs. Lou Mycroft proposes that you formulate that as a practice statement, that becomes "What would credentialing of OERs look like as a practice of inclusion". Formulating ideas in that way is one way to get people thinking beyond "we can't do it because… the system says this". It's not a practical methodology it's a way of changing mindsets, which I think is the first step.

Dai Griffiths. Moving up one level, how can we get trust in the processes that link OER and credentialling?

Deborah Arnold. Trust comes back time and time again. I think what builds trust is showing examples of where things have worked, "Oh, that looks good! so I will trust that". So, it gets circular, doesn't it? Interestingly, it comes back again to things that I've mentioned earlier. The work that that we're doing in the in the ECCOE project is based on the European Commission solution of European Digital Credentials for Learning [8] , so the whole

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[7] https://loumycroft.org/2021/01/24/the-practice-of-values-2/
[8] https://europa.eu/europass/en/european-digital-credentials-learning

argument there is that it is trustworthy because it comes from the European Commission. But all these different trust mechanisms have built in authentication checks, validation checks, and transparency: "This credential has been issued by so and so, for this reason, it has been stamped here, it is valid, and it hasn't been tampered with". Then it doesn't matter who's delivered it. It's not the European Commission delivering it, it's John Smith delivering the credential to Jane Doe, but when everything is transparent, you know what it is. Then the people looking at that credential need to know how to read it.

Of course, you can go back to the system where you have very, very well-known universities that don't need to go down the level of micro-credentialing because of the prestige of their name on the certificate. But students these days can create their own diplomas on PDF, it's not that hard to do. That is why the whole digital credentialing side is very, very interesting, whatever technology used behind it, if it's blockchain, or something else.

Dai Griffiths. You just mentioned technology, and that has a role too, presumably. The transparency not only has to be documented, it also has to be certified.

Deborah Arnold. We have a responsibility to ensure we use technology appropriately to resolve a social problem that has itself been created by the technology: that it has become more difficult be sure that documentation is authentic.

Dai Griffiths. What actions are needed if OERs are to help people build their career portfolio of credentials, and not be marginalised as something to look at in your spare time?

Deborah Arnold. I'm going to repeat myself: associate the OER with example learning objectives. This is not getting into learning object metadata territory or whatever, but at least encourage people to formulate clearly how a particular OER supports the learning of something which can then be credentialised.

Dai Griffiths. Does that require some kind of standards or formats, technological support? Is there is there a gap there?

Deborah Arnold. The challenge is the very fluid and open definition of what constitutes an OER in the first place. It can be anything from a learning object to a fully-fledged course, the boundaries between the two are fuzzy, and they can change from one to the other. To get round that, I would say focus on what the learner learns and how the learner shows what they've learned. Which means encouraging anybody who's looking at that to ask those questions.

Dai Griffiths. And to have some way, presumably, that those can be represented.

Deborah Arnold. Yes. Let's take a very concrete example. I'm doing work producing OERs with H5P at the moment. Now H5P is very good about getting you to put into the metadata the information about the license. But it never asks you about learning objectives because perhaps you can't formulate those for the object itself.

Dai Griffiths. Is that level there, or is it an empty space that needs to be filled?

Deborah Arnold. It's there in what we're doing around the production of 30-minute

modules, capsules, whatever word you want to use, which can be an assembly of different H5P activities. But there's part of our processes that always starts with the definition of the learning objectives. And there are activities in the form of quizzes embedded in that, so I suppose you could deliver some kind of credential for somebody having gone through those 30 minutes of learning activity. But then what does that mean? So, then you get to the 'why' again.

Dai Griffiths. If people want to build on OERs to lead to credentials, are the formats and standards available for them to represent that in an interoperable way, so that we can shift them between institutions?

Deborah Arnold. It comes down to that question of the actual recognition. It is technically easy to transpose the data that comes from the OER into a digital micro-credential that is completely compatible with the European system. You can stamp it, and it exists as a micro-credential on the Europass platform. So, all that infrastructure exists, but what does it actually mean for the person who owns it, and what does it mean when the person wants to use it to get a job to get access to education?

Dai Griffiths. Can credentialing through OER contribute to the sustainability of OER? Is there a potential revenue stream that could make OER more viable?

Deborah Arnold. On one level, yes, because it would embed the OERs more into the learning process and there would be an end result, which is the credential for the learner. I'm not sure that there's a revenue stream now, although people are more likely to pay for a credential, as we've seen with MOOCs. For some things you can pay something like 500 Euros for the credential, because there's a formal exam, or ID verification.

Dai Griffiths. It could be some other model whereby the repository is funded because it supports the credentialing of some national scheme, or international...

Deborah Arnold. Which is why I like that co-creation model very much. Because then it becomes meaningful for everybody involved and you've already got the stakeholders concerned around the table and they've agreed that that is a solution. It's more labour intensive, but it's perhaps more meaningful at the end of the day.

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