

OEPS briefing

Writing a free, open online course

This briefing is one of a series produced by the Opening Educational Practices in Scotland (OEPS) project. OEPS was a three-year cross-sector project to facilitate best practice in Scottish open education. The project had a specific focus on widening participation and social justice. This briefing and others in the series reflects the focus and objectives of the project. Find out more about OEPS at [www.oepscotland.org](http://www.oepscotland.org) and access reports, case studies and good practice guides from the [OEPS legacy collection](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/oeps).

## Introduction

These notes bring together experience gained by the OEPS team while supporting the development of fifteen open courses written collaboratively with a range of partners. The aim is to provide an overview of process. If you are new to open education you will find the short course, [Becoming an Open Educator](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2274) a useful introduction to the ideas and concepts involved. Should you decide to write your own course or edit and remix existing material into a new course then [How to make an open online course](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2221) provides further support.

The assumption is that an open online course embodies pedagogical approaches that support active learning and provide opportunities for participants to build on prior experience. It has a clear structure and includes assessment and a record of achievement. By ‘open’ we mean that the course is licensed under a [Creative Commons license](http://www.creativecommons.org).

The critical stages in writing a course are:

* Learning Design
* Authoring content
* Technical Production

The most labour intensive phase of the process is content authoring, however, this phase depends critically on the clarity of the design decisions taken in phase 1. Provided all the groundwork has been completed offline in phases 1 and 2 technical production is the most straightforward part of the process. If resources can be allocated intensively course production can take as little as 8 – 10 weeks. However, particularly if the process involves partnership and draws on the support of individuals from a variety of roles we would recommend allocating around 6 months.

Each of these stages is explored in more detail in this briefing.

## Learning Design

Once you have an idea for an online course this is the really critical first stage. It’s useful to think of it as comprising three steps:

1. Understanding Your Learner
2. Designing a Learning Journey
3. Building a Learning Journey

Throughout the OEPS project we found it useful to start thinking about learning design through an initial workshop. Powerpoint slides and notes providing a structure for the workshop can be found in the [OEPS resource collection](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/oeps). The slides provide a tested framework that you can modify for your own context.

There is a customisable template for a Learning Design Workshop in the [OEPS Legacy Resources](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/oeps).

Ideally this workshop should involve as many of the people who will be involved in the development of the course as possible. Involve potential ‘students’ if you can. Our experience suggests that while workshop participants are committed to the idea of producing a learning resource they may have a very wide range of ideas of what this means and a diversity of experience to share.

In the course of the workshop discussion it’s worth clarifying what participants have in mind when they talk about a free, openly licensed course. They may have different models and approaches in mind. As the OEPS team we had in mind a student centred and interactive approach with lots of opportunities for activity and reflection. Often others in the workshop would have had experience of more tick-box or didactic approaches, which might be mediated by a face-to-face tutor.

By the end of the workshop you should have teased out an in depth picture of who the ‘students’ are; what are their characteristics – educational background – learning needs – physical location – individual or in groups – prior experience – time and opportunities for study - access to technology – challenges and barriers and so on. On the basis of this ‘rich picture’ of the potential audience it’s then possible to make better informed decisions about what kind of course, what kind of support it needs to incorporate, whether it’s necessary or desirable to refine the target audience to a some subset of the possible audience, what kind of pedagogical approach is appropriate, what are the learning outcomes for the course and what kind of assessment is appropriate.

The time spent on these issues is invaluable. You may find that a three-hour workshop suffices – on occasion, however, it can be useful to meet again after the group has had time to reflect. At the end of this process you will want to log the decisions you’ve made.

**Note that the learning design process starts with the students and their needs and then considers how those needs can be met, the technology is important but it’s the last thing to talk about and the student learning focus should drive the decisions you make.**

## Issues to consider

It’s worth having a checklist at the workshop of these and other issues that you identify.

### Licensing

Workshop participants may be familiar with traditional forms of copyright, which can constrain the ways in which educational materials can be used and copies. Some free online courses are copyright – this is the case with [Massive Open Online Courses](https://oepscotland.org/about/definitions/) (MOOCs) published on platforms like [FutureLearn](http://www.futurelearn.com). Here when we talk about ‘open’ we are thinking of online courses published under variants of the [Creative Commons licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/). These ‘open’ licences allow a number of freedoms for the user/learner. The least restrictive is CC0 or public domain - in this case the designer and publisher of the resource puts no restrictions on the use of the material. It’s more common in course design to choose one of the other CC licenses, which allow unrestricted use.

Sections 1.5 and 2.4 of [Becoming an Open Educator](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2274) cover licensing issues in much more depth.

### Why publish as an openly licensed course?

The first reaction to issuing material under a CC licence is often negative. Why ‘give away’ resources? ‘What if people using or modifying our material in unacceptable ways damage our reputation?’ However, there are powerful arguments in favour of ‘going open’. The ability to use and reuse material without fear of copyright infringement is likely to encourage higher levels of use. If the material has an international audience it enables translation into other languages and contextualisation through the use of appropriate local case studies. Where such changes are made the organisation or individual making them has to give appropriate acknowledgement to the originator, conform to the type of licence designated by the originator and take responsibility for the changes that they have made. The Commonwealth of Learning is a good example of an international organisation that carries out most of its publishing in Openly Licensed formats. Open Licensing, through the encouragement of new and refined versions of material, enables knowledge exchange to become a two-way process.

Publishing in the open can enhance the reputation of an organisation and is particularly suited to organisations that are publically funded and/or have an emphasis on social justice and widening participation.

These issues are explored in greater depth in a number of briefings and reports in the OEPS Resource collection on OpenLearn Create.

### Where will the resource be hosted?

Your open course will need to be hosted on a website. Where is influenced by the outcomes of the Learning Design phase and what sites are available for hosting open courses.

Factors to be considered include:

* Does the chosen platform support the hosting of copyright material or is it an ‘open’ platform?
* Does the platform include tools for creating interactivity, online quizzes and digital badges?
* Does the platform ensure that course material conforms to accessibility requirements?
* Can it host material that can be viewed through any digital device (computer, mobile, tablet etc.)?
* How findable is it? This may be linked to what kind of material the platform already hosts and the level of traffic it has.
* Is the platform open – or is content hidden behind a password?

There are relatively few open platforms available at the moment. Some are linked to commercial providers. Others may place some restrictions on the types of material that they host. You will want to explore the opportunities and constraints of these platforms carefully before coming to a decision. The OEPS courses and the materials created by the project are hosted on OpenLearn Create (OLC). OLC is a community platform for hosting openly licensed resources that is provided and maintained by the Open University. Organisations can request their own project site and there is advice and guidance on how to create a course. At the time of writing OLC provides a user with the tools to create courses themselves using Moodle. It is expected that a new authoring tool will be added to the site during 2018. This will enable greater ease of use, enhance the options for interactivity and enable courses to be downloaded in multiple formats.

You can also host the course on you own website. There are three important factors to consider in this case. Is the site easily findable? Is it possible to host the course without having to have a password to access the site? Does your software provide tools to support interactivity and assessment? If the answer to the last of these questions is no, then costs of production are likely to be higher since it may be necessary to write bespoke code.

Section 3 of [How to make an open online course](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2221) covers these issues in detail.

### Roles and responsibilities

There are huge strengths in writing as a course team. The whole team should be involved in the Learning Design phase and if possible should meet as necessary to monitor and review progress Competencies required by the team include:

* Knowledge of the proposed content – ideally from multiple perspectives – for example, practitioner, academic and student;
* Some understanding of educational practice and pedagogy;
* Project management skills;
* Technical skills to render content online.

These competencies may be spread across the team. During the Learning Design Phase however, it’s important to establish who will oversee the overall timeline and manage progress and who will be responsible for writing the course content.

### A note on costs

Costs are not easy to pin down since they depend quite critically on whether all the effort involved is accounted for or whether some of it is subsumed into existing roles. Media mix and who does the work both have significant influence on cost. Filming and editing high quality video can be a significant cost as is creating bespoke code for animations and activities. Neither of these are essential, however. In terms of people time the biggest factor is identifying existing material and authoring new material, so if this time needs to be paid for it adds significant cost. Rendering material online requires the support of an individual or a team with appropriate technical skills. As a very rough guide you might expect costs to be in the range £1500 - £2500 per hour of study time.

## Authoring Content

### Getting started

Having completed the Learning Design Phase you should be starting this part of the process with some clear ideas about what you want to cover, what you want the students to learn and the contexts in which they may be studying. You should have an idea about how many hours of student effort the course will require – remember this is not how long it takes to read the text - it should include an estimate of time engaged in activities and assessment.

At this point if you are new to course writing you might want to look at [How to make an open online course](http://www.open.edu/openlearnworks/course/view.php?id=2221" \t "_blank), which has a wealth of advice on the style and approach that works to encourage deep learning.

It’s a good idea to start by summarising what you want the student to learn by writing down the intended learning outcomes for the course and for each section. Learning outcomes statements of what you want the student to learn (of course a good course will allow for all kinds of unintended outcomes) but these are the core. If you’re unsure about learning outcomes look at Understanding Parkinson’s or one of the courses in the OEP collection on OpenLearn Create. The activities that you include in the course and the assessment should align with these outcomes. You won’t get the outcomes exactly right first time and as you develop the course you will probably want to revisit them and possibly add or amend. As a rough guide you may have between 3 and 5 outcomes for each section of the course. Note at this point you will be writing in Word.

### As you write

* Avoid ambiguity – you can deal with this face to face by immediately clarifying – but online the student simply has the text.
* Keep the student in mind as you write – an authentic tone can make a huge difference to how the material is perceived. Short video excerpts speaking to the students and acknowledging their context and experience can help with this too.
* It’s important to avoid long sections of unbroken text. Paragraphs should be short and material should be broken up into sections. Wherever possible avoid telling students things in a didactic manner – instead try to develop ideas by asking the student what their ideas are and then revealing the course perspective, or by letting them try out an activity that engages with the idea that you are trying to get across.
* Use bullet points and numbered lists. Signal top line messages with the use of strong headings.

Make sure that activities are clearly described and have an obvious relevance and relationship to the learning outcomes. If there are a number of reflective activities you may wish to include a Learning Log where students can record their thoughts. We’ve also found it useful to encourage students to share their thoughts with friends, family or workmates if they are studying on their own, or even better to bring their ideas and question to others who are doing the course if they are in a study group. Section 8 of [How to make an open online course](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2221) looks at the value of social learning. Another short course created by the OEPS project [Supporting collective learning in workplace and community settings](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2692) explores the practical issues of encouraging social learning in more depth.

* You can use hyperlinks to link out to other material that is available on the internet. However, do this with care since some material online is relatively transient and it’s very frustrating to find that links in the course are broken.
* Use images and graphics when it complements the text but not just for the sake of it.

Section 5 of [How to make an open online course](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2221) covers these issues in detail.

### Practicalities – keep an asset register

We refer text from other sources, images, diagrams, videos etc. that you include in the course as assets. The OEPS resource collection includes an example of an asset register – a simple spreadsheet in which you record the origin and license of the material in question. If any material you use is clearly under copyright, or its license is unclear, you will need to approach the owner of the material for permission to use it. If at all possible it’s preferable to use materials that have been released under a creative commons license, so for example text from an existing openly licensed course or an image from a site like [www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com) or Wikimedia where large numbers of openly licensed images are stored. Your asset register allows the course team to keep up to date with the origin, provenance and license of materials that you propose to use.

### Drafts and critical reading

The writing stage is the most labour intensive and time consuming part of the course production process. It is critical to the design of an engaging course. Good practice is to write develop the final content though free drafts. The first draft involves developing all the sections with most of the content, ideas for activities and perhaps some rough notes on ideas for assessment questions. You may not have included images and graphics and the activities will probably need further refinement. At this point you have a rough draft to share with the team and decide whether it’s on the right track, that the content and activities cover and align with the learning outcomes and that the style and tone is right for your intended audience.

The second draft is a refinement, taking on board comments from the team. On completion it should include activities, assessment and be close to the final version. At this point it’s good practice to share with critical readers. On occasion you may use critical readers who have specialist knowledge of a particular part of the course. However, having some who are asked to consider the course as a whole is also important. It’s important to aim for a range of perspectives.

You will want to consider the comments from your critical readers and discuss them as a course team. Once you’ve done this, the final stage is to write your final draft. This is still a Word document but it needs to be in the form that you would want it to appear online. So as well as the text all of the images, diagrams and activities need to be filed and available, the asset register needs to be up to date and permissions obtained where necessary.

### Assessment and credentials

Assessment is an important part of any learning experience. Well-designed formative assessment helps to encourage and promote deep learning.

Typically open courses are between 5 and 25 hours in length. In contrast modules studied, as part of formal qualifications, can be anything from 100 hours to 600 hours in length. Conventionally 10 hours of student effort translates to one credit point. So it’s important to think about assessment in the context of what’s possible online and what’s appropriate for a short episode of study.

One approach to assessment is to set tasks which then have to be submitted to a human assessor. This enables a wide range of assessment instruments to be used but it is only really appropriate if the course is closed to a defined and limited number of participants. Where courses are open and online there is no limit to the potential number of participants and so automated online quizzes are recommended. How to make an open online course includes advice and guidance on writing quiz questions.

There is a danger that students read the course too quickly and pay insufficient attention to the learning activities. Short end of section quizzes are invaluable in checking knowledge and encouraging student to review and revisit the course text. While quiz style questions themselves don’t provide opportunities for reflection and deeper learning they can be used to refocus students on activities that do. Formative assessment activities at selected points in the course maintain student engagement and also drive learning.

Section 7 of [How to make an open online course](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2221) provides help and support with quiz design.

### Open Badge

Summative assessment and engagement with the course material, all of which can be monitored automatically can be linked to the award of an open badge or certificate at the end of the course. During the design and writing stages the course team needs to make a decision about what kind of credential to offer and the criteria on which it will be awarded. It is possible to offer both a badge and a certificate. If a badge is one of the options chosen then it will be necessary to design an appropriate image.

Guidance and tools for creating your badge can be found in the [Getting Started](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/local/ocwcreatecourse/gettingstarted.php) section of OpenLearn Create.

## Putting the material online

Before this stage begins the following steps should have been completed:

* All content and activities written, checked to ensure that it is organised in a manner appropriate for reading on screen and edited for readability and accuracy.
* Videos, images, diagrams etc. should have accompanying transcripts that can be read by a screen reader.
* Quizzes should include appropriate feedback and encouragement for correct and incorrect answers.
* The asset register should be complete and all assets checked for copyright.

How the technical process is organised will depend on your choice of platform. OpenLearn Create provides support and guidance for this process – the details will be different on other sites.

## Piloting the course

If possible it’s a good idea to release the course url to a pilot group prior to launch. Feedback from the group can be obtained by embedding a link to a survey in the course or by interviews and focus groups. Edits can then be made prior to launch. An embedded survey can also be used to obtain feedback from participants throughout the period when it is live.

Section 9 of [How to make an open online course](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2221) looks at testing your course prior to launch.

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July 2017

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