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Review of John Shank's Interactive Open Educational Resources

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Review of J.D. Shank's *Interactive Open Educational Resources*

By Kim Grewe

The use of Open Educational Resources (OER) in higher education is becoming more widespread as college educators explore ways to increase college access and affordability. OER, which are often free or low-cost to students, also allow for more pedagogical innovation, continuous improvement, and rapid development of materials in response to student evaluation. In *Interactive Open Educational Resources,* John Shank provides a go-to guide for college educators who want to learn the basics of curating, using, and evaluating the most widely known OER. With a focus on interactive learning materials (ILMs), this practical guide provides a streamlined approach for integrating ILMs into existing college curricula.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, "Setting the Stage," defines ILMs and sets parameters for how ILMs work into the new paradigm of the digital age of information. According to Shank, the old industrial paradigm relied on static sources of information such as newspapers, journals, textbooks, and videos. The new paradigm relies on more interactive resources for learners, and it is these resources that Shank discusses in the book. Shank clearly defines ILMs and classifies them into distinct types: online learning modules (tutorials), online games, and online simulations. No matter the type, effective ILMs share several important characteristics, according to Shank. They are multimodal, require learners to make decisions while working through the material, and they provide assessment and feedback along the way.

The second section, "A Digital Exploration," focuses on finding ILMs and provides a systematic process for making sense of the sheer volume of loosely organized materials available on the Web. Here Shank provides a search taxonomy for the "what" of ILMs, relying on

subject/discipline, keywords, type, technical format, audience, language, and date. Shank also provides a search taxonomy of the "where," including educational repositories and digital libraries, university and college websites, educational software and entertainment media websites, museum websites, professional organization websites, and web search engines. Shank provides a ranking system and evaluates these repositories based on five criteria: collection, searchability, usability, currency, and reliability. For inexperienced users, this section is particularly helpful since Shank provides tips and tricks based on the idiosyncrasies of each repository.

The third section, "Choosing and Using ILMs," outlines the selection and implementation process – how to choose and evaluate ILMs, implement them into existing curricula, and assess their effectiveness in terms of student learning.

Like a well-designed online course, the book is clearly organized and easy to navigate. Shank provides an overview of the content and organization of the book in the preface, begins each section with a preview, and makes use of tables to provide lists. These lists illustrate key points at a glance and sometimes serve as quick-start guides. In addition, Shank peppers the chapters with "Quick Tips" to remind readers of the unique idiosyncrasies of each repository and their search parameters. These "Quick Tips," intended to yield more fruitful searches, are invaluable to those just beginning their quest to find and utilize OER and ILMs. Each chapter includes a "Going Further" section with recommended reading, which takes the book beyond the realm of the uninitiated and provides further guidance to more advanced OER/ILM adopters.

Shank also provides a clear explanation of what ILMs are and what they are not. The focus on the elements of interactivity (e.g. decision-making activities, learner assessment, and learner feedback and reflection) provides a useful distinction between mere open source

materials and ILMs. His systematic method for evaluating existing repositories and providing a search taxonomy makes this book a must-read for those new to the process of curating and implementing OER/ILM.

Some may argue that such focus on web-based resources may prove to become out of date rather quickly, but Shank has chosen sites that are well established and which continue to grow and evolve in sophistication. The book was published four years ago, but all the sites covered are still in operation and still function in much the same way as they did when the book was originally published.

Besides the continued relevance of the information, another strength of the book is the way Shank ties his exploration of ILMs into the new science of learning, bringing credibility and a sense of forward thinking to his approach. For example, one of the projects in which he was involved created tutorials using ILMs for introductory calculus classes at Berks College of Pennsylvania State University. These tutorials relied on Gagne's nine events as a guide to enhance student learning. Shank uses the creation of these tutorials as a shining example of the transformative nature of ILMs. Furthermore, in Chapter 9, Shank argues that ILMs align with Chickering and Gamson's seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education, foundational ideas also supported by the new science of learning.

The book follows through on its promise to provide guidance for finding and choosing ILMs. Where it falls short is on the "transform college teaching" promise, making the subtitle of the book, *A Guide to Finding, Choosing, and Using What's Out There to Transform College Teaching,* misleading. In the preface, Shank asks the reader to "imagine a world where students are excited to use course resources and where they spend more time engaged with their course work" (p. xiii). He also impels the reader to "[i]magine educators being able to better know what

each of their students has mastered and what they still struggle with" (p. xiii). He envisions "instructors being able to assign ILMs that can remediate student learning gaps through automated activities . . . to be completed outside of class anywhere students have access to the Web" (p. xiii). The book does not convince this reader that this ideal world of college education is obtainable through the skillful implementation of ILMs. The final three chapters outline methods for assessing the usefulness of chosen ILM, but they do not follow through on the idea of transforming college teaching. Shank could have provided more than the one case study in Chapter 9 (also referenced in Chapter 1), showing how one university implemented the use of ILM in a math course. Also, this case study did not provide the type of compelling evidence needed to convince readers that the use of ILMs via Shank's method transforms college teaching.

Questions that readers may be left with include the following: How do administrators cultivate buy-in from more faculty? How do they address the worry over intellectual property rights? What role can students play beyond mere consumers of resources? Even though Shank focuses on the decision-making properties of good ILMs for learners, what about beyond that? In what ways can ILMs be used for remediation or to teach new concepts? Nonetheless, Shank calls his book a primer and it does provide a good starting point for discussing these kinds of questions.

Trained as a librarian himself, Shank seeks to impose order in the Wild West of OER, no small task, given the lack of a consistent method for cataloging and organizing ILMs and the sheer volume of materials out there, both good and not so good. His framework for evaluating various ILM repositories provides a good starting point for faculty members and librarians alike. His desire to catalog and organize seems like a natural inclination for a librarian. In this context, Shank argues that libraries must take the lead in transforming the way in which they serve their

communities. As Shank notes, "To remain relevant, we must rethink, re-envision, and ultimately transform how libraries perform the same functions that they have been responsible for in the past (p. xi). Furthermore, Shank questions the role academic and public libraries will play in archiving and storing valuable OER and ILMs. As technology evolves and changes, access to materials could become limited. His argument about the role of libraries as gatekeepers of information and how they must evolve to fit into the digital age is a compelling one.

While Shank does highlight the role of librarians, he also calls for collaboration among teams of faculty, librarians, and educational technologists. His suggestion makes a lot of sense. Colleges and universities would do well to heed the call and do a better job of drawing on the unique expertise each member brings to the process. In the epilogue, Shank expresses concern that for-profit publishers and content providers will take the lead on access and adoption of ILMs, driving up their revenues and cost to students in the process. He argues, however, that it is educators who should take the lead, climb out of their silos, and work with various other stakeholders to reach the common goal of keeping learning relevant and accessible to students. To ensure these materials are available to students at little or no cost; to curate, evaluate, and implement ILMs; and to make ILMs a viable part of learning in higher education is Shank's vision. His book *Interactive Open Educational Resources* is a must-read for those who share this vision and want to roll up their sleeves and get started in their quest to transform college teaching using ILMs.