

3 Questions for an OER Leader

| Featuring Rory McGreal

Melissa Layne



Dr. Rory McGreal is a professor at the Athabasca University and Chairholder of the UNESCO/International Council for Open and Distance Education in Open Educational Resources. He is a professor in the [Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences](#) at Athabasca University—Canada's Open University, based in Alberta, Canada. He is also the Director of the [Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute](#) (TEKRI); Editor of the [International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning](#) (IRRODL); and founder of the [OER Knowledge Cloud](#), which received an award of excellence from the Open Education Consortium. Formerly, he served as the Associate Vice President Research. He has received lifetime recognition awards from the [Open Education Consortium](#), the [European Distance Education Network](#), and the [Canadian Network for Innovation in Education](#).

Melissa: Hello Dr. McGreal, thank you very much for taking the time out of your schedule to join me for this interview in our regular section, *3 Questions for an OER Leader*. Welcome.

Rory: Thank you. And thank you very much for this kind invitation to speak to your readers.

Melissa: So, before I start asking you the serious questions (this one doesn't count as one of the three), I wanted to point out an interesting factoid that I'm sure many people in the OER community may or may not know, and that is the title of *IRRODL* journal wasn't initially named *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*. Previously, it was called the *International*

Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning. When and why was the change made?

Rory: Very good question. It was about four years ago—it could be five, but years blend into each other as you get older. We made the change because we saw that everybody was getting into distance education and that blended education and hybrid education and other forms were mixing with distance education. We found that in distance education, there were times when people would meet together and do things. It was becoming mixed. So, we were looking for another term—and at the same time, we received a grant from UNESCO to focus more on open educational resources. We wanted to make sure that

this wasn't just about distance learning, but it was also about open learning, specifically open educational resources, and also open education in general. So, we didn't want to lose the initials and we found the word *distributed*. That's the truth and I'm sticking to it.

1 Melissa: In terms of the UNESCO recommendations, what are your perceptions of the latest UNESCO recommendations? What do you think of the overall initiative?

Rory: Well, I'm a big supporter of the initiative. I attended the meeting in Paris, and consulted with several people around the world on some of the changes that were made. But in terms of evolving the recommendations, I think that's a non-starter. It took so long to put the recommendations together, that I don't really see much room for any evolution. Further, to get an agreement with so many countries is just impossible at that point to make changes. I think it is an issue. Publishers could drive a truck through open now and still call themselves who we are. So, I think there's a real problem there. But at this point, it's really impossible to change that definition. I mean, we see the same problem with open access publishing where they claim to be open, when really, they're not open. It's up to us to continue and support the original idea of open educational resources. Despite the problems, I still think it was a great accomplishment.

Melissa: Do you see UNESCO doing anything different than going forward in their initiatives?

Rory: I think there's been a huge bounce in growth of all (initiatives). Due to COVID-19, all kinds of institutions are beginning to understand how to use distance education, distributed education, online education, and blended e-learning. They're open now to all kinds of new modes that they weren't before. They were sort of stuck in the 19th century with the classroom-based model, and now they're realizing that there are many other models that can be applied. Also, as part of that, they're finding that online can be very difficult when using commercial content—especially if you're looking at students who are living in different countries with different copyright laws, different copyright agreements among publishers, digital locks, and all kinds of other problems. In Canada, of course, and many other countries, privacy is also an issue. When companies collect and own student data, there are some real problems with commercial content. So, this is an impetus for educators to start using more and more open educational resources because they're unencumbered. I mean, it's not just they're cheap, but they're unencumbered with all of these other effects. One of the problems that we face is that we have students in 60 countries where there are digital locks on content. Much of the video material that we use is multimedia material and they can open the material in different countries. It's illegal to break the locks because of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that America has pushed around the world. People are realizing this is unworkable. We can't really use content with these locks on them. Then, of course, there's the legal

entanglement where you're not legally allowed to break the lock. Even if you have a reasonable, non-criminal purpose in accessing the material, it's illegal to break the lock. They're basically putting themselves out of business by trying to protect it too much. They'll eventually have to come up with other ways of open-washing to stay in the game, because we are, of course, free and we don't have any of those encumbrances.

2 Melissa: Turning to academic scholarship in OER, what research priorities should we be exploring? Do you see OER research studies advancing toward different trajectories? If so, how will your role at UNESCO progress these other directions?

Rory: In my role as UNESCO Chair, since January of 2019, we have had a policy about the articles that delve into students' perception, satisfaction, their ideas about interaction, etc., and we suggest that if you're going to submit an article about these phenomena—which are important, you must also show that the students learned something—or that they didn't.

At *IRRODL*, what we're finding is that some articles concluded that (paraphrasing), "yes, the students just loved the course, the teachers loved it. It was highly interactive," but they don't even mention what particular subject students were learning, or even whether or not the students learned anything. I've had five or six articles this year where authors were asked by the peer reviewers to rewrite their papers to in-

clude student learning data. Some of the authors actually *had* student learning data, but didn't think it was important to include. If you're a teacher in the classroom, I don't care what you do. If students don't learn anything, you're not doing your job right. I mean that. This means an online classroom or face-to-face, or anything else. Students can really love you as a teacher. They can love the interactions they've had with you ... and by the way, if they've learned something, they think that's important – that maybe those actions you made with the students had a positive effect on their learning achievement. I also feel we don't get many articles on cost-effectiveness. It's a no-brainer that OER costs less than the commercial products, but we don't seem to get really good analysis on the cost-effectiveness of open educational resources. What's key, of course, is awareness, which is still a problem. I think there's been a big boost due to COVID-19 that a lot more people know about it. However, there is still a problem with lack of awareness. What we found is that as we explained to teachers what they are to students, and that they have experience with the way they are, they get it and they're very supportive. However, so many still don't really understand what they are, or what they're all about. I don't think we've done a very good job in propagating what we are and how there are benefits—not just financial, but also a benefit to teachers in allowing flexibility, etc.

3 Melissa: This is a nice transition to our third question: What message would you like to communicate

from this interview to our OER Community? How can we play a role, as editors, to boost awareness?

Well, what I'm seeing is the sort of a move toward closing of what open is—which sounds strange, but people have their opinion about what openness *is*, and other opinions are not accepted. To me, openness is not a left- or right-wing phenomenon; it's egalitarian. It's inclusive of diverse groups, and a wide range of views can be accommodated with open educational resources. However, what I'm finding is that there are strong authoritarian tendencies. From the right and the left within our movement they want to say, "oh, this is all we are, and this is inclusive and this is what we believe." And others say, "well, no, *this* is inclusive and that's our belief." This is not what being "open" is all about. As an open community, like we're *supposed* to be, we need to be, open to a wide range of different philosophies. In terms of methodologies, if you're constructivists, put it out as constructivist. If you're connected, just put it out as connectivists. I don't see why these things are so onerous and people make a big deal about them. We cannot afford to become captive to one educational or political orthodoxy. It doesn't matter how zealously they put it forward. We need to be open. I'm on the working group at UNESCO for equality, diversity, and inclusiveness. What some do not

realize is that we need to be inclusive of not only of groups, but also of individual views and opinions. As a UNESCO Chair—as all the UNESCO chairs do, we support human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Free expression is the cornerstone of those rights. We need to harness open educational resources to support a big, inclusive, and diverse tent.

Melissa: Anything else you'd like to add?

Rory: As a journalist, I think that we need to find ways of supporting the sustainability of open access, things like the Directory of Open Access Journals, and even consider joining the council of Elsevier movements, which are happening around the world. California seems to be leading in it, but I don't know. I think recently they made an agreement with Elsevier that substantially reduced their costs. When publishers have open-washing and pretend to be open access journals, we have to be aware of them and make people aware of them, because they could ruin us by their bad reputation. Those are issues that we as journalists need to be aware of.

Melissa: Rory, thank you. I really appreciate you joining me for this interview, and I think that our readers are going to be excited to learn your perspectives on these topics and issues. **Ω**