

Chapter 7

A Textbook Transformation Project: Open Access Materials With an International and Interdisciplinary Focus for Spanish

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ABSTRACT

Open education resources (OER) have been impacting higher education across the world, providing access to affordable learning materials that represent a powerful alternative to commercial textbooks. This study discusses a two-year-long textbook transformation effort affecting first- and second-year Spanish at Georgia Gwinnett College. The goal was to replace the commercial textbook with OER that were free, international, and interdisciplinary in focus, and meaningful to a diverse student population. During 2017 and 2018, 336 elementary and intermediate students of Spanish were affected by this project. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The results indicated that the textbook transformation project was successful, and the students welcomed the no-cost model. Retention and completion rates were higher than the rates prior to this research, and dropout/withdrawal/fail rates decreased. More research is needed on the impact of OER to teach and engage the whole student and how it enhances second language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Open educational resources (OER), generally defined as “digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research” (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2002), have been impacting higher education and K-12 across the U.S. and the rest of the world. OER provide access to learning materials and content that are affordable, current, interactive, and meaningful to a diverse student population. In terms of second language learning, few empirical studies have investigated the impacts of OER on student learning and teaching (Beaven et al., 2013; Blyth, 2013; Rossomondo, 2013; Thomas & Thomas, 2014), and much of the research on OER has focused on cost (Allen, 2013; Wiley & Green, 2012). The benefits of OER extend beyond economic factors. They allow educators more control over content, giving them the ability to select high quality learning resources that target specific student needs. OER are more flexible than traditional textbooks and can be remixed and adapted from other instructors via licensing alternatives such as Creative Commons. Moreover, OER allow instructors and students to become producers, not just consumers, of course content, which can contribute to a more enriching learning experience (Butcher, 2011).

It is within this context that the research team took up the endeavor of implementing OER across both elementary and intermediate Spanish courses offered at Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC), the youngest and most diverse open access four-year college in the Southeast of the U.S. This chapter presents an overview of the effects of a two-year study on faculty and students during the implementation of OER to replace a traditional textbook for elementary and intermediate Spanish. A total of three faculty members teaching the courses (the research team) and 336 students from first and second year Spanish were affected by this project. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The main research questions guiding this study were how effective the use of OER was in the Spanish courses, and how both instructors and students experienced the new teaching and learning materials. Vygotsky’s constructivist theory of learning (1978) informed the development of OER for this project, as the research team sought to incorporate highly interactive assignments and opportunities for co-learning across a variety of multimedia platforms. Overall, the findings revealed that the use and implementation of OER was effective as Spanish faculty and students affected by this project welcomed the new materials very favorably. Considerations are offered on the impact of OER to teach and engage the whole student, and how OER can enhance cross-cultural interaction and awareness, second language acquisition, as well as high-impact learning in other disciplines.

Background

The textbook transformation project for Spanish discussed here came about at a time when a number of GGC faculty across disciplines had been awarded grants (Affordable Learning Georgia, 2019) to implement OER in their courses in place of traditional textbooks. One of the driving forces behind the initiative was related to the economic impact, as the reduction of textbook cost was particularly appealing to GGC administration. In a study on open access introductory psychology textbooks, Griggs and Jackson (2017) acknowledged that OER meet the textbook market for financially and academically underprepared students who need help with the cost of their education. At GGC, approximately 70% of the students are on financial aid and often either cannot afford to pay for their textbooks or are delayed in purchasing them as they wait for financial aid vouchers. While cost is an important factor, enhancing

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