

Chapter 10

An Open Educational Resources Journey: OERs in Multi-Section Courses in an Access College

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ABSTRACT

The open educational resources movement in higher education has largely been driven by concerns over increasing textbook costs and the resulting barriers to access. As the movement has gained traction in sectors of higher education, research has focused on achievement of student learning outcomes. Advocates of OERs point to research indicating that students do as well, and sometimes better, with OERs as with traditionally published textbooks. A study of 10 grant-funded OER projects in a Southeastern access public college found comparable results with the adoption of OERs but not the same level of improvement found in other studies. A deeper investigation into the work involved in the creation of an OER for a multi-section communication course found interesting patterns of use by students as well as a set of lessons learned for the creators.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone venturing into the world of research on Open Educational Resources (OERs) will first encounter the theme of access and cost savings. Certainly, students across the United States and the world are saving millions, possibly more, from faculty adoption and use of OERs (Hilton, Robinson, Wiley, & Ackerman, 2014; Affordable Learning Georgia, 2019). That statement is indisputable. Also indisputable are students' positive attitudes about these OERs and their cost savings (Grissett & Huffman, 2019). Any student who walks into an introductory biology or principles of macroeconomics class the first day and learns the textbook will be zero-cost, in contrast to \$300 or more, will probably be elated. Further research indicates that students also perceive OERs to be of high quality (Ikahihifo, Spring, Rosecrans,

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& Watson, 2017). In fact, Grissett and Huffman (2019) concluded that existing research suggests that “there are few if any differences between outcomes . . . of open textbooks as compared to traditional textbooks” (p. 22).

The Open Educational Resources movement in higher education has been driven by concerns over increasing textbook costs and over desires for greater accessibility in higher education (Hewlett Foundation, 2013). According to Weller, de los Arcos, Farrow, Pitt, and McAndrew (2015), the movement took initial shape in 2001 with MIT’s OpenCourseWare Project. These authors also noted that open educational resources are characterized in the minds of those who are aware of them by sharability, contextualization, access, and low cost.

However, even with more than 17 years as a movement in higher education, the majority of faculty members are unaware or only vaguely aware of OERS, their driving factors, their benefits, and the research base supporting their quality in comparison to traditional publishers’ texts (Seaman & Seaman, 2017). Those who are aware of OERs but nonusers may avoid them out of a number of reasons, such as the following:

1. The lack of availability of OERs in specific disciplines. For example, faculty in the hard sciences and medical or health professions subjects may experience additional barriers to finding and adopting high-quality OERs (Hassall & Lewis, 2017; Seaman & Seaman, 2017).
2. Colleague and administrative concerns. For example, in situations of general education, core, and multi-section courses, if one professor out of many adopts an OER, there may be real ramifications in terms of departmental politics. “Why do Dr. Smith’s students pay \$200 for the History 101 text but Dr. Johnson’s pay nothing?” is not a minor question for students, faculty and chairs.
3. Time and effort involved in their creation and maintenance balanced with the incentives. Beyond altruism, there are minimal financial or professional incentives for faculty adoption of OERs (Annand & Jensen, 2017), although some institutions do grant merit for tenure and promotion and some systems or institutions award grants for OER adoption (Affordable Learning Georgia, 2019; Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, 2018). Additionally, not all OERs have easily available ancillary materials, which means the instructor using an OER may have to create tests, slide decks, exercises, and other teaching supports.
4. Lack of understanding about Creative Commons (CC) licensing and the nature of open sources (Spilovoy & Seaman, 2015). In fact, Seaman and Seaman (2018) found that only 68% of faculty in their study had any level of awareness about Creative Commons licensing, and only 21% claimed to be “very aware” (p. 10). For example, some faculty confuse or conflate “fair-use,” “copyright,” “public domain,” and Creative Commons licensing.
5. The largely digital nature of OERs. Not everyone is comfortable reading only from a screen, and there has been concern about whether less developed and proficient readers in, for example, learning support classes in access institutions have sufficient reading skills for digital-only reading (Picton, 2017; Schugar, Schugar, & Penny, 2011). As this chapter will illustrate, students do not always read their textbooks on desktops or laptops; many read from their phones, and the digital materials may not be mobile-friendly.
6. Most importantly, concerns about quality as compared to traditionally published textbooks (Gurung, 2018; Belikov & Bodily, 2016; Judith & Bull, 2016). These concerns includes perceptions that OERs are inferior to traditional textbooks in quality and in achieving learning outcomes due to their open and “free” nature (Gurung, 2018; Belikov & Bodily, 2016; Judith & Bull, 2016). In other words,

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