Why Not OERs?

Tomalee Doan

Many observers find it baffling that faculty in higher education have been slow to adopt open educational resources (OERs). The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, a private foundation that makes grants to expand access to learning materials, defines OERs as:

Teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge.1

OERs offer many advantages. For example, they ensure that every student can afford access to course materials. OERs also enable faculty to create materials customized for their classes. Despite these potential benefits, adoption of open educational resources remains limited. Some of the greatest OER use and adoption has taken place in community colleges, primarily pointing to the rising costs of textbooks and community colleges’ concern for their students’ financial needs.

How can information professionals move OERs farther into the mainstream? This is not only an academic issue but also an essential issue of economic fairness for students and for the entire world. The Babson Survey Research Group at Babson College, a private business school in Babson Park, Massachusetts, examines the attitudes, opinions, and use of OERs among teaching faculty in United States higher education. The group published a pivotal report titled “Opening the Curriculum: Open Educational Resources in Higher Education, 2014.” The report was created with support from the Hewlett Foundation, which also provided its assistance in framing the project and handling the data analysis.

The Babson Survey Research Group’s report identified faculty were not very aware of open educational resources. Once understood, they appreciated the concept and found that OERs are roughly equivalent to traditional resources. The largest barrier to OER adoption is faculty. Their perception, time and effort to find and evaluate them hinders wider use of OERs.2

A literature review and conversation with colleagues helped me glean useful information about current OER opportunities and challenges. I am the associate university librarian for engagement and learning at Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, a

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major research institution with the largest course online presence in the United States. My colleagues and I embrace the notion that every one of our users is online. To widen our users’ access to education, we must continue to forge ahead in creating innovative strategies and partnerships with campus members as a team.

North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh is a successful research institution with an excellent reputation for success with OERs. In April 2017, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) awarded NCSU one of its National Leadership Grants for Libraries. NCSU received the grant in collaboration with the American Psychological Association; the University of North Carolina Press; the Student Public Interest Research Groups, independent statewide student organizations that work on poverty and other issues; the Open Textbook Network, a group of universities and library organizations that support use of open textbooks and practices; and the new preprint service PsyArXiv, a free preprint service for the psychological sciences. What a great team of collaborators! I contacted the principal investigator, Will Cross, director of the Copyright and Digital Scholarship Center in the NCSU Libraries, to respond to a few questions about OERs. He kindly agreed and asked his co-principal investigator, Mira Waller, the associate head of collections and research strategy in the NCSU Libraries, to participate. The following is a synopsis of the questions I asked and Will and Mira’s responses.

**Interviewer.** Though studies have shown that students perform as well or better in courses using open educational resources (OERs), instructors at American universities are hesitant to replace their course materials with open resources. What do you see are factors that cause this hesitancy?

**Will.** The Babson Report puts a lot of weight on faculty concerns about quality and discoverability, and those are obviously important issues. I think rather than asking “Why not?” we need to answer the question “Why should I bother changing?” The status quo is easy, and the cost issues feel remote enough that it just doesn’t move the needle for a lot of faculty members.

My own sense is that we haven’t really made the case for a lot of faculty members that their own work is improved by OER. Some are moved by the cost issue, but I find we get a lot more traction when we talk about more students able to participate in class instruction or giving them back control of the classroom, rather than using the “teacher-proof” textbooks that are often assigned as a way to replace their own creativity with one-size-fits-all materials. At the same time, some faculty really don’t have the time to invest in creating customized, engaged instruction. If we want to see major change we need to look at institutional incentives, which today often focus more on research than instruction. Whether it’s a P&T [promotion and tenure] system that includes student success, a mechanism for rewarding faculty as a named “champion” that goes on a CV, or something else, faculty need something that spurs them to take action to change, and we haven’t really done that at scale yet.

**Interviewer.** NCSU Libraries were very progressive in the OER space. Was there a specific strategy that contributed to this forward direction by NCSU Libraries that would be helpful for other academic libraries?

**Mira.** Hiring Will as director of the Copyright and Digital Scholarship Center at NCSU Libraries. Will has been a strong advocate and believer in the NCSU Libraries focusing in the OER space. Having a position like Will’s, as well as the backing of Susan
Nutter [vice provost and director of the NCSU Libraries] and our Libraries’ Directors Council, has been instrumental in getting faculty and university buy-in at NC State and has allowed us to get the resources needed to support programs like the Alt-Textbook Project [a program that awards grants to faculty to adopt, adapt, or create free or low-cost alternatives to expensive textbooks].

WILL. We’ve certainly been very focused on meeting faculty where they are and pitching OER that is about innovative instruction (that can be taken to a conference, written up in a press release, etc.). That has gotten faculty involved in a different way and given us some great models of what makes OER exciting and innovative. The other thing we’ve done is really work to make OER a campus-wide team initiative. We’ve been very aggressive about partnering with the bookstore, our Office of Faculty Development, etc., and built faculty and student engagement into evaluating alt-textbook proposals. Similarly, within the Libraries, we don’t have a single person who runs the Alt-Textbook program, we use a team. That distributes the work but also brings in different expertise, relationships, etc. That has led to OER work that has been owned by many people in the Libraries but also made our Alt-Textbook program a great window into other Libraries services like course design, e-reserves [online materials for specific courses], copyright consultations, etc. It’s a win for everyone, so everyone is more excited to be engaged.

INTERVIEWER. Congratulations on the IMLS grant award! Why psychology as the discipline for the research project? Do you think there is a difference in disciplines and acceptance of using OERs?

MIRA. As one of the most consistently popular undergraduate majors at higher ed institutions, psychology and our understanding of the tools and supports that psychology instructors and students need around the creation and use of OERs [have] the potential to have a broad and far-reaching impact on student success. Yes, we believe that each domain has unique practices and norms around learning, teaching, research, and information sharing. Project Euclid [a nonprofit online publishing service providing access to journals, monographs, and conference proceedings in mathematics and statistics] was built on this premise and has been successful in part due to its focus on mathematics and statistics.

WILL. Every discipline has specific competencies they bring to OER and different incentives around how much they like to/are rewarded for teaching, and psychology is a great fit on both fronts. A psychology instructor is more likely to know something about engaging students and have some stake in understanding and connecting with them. Psychology is also high-enrollment, textbooks tend to be expensive, and we have some good relationships on campus and at the national level.

INTERVIEWER. Locating OERs can be difficult because of the varying repositories. How do you see the Libraries’ role in the knowledge management of these resources to enhance their discovery?

WILL. Since discovery is central to librarianship, we’ve got great strength in everything from platforms and metadata to relationship building and reference interviews. This makes us natural leaders in terms of discovery of OER. If we think of discovery as a pipeline, things can break down at any number of places, so we need national efforts to catalog OER (like the Open Textbook Library), local curation of OERs that are well-suited to a specific community (something we can do at a campus or consortium level),
and individual relationships, such as our subject specialists’ work with specific faculty members. By making these pipelines clear and steady, we can make OER the easy and obvious solution, and hopefully we can eventually make it the default approach, just as frictionless access to journals is the default approach today.

MIRA. Libraries can help those who create OERs provide better metadata, and depending upon the OERs may be able to include a record in their catalog. The SHARE initiative [a partnership between the Association of Research Libraries and the Center for Open Science to make research accessible and reusable] might also be an interesting model for libraries and others to explore emulating for OERs or as a place to investigate for the inclusion of OERs for discoverability.

INTERVIEWER. Your positions have been integral in the successful progress to move OERs more into the mainstream. How do you see the library liaison having a role in supporting faculty/instructors with creation and/or use of OERs?

MIRA. As a library liaison, I believe that we have a key role in supporting faculty/instructor creation and adoption of OERs. We can help provide faculty with a sense of quality control, as well as help them discover OERs. We are embedded in the domains and can help provide feedback and suggestion around OERs specific to the discipline.

WILL. These relationships are critical both because a liaison understands the context and because they are trusted guides in this space. Our Alt-Textbook Project has worked precisely because we have liaisons explaining why OER is a good fit to faculty members and how we can make our outreach and support meaningful in specific academic and disciplinary contexts.

According to NCSU’s Alt-Textbook site:

**Dr. Alyson Wilson’s Introduction to Data Science course is an upper-year, interdisciplinary course, taken by students with heterogeneous backgrounds. The course is largely hands-on, and needs course materials that supplement the learning experience. This Alt-Textbook includes readings that provide “leveling” background, real-world context, and supplementary details for each topic. This includes a compilation of pre-existing Open Educational Resources on basic topics, as well as more specialized resources. Since data science is a rapidly evolving field, the Alt-Textbook provides the ability to update course materials each year. Click here to explore the Introduction to Data Science Alt-Textbook.**

INTERVIEWER. Can you cite an exemplar situation of a successful OER implementation into a program or course for our portal readers?

WILL. Mira has given an example of slotting in some existing material. My go-to example is Maria Gallardo-Williams, who partnered with her students to create videos that explained how to do experiments in her chemistry lab courses. Students have real ownership of the materials and learned by doing, and Maria was able to do teaching that would have been impossible for her working by herself. Real learning is collaborative and leverages what everyone involved can do best, and Maria’s OER did exactly that, reducing costs to $0 but also transforming pedagogy to make learning more impactful and meaningful.

Among the barriers to faculty adoption of OERs are concern about quality and that faculty often cannot find the resources. They believe—sometimes accurately, sometimes not—that good OERs do not exist in their field. Information professionals can lead the way in creating more high-quality open educational resources and making existing OERs easier to find by improving metadata, providing better labeling, tagging, or coding to improve retrieval of information.

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Notes
2  Ibid., 52.