

Against the Grain

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Mark Cummings

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Beyond Affordability

by **Mark Cummings** (Editor and Publisher, Choice) <markc@ala-choice.org>

A standard argument for the use of OER in undergraduate classrooms goes something like this: spiraling commercial textbook costs are forcing students to forego their purchase altogether, use second-hand, out-of-date editions, borrow from classmates, or rely on scant library copies (where available), with predictable effects on student outcomes and retention. In extreme cases, these costs have priced a college education beyond the means of many. The use of free or low-cost open educational resources can remove these pernicious barriers, improve outcomes, and put a college education within the reach of more students.

Thus phrased, affordability is the most frequently used and until now most effective strategy for OER advocacy. The notion of free or low-cost course materials is so appealing on the face of it, and so morally attractive from the standpoint of social justice, that it is tempting to regard affordability in-and-of-itself as sufficient reason for OER adoption. The problem with this approach is that it is looking at only one side of the issue.

At the end of the day, adopting OER, or any new textbook for that matter, means redesigning one's entire course. The selection processes for the new texts alone are time-consuming, particularly given that open resources are not readily discoverable. Then come the associated problems of finding new and congruent ancillary resources, reworking homework and research assignments, finding or creating new problem sets, and, ultimately, recasting the entire array of assessment tools. Adjuncts (assuming there are any) need to be retrained, libraries put on notice as to new reserve readings, and new materials loaded into the LMS.

So while adoption of open educational resources is something of a cause for many academic librarians, it is important to keep in

mind that it comes with high switching costs for instructors, many of whom also worry that the quality of these new resources, *and thus of their teaching*, may decline if they adopt noncommercial resources. By and large, commercial textbooks are accurate, well written, meticulously edited, and handsomely produced. When the publisher of a known and respected textbook lowers its prices in response to challenges to its affordability, it offers instructors an immediate, powerful incentive to adopt it. Under such conditions, appeals to affordability by themselves cannot win the day for OER. Only the quality of these materials can do that. Quality and an understanding of how to use them to their maximum advantage. In other words, for OER to achieve their promise, the decision to adopt them must be based not on cost but on their pedagogical superiority. But how do we demonstrate that?

Historically, one method of demonstrating a work's fitness, or otherwise, has been peer review, the focus of which has been assessment of such content-centered elements as provenance, accuracy, lack of hidden bias, cultural relevance, internal consistency, comprehensiveness, acknowledgement of sources, and so forth. These elements are no less important to a review of OER, yet the requirements that define an open educational resource require that its review consider additional issues. Ultimately, what makes an OER "open" is not its cost but the rights profile pertaining to ownership and use of the work and, following on that, the ability of the instructor, and even the student, to modify its content, combine it with other works, and reuse it in other contexts. In the absence of these elements of open education, an OER is just an inexpensive textbook, and while there is nothing wrong with this, OER used in this way are unlikely to precipitate the educational transformation its adherents

envision. If the goal is to promote OER as part of a larger educational program, and not merely as an affordable alternative to commercial products, we must do a better job demonstrating the possibilities such resources provide. Thoughtful reviews of OER, written to a standardized format designed to expose these elements, can be an important factor in this process.

Critical reviews are not always easy to come by, and I hope it is not going too far to suggest that one area for librarians to contribute to this effort is to enlist reviewers for works either contemplated or already in use on their campuses or to provide interested faculty with a template against which to evaluate them on their own. **Choice** has created such a template, available at <https://www.choice360.org/content/1-openchoice/choice-oer-review-template.pdf>. The template elicits evaluation in twelve areas: format and source, provenance, subject, target audience, licensing, accessibility, adaptability, content quality, pedagogy, interface design, ancillary materials, and competing works. Another good source, written by **SUNY's Mark McBride**, can be found at <https://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=L9WC6X&sp=true&>. Both of these explicitly call out those elements that make for a serviceable open educational resource.

The real promise of open educational resources lies not in their affordability but in their potential to change teaching and learning. Ensuring that the works we use conform to this goal in all respects, and are of a quality equal to or better than their commercial counterparts, is vital to the success of the enterprise. 🐼



A System-wide OER Initiative ... from page 24

materials tended to have higher grades, and fewer students withdrew from the class compared to students in courses that did not have access to OER. Similar results were found in another research study conducted that compared students in two biology classes (Fisher et al, 2015). The students who were assigned OER earned better grades and were more likely to persist through the entirety of the class than students who were given the traditional course materials. One could conclude that grades increasing and student persistence are indicators that OER may have a direct impact on student academic achievement, but this should be tracked over several semesters. None the less, very promising.

Further, if the ability to customize OER is the real benefit of OER in the eyes of many faculty, and these faculty take full advantage of their ability to customize these resources, the result will be deeper engagement with their students. I believe this could lead to an increase in retention. The more engaged a faculty member, the more engaged the students.

Many traditional commercial publishers have made a pivot to offer OER, but most have dramatically decreased their costs and have started to offer a package they call inclusive access. They are banking on lowering prices to compete with OER, but the materials are still copyrighted and therefore, can not be customized by instructors. They lower the price and that's a wonderful thing, but a skeptic may say, "what took you so long?" OER is more than a cost savings solution. OER empowers faculty

to make the necessary changes to course materials they want their students to engage with. For years faculty have done this, but OER simplifies the process and provides a license that makes the ability to alter resources legally acceptable. Many faculty are using OER as a vehicle to change the way their students interact with the content, even by creating OER for the course.

More research is needed to truly understand the advantages to using OER, but many faculty are beginning to believe the real advantage to using OER may not just be the student savings. The benefits may be the ability to customize these resources (i.e., engage with the 5Rs), resulting in deeper engagement for our faculty with their students and improving the overall learning experience for our learners. 🐼