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Open Education Resources and the Academic Library



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ABSTRACT

Librarians have an opportunity to assist faculty and students in adoption and use of OER, or Open Educational Resources. Faculty and students present differing perspectives and responses to OER that may inhibit their use. Libraries are known for providing access to resources and educational training or workshops on the use of new technologies and existing or new resources. Libraries are also accustomed to providing proxied access to online resources, hosting repositories and developing policies for management, curation and collection of a wide array of materials and resources. By helping to develop and organize an OER initiative of any kind at their institution, libraries may be able to help create a viable and valuable OER program for the benefit of their faculty, students and other stakeholders at their institution.

Introduction

While open educational resources, or OER, have been available for some time, many in higher education are unfamiliar with them though they may have heard the term. What are open education resources? OER are born digital resources available in place of traditional or printed materials most typically used in higher education (Okamoto, 2013). OER may be textbooks, tests, videos, learning modules and other materials used to support learning in traditional face-to-face, hybrid or online courses (Doan, 2017; Farmer, 2019; Seitbert, Miles, & Geuther, 2019). OER are free for instructors and students to use and copyright is most often managed through the use of a creative commons license. Wiley (Defining) defines OER according to five Rs: retain, revise, remix, reuse and redistribute. These 5 Rs are possible because of OER's location online and identification as part of the public domain or through the use of a Creative Commons license or other open licensing tool (Wiley; Seibert et al., 2019). OER have often been developed by faculty at higher education institutions and supported by grants or institutional funding (Stanforth, 2018).

Once developed, OER are shared across an institution and more widely through a hosting platform such as Merlot or Open Textbook Network. OER that reside on openly accessible platforms such as these allow many users to access resources (Goldberg & LaMagna, 2012; Doan, 2017). A major benefit of these open access platforms is that faculty are not required to develop all their own materials for a course but can adopt and use these resources. The two major arguments that are

used to convince administrators and faculty to implement the use of OER in college classrooms are lowered costs of college and equity of access to learning resources (Stanforth, 2018). At the same time, faculty express concerns about locating quality resources in their discipline (Doan, 2017).

Academic libraries and librarians may be called upon to coordinate or serve as leaders and organizers of OER efforts on a college campus. Their role will vary based on the needs of the institution's faculty and students. Libraries can collaborate and partner with various departments on campus to facilitate the adoption and use of OER. Reference librarians can aid faculty in discovering OER that meet course needs and help with understanding technology related to OER. Libraries can also work with others to facilitate the development of OER on campus (Doan, 2017; McGreal, 2019). This creates a need for future library and information specialists to acquire an understanding of and familiarity with OER. It may seem important only for those who intend a career in higher education to gain this understanding, however, considering recent events related to the coronavirus pandemic, a knowledge of OER may be needed by other types of librarians, including public and K-12 school librarians. OER may be predominantly created for higher education, but their creation and use could easily be transitioned to primary and secondary education settings. The current challenges preventing more widespread adoption in higher education settings for both students and faculty could be partially addressed through the involvement of librarians.

Academic Libraries and Open Educational Resources

Discovery of resources is central to the work of reference librarians, so it seems a natural fit for them to work with faculty to assist in locating suitable OER (Doan, 2017). Some of the basic functions of libraries are adaptable to the development and use of OER. Collection development has long been a function of libraries and most have policies and procedures that guide the purchase and inclusion of print and digital materials. Librarians can help faculty and faculty development centers adapt these policies to guide selection and adoption of OER in place of more traditional print resources. This is a new way that libraries and librarians can begin to develop or further develop existing campus partnerships and collaborations and emerge as campus leaders in innovation (Farmer, 2019; Todorinova & Wilkinson, 2019).

Most libraries and librarians have established relationships with faculty through subject liaison relationships or through other efforts to communicate information about library services and resources and OER could be included in these efforts. The percentage of faculty who are aware or very aware of OER is about 20%. Rather than leaving faculty to attempt to locate high quality OER materials, libraries can provide guides, webinars, one-to-one searching assistance (similar to a reference interview session) with faculty to promote the use and knowledge of OER across

the campus. Establishing guidelines for evaluation and selection of OER would be ideal (Clobridge, 2019). While some institutions have opted to create their own versions of an OER repository, focused on their curriculum, some are focused on using what others have created in an effort to embrace open scholarship and communication, as well as establishing financial grants and stipends to help encourage development of an OER program. The funding for this may be a part of the library's operating budget or the management and hosting of a repository may be a part of the library's normal operations. Libraries have an inherent structure suitable for hosting, managing and marketing an institution's OER program. Development of library faculty and professional staff is key for implementing this type of program, which may be more easily achievable at a larger institution. A small or medium sized school may have to explore other options, along with distributing the workload across several departments (Jensen & West, 2015; Clobridge, 2019).

Along with education about OER, libraries can take an active role in helping faculty gain an understanding of copyright, Creative Commons licenses and other vendor licensing issues that they may encounter and equip them to make informed decisions about course content and resources (Jensen & West, 2015; Seibert et al., 2019). In addition to openly accessible OER, libraries also offer access to other online resources through subscription databases and eBook purchases that can also be incorporated into learning materials at no additional cost to students. Typically, proxy access to licensed resources is managed by the library and librarians are able to help faculty with connections to those resources (Okamoto, 2013).

Faculty Adoption of Open Educational Resources

With the tools and expertise of their librarians, it would seem that faculty would be eager to implement and use OER in their courses. While OER are available across a wide range of platforms and repositories, covering a multitude of subjects and topics, locating, evaluating and adopting OER may appear a daunting task for faculty, who see this as an unproductive use of their time (Okamoto, 2013; Stanforth, 2018). Faculty may also be reluctant to adopt OER or other non-print resources due to a lack of comfort with technology (Billings et al., 2012). Open education and OER present a shift in pedagogy and thinking for faculty. This shift can lead to changes for both faculty and students since it opens up the opportunity to share and collaborate on a larger scale than many are accustomed to having (Jensen & West, 2015). This variety of challenges and benefits can feel like an unsolvable puzzle for faculty. Librarians can help in this process by providing education, technical expertise and reassurance for faculty as they open the door to use of OER.

Farmer (2019) outlines four issues related to the use of OER by faculty in higher education that help illuminate the reluctance to use OER that librarians may encounter. Faculty discovery of resources is problematic for most institutions. Along

with the vast number of OER platforms and repositories, the building blocks for these employ a variety of metadata and controlled vocabularies to aid in searching, or they may use very little by way of these organizational tools which makes discovery even more challenging. Next, faculty also question the quality of OER for several reasons, mostly stemming from unfamiliarity with these resources. They may assume that OER can be likened to self-publishing, has a lack of peer-review, be a version of a professor's teaching notes or that it would violate copyright law to use them. The third issue is an instructor's familiarity and confidence using a specific textbook or textbook publisher in order to ensure a level of quality, regardless of cost to students. The final issue is a perception that supplemental materials will not be included as part of an OER. However, many OER developers and authors specifically include supplemental materials such as quizzes, worksheets, videos and so on (Farmer, 2019). In addition to these four issues there are additional barriers that develop as the result of institutional guidelines established that could not have foreseen or addressed modern technology and the unique needs of online students. Faculty might be reluctant to develop or write texts as OER due to restrictions placed on scholarly publications as part of their tenure and promotion procedures (Billings, et al., 2012). Also, many institutions have failed to or refuse to update their scholarly publication procedures and requirements to reflect transition to more online and more open source publications. The effect of this hampers the growth and development of newer teaching models and philosophies that may not keep pace with transitions from face-to-face to online teaching.

It could be argued that library vendors and publishers are constantly seeking ways to make money from resources no matter who created them. EBSCO, a major vendor for electronic journal articles and eBook access for libraries (among many other things) has recently developed a search tool that can potentially be used to ease the discovery dilemma for faculty. With *Faculty Select*, EBSCO has curated and created new metadata from some of the larger OER repositories to aid in discovery. The search interface functions similarly to their standard research databases which will lend familiarity and reassurance for faculty while searching. Depending on the settings of an individual institution, faculty may also opt to search for DRM-free eBooks that may also be used in place of traditional textbooks (EBSCO, 2020). This search tool is being marketed to academic libraries and with the ability to purchase DRM-free eBooks, it seems a timely addition for libraries attempting to take the lead in campus-wide OER initiatives and helping provide solutions for online learning in a time of uncertainty.

Research studies have been conducted around the world to explore OER use in higher education. Technical schools, two-year and four-year colleges and universities have all been the subjects of this research. It includes the creation, adoption and adaption of OER by faculty through incentives and stipends as well as the creation or redesign of courses with the express purpose of making the course low-cost for

students (Sutton & Chadwell, 2014; Doan, 2017; Lantrip, Hofer, & McGeehon, 2018; Todorinova & Wilkinson, 2019). While not all institutions can afford to implement such programs, some local reward or incentive could be developed and used to jumpstart use.

Otto (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 25 OER projects at post-secondary institutions in Germany. They found that every situation was unique and presented different challenges, however, they also had two strong recommendations for those wanting to implement the use of OER at their own institutions. The first is to offer training and workshops for faculty. They also state that it is important to align the training with other relevant topics such as legal considerations and copyright. This has the added benefit of situating OER use in educational practice. The second recommendation is to establish a central individual to be the point of contact campus wide. While availability and familiarity with OER would be essential for this individual, it could be possible to make the argument that a librarian would be ideal to fill this role (Otto, 2019).

Student Use of Open Educational Resources

Students have a vital role in both the development and implementation of OER in college classrooms. Not only are they attracted to the low- or no-cost factor, the role of access to course texts and materials is a major factor in student academic success (Stanforth, 2018). The average cost of books and supplies, typically beyond the cost of tuition, now averages \$1200 per academic school year (Billings et al., 2012; Clobridge, 2015; Todorinova & Wilkinson, 2019). Traditional publishers have a captive market for their textbooks and it does not work in the favor of students. Often, students opt not to purchase required textbooks due to high cost even when they are aware that it may have a detrimental impact on their grades. Open access materials open a door to a whole new way of offering learning materials that helps drive down costs for students (Clobridge, 2015).

Researchers at the University of Georgia used OER textbooks in two non-major biology courses over two semesters. The seven sections of the two courses had 1,299 students enrolled. Students had access to the text from the first day of class and at the end of their course were offered the opportunity to complete a survey about their experience using OER. The survey asked about positive and negative experiences using the text. The most common positive response was the fact that it was free for students to use. This outweighed negative experiences, but it is important to note that students complained of eye strain, and the inability to highlight or annotate in their book, an ability that varies depending on OER format and platform. Students were also favorably impressed by searchability, portability and the way professors were able to link reading assignments in their course management system. Instructors noted that the material was comparable to that of a traditional textbook (Watson, Domizi, & Clouser, 2017).

Depending on the Creative Commons license used by OER creators, instructors and students have the ability and opportunity to not only use the materials but adapt it to their specific course needs. This allows students to become participants in their own learning by engaging learners in selection and creation of learning objects that can then be added to the available OER repository. This may depend not only on the Creative Commons license, but also the institution's ability to host or share OER with others online (Farmer, 2019).

Todorinova and Wilkinson (2019) found that students expressed a preference for selecting courses that had a lower textbook cost. Their study further indicated that students sometimes use illegal methods to obtain textbooks and other course materials from pirated copies they locate online. They suggest that this tendency to use illegally obtained versions of texts also reflects a need for increased information literacy that addresses ethical use of information and the value of information to the creators and publishers (Todorinova & Wilkinson, 2019). This creates or highlights additional need for librarian involvement with students and faculty information literacy instruction.

Research studies have further found that academic success is comparable for students using print or online texts and other resources. However, there are features that students prefer to have when using an online resource, "they want the ability to print, annotate, highlight, share, and bookmark pages," similar to common actions they take when using print materials (Okamoto, 2013). Colvard, Watson and Park (2018) examined end of course grades for courses that used OER textbooks and found that having access to the text from the first day of class made a significant difference for higher risk students, including Pell eligible students, underserved populations and part-time students.

Conclusion: Barriers and Benefits of Open Educational Resources

It seems clear that campus wide participation is necessary for successful implementation and widespread adoption and use of OER. Faculty, students, librarians, and other campus stakeholders, such as the bookstore, student success, and faculty development, are key to adopt their use in courses (Doan, 2017; McGreal, 2019). It is also clear that OER are new enough that there is resistance and a position of wariness from all involved. The high cost of textbooks, students attempting to learn without textbooks, and faculty resistance to change, all combine to create a tangled mess that is difficult for libraries and librarians to navigate. However, major shifts in higher education make this tangled mess an unavoidable one. With widespread quarantine and stay at home orders across the United States and the entire world, higher education is reeling from the needed changes and the unpredictability of the future. With students, faculty and staff absent from in-person classes, alternative means of delivering content must be explored, developed and implemented. How

much OER resources will drive this is uncharted territory, but certainly worth librarians developing an increased understanding in order to inform faculty, students and administrators about best practices.

A lack of understanding copyright and Creative Commons licenses are barriers for faculty in adopting OER for their courses. Librarians can assist by providing workshops or other teaching opportunities for faculty to learn about this important facet of OER (McGreal, 2019). Technology is also a barrier for some institutions in implementing widespread use of OER in courses. Faculty may not feel they have the ability to instruct students using OER but also in demonstrating how students can access materials (McGreal, 2019). Reading online and reading eBooks is known to use different abilities than reading print materials. Instructors must make students aware of this and it is an added responsibility for providing some guidance for students (Okamoto, 2013; Farmer, 2019). Tutoring services and/or student success departments should also be equipped and prepared for helping students as difficulties may occur. Portable technology to access OER by students may need to be supported by the library and campus learning technology departments (Billings et al., 2012).

Faculty may opt to use a variety of resources to make up their reading and/or activity list for a course, including the use of articles or eBooks from proprietary databases the library provides. This can benefit faculty and students by exposing them to multiple and diverse viewpoints, expanding the learning experience for all. It is important that libraries explain licensing agreements to ensure faculty understand limitations of the variety of license restrictions they may encounter and that may cause difficulties for their students (Billings et. al., 2012).

While the future of higher education and education in general, may be unclear at this time, it seems clear that libraries and librarians in an academic setting are needed. An understanding and familiarity with OER will benefit not only individual librarians but the institutions where they work. As OER continue to be created and adopted in higher education more research will be needed to understand these barriers and benefits and begin work to develop meaningful solutions that meet faculty and student needs. †

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