

It's More Than Just The Book: Open Educational Resources Deployment And Its Impact on Teaching Practices

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Part 1: The Analytical Memo

Introduction

Though definitions can sometimes vary, essentially, open educational resources (OER) are learning objects that can be freely used, remixed, and redistributed for the intentions of contextualizing the objects for specific populations of educators and students (What are Open Educational Resources (OERs)?). While conceptually, open educational resources have been around since late 1990s, they have risen in popularity within higher education in the United States in the 2010s (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Their dissemination across higher education is varied in scope, practice, and attitude towards their usage. MIT Open Courseware Project from 2001 is one of the earliest examples of open educational resources but there are many other online OER databases like MERLOT or OER Commons as well as the development of OpenStax by Rice University which publishes OER K-12 and college textbooks that are used across the country (Complete list of institutions that have adopted OpenStax, 2017).

The rising popularity of OER comes at a time when the costs of textbooks and other learning materials (along with higher education as a whole) has become prohibitively expensive (Popken, 2015). In fact, justification for OER usage is often situated in the language of cost and students' ability to access them: "Open resources are one way to address the rising costs of education..." (7 Things You Should Know About...Open Educational Resources, 2015), "In addressing the costs and quality of learning....easing the burden of textbook costs for many students..." (Open Educational

Resources, 2017), "...teaching, learning, and research resources that are free of cost and access barriers..." (Open Education - SPARC). A focus on students inability to afford and access learning materials has the possibility to create or perpetuate negative views of students in what is commonly referred as a deficit view. The deficit view of students often frames and presents students in terms of their inabilities and limitations rather than in their abilities and possibilities. Ultimately, the ability to freely reuse, augment, and redistribute is a valuable opportunity for faculty who face various struggles to engage students with meaningful learning. Though sometimes, the framing of OER's potential may contribute to a perpetuation of a deficit view (Gorski, 2011).

Another means of presenting and thinking about OER is to consider how access to learning content that can be molded and reshaped by both instructor and students opens up some great opportunities for contextualized learning and can empower students to critically engage with texts that they can literally and figuratively change. A view like this would more align with what is know as asset-based views of student learning wherein learners are considered equitable contributors to the learning environment and therefore, encouraged to add and augment the course's direction based upon their knowledge and understanding (Gorski, 2011).

OER is still an emerging movement, which means faculty either stumble upon or introduced to it by institutional actors (primarily librarians, members of centers for teaching and learning, and instructional designers or technologists) about what they are, how to find them, and how to implement them into courses. So what does this look like and how might this process be beneficial or problematic? If OER can be presented

through deficit and asset-based lenses (even simultaneously), then it's worth studying the impact of and introduction of OER by institutional actors can have on faculty perceptions of students and faculty practices.

For this small pseudo-phenomenological study of two OER trainers and two faculty members at a community college in Massachusetts, I set out to explore this intersection of OER training and faculty perceptions. This analytical memo will highlight the most salient theme to emerge from this small study, some of the categories that arose from analyzing the interviews, and reflections about what I have learned about the subject that I have set out to study.

Salient Theme: Empowerment

ED #1 (pseudonym for person interviewed) said it best in terms of the most salient theme to emerge: "...it really has expanded what I can do." Though the OER movement and its presentations within institutions has largely focused on the learning materials, all participants recognized that OER was much more than just learning materials. Rather it became the gateway to new practices, new ideas, and new strategies for teaching and learning.

It is important to note here that OER itself did not meet this purpose but rather the financial, institutional, and staff support provided by City Community College. These aspects created a space for reflecting about learning materials, thoughtful training about how learning materials are not isolated objects but integrated into a course (and therefore to change them might mean to change other things such as objectives,

assessments, interactions, etc), and recognition for the potential time-intensive investment faculty would need to make.

While every participant overwhelmingly praised the impact of OER, (ED #1 enthusiastically praised OER, “My students are getting the most current stuff that I can find for them.”), they all spoke to other ways the teaching had changed in important ways. For instance, ID #1 noted that “We can talk about accessibility in a way that we never really have been able to talk about them before.” Unprompted, ED #2 recognized that the focus on accessibility and universal design for learning was beneficial but also feel the classroom had changed because students had more choice and by proxy, more power, “So you can direct them, give them choices they can select and they become owners of the materials that they are going to discuss with others, rather than being told what to do. Here's the baseline stuff, here's the OER stuff, go West young woman, knock yourself out.” Thus, for ED #2, it became less about assigning singular OER material but letting students determine some of their own learning practices.

The charge for faculty in the project was to replace the textbook with free materials. For some, that meant finding a free textbook they could use. For others, they had to find a collection of resources and yet for some, it meant possibly building from scratch. ID #2 noted with pleasant surprise the degree to which faculty took to building anew entire aspects of their students learning materials. One faculty member replaced a pricey chemistry book with an open chemistry book, but didn't stop there. The faculty member proceeded to build a series of mini-lecture videos that he placed into YouTube to enhanced the students' learning (and also contribute to OER after

having directly benefitted from it). ID #2 discusses another person who went above and beyond: “We have a faculty member who took and built a Human-Health Nutrition course. She wasn’t finding a lot of great open resources and so she ended up using some stuff from Wikipedia, which as you know is CC licensed. She turned around a bunch of edits and added some videos and different things like that. She could take something that was existing and improve on it and use it for her students.” Though I know from my own experience and having worked with faculty on OER, this is pretty common, I think it speaks to the sense of empowerment that faculty feel when given the chance to reinvent or at least slight re-calibrate the proverbial wheel. I can see a lot of potential in the ability of OER unlocking or reinvigorating faculty instruction because it gives faculty and students a toolset that they have traditionally not had. For faculty, having flexible and expansive learning materials (no longer restricted to what’s available or how many materials one can reasonably ask students to purchase), changes what they can do for teaching. Meanwhile for students after decades of being told not to write in K-12 textbooks and hesitant or reluctant to annotate or interact with physical textbooks in college because it might ruin their resale value, a set of free learning materials that they are charged with engaging with in new and meaningful ways can also open up learning in new ways.

The Categories

My method of categorization wasn’t entirely methodical. I had some categories that I had created prior to looking at the data, but other categories I created after

re-reading the data. I did manual coding for this project because I was in a professional situation where buying the NVivo software was not feasible (in the midst of switching jobs and the new position will have a different computer platform than the one I currently am using). The predetermined categories were: asset-based views, deficit-based views, and training, while the categories that emerged were faculty observations, enthusiasm for OER, and New OER Projects.

Asset Based Views

Though most accounts did not overflow with clearly articulated statements framed in asset-based views, at least one did. ID #1 who also teaches a course discusses how she found the implementation of OER her classroom changing her practices: “I could find out what my students interested in, what are they majoring in, and try to tailor the projects to what was more relevant to them.” Here, the contextualizing of the course materials to meet the students and their pursuits recognizes the strengths and values of the student.

D #1 was not the only one to find this. ED #1 was exuberant to discover: “When they leave the classroom and we’ve had these unbelievable debates and really get down into some of the topics they’re able to step outside of the classroom and have these really important conversations with other people and engage those people about what they’re learning about here...” He saw that the learning was transformative and contagious and that it was happening through dialogue instead of lecture. ED #2 also noticed that a result of using OER empowered conversations and learning go on

beyond the classroom. “But it really has expanded what I can do to exposing students to things--because the OER is 24-7, it’s not confined--that is the discussion of it is not confined to my classroom. That has really helped in the teaching and I believe, as really helped others with learning.”

Deficit Based Views

Here too, deficit-based views were even harder to find but there were some echoes of them present. What follows is at best is a bit of stretching, which I believe is a result of my failure to better explore faculty’s perspectives of students overall views about students.

When discussing his motivation for moving to OER, ED #1 explained the following scenario: “Typically, when students come in as a freshman, they don't have a book, some don't have anything and they haven't gotten their financial aid checks back yet so we're looking at November when a student gets those checks. You're already eight weeks for nine weeks into the semester and you can afford a book.” While it’s true that ED #1 is rightfully showing his care and consideration for his students, his use of “don’t have anything” and that they are largely unable to do anything until the financial aid check comes along seems to deny the resourcefulness of students; it frames them in the deficit view of incapable and unable to engage with their learning in meaningful ways despite the absence of the book.

Similarly, ED #2 discusses the value of having the resources right there being accessible and being able to pull them into the discussion. She appreciates that

students can quickly use the materials to reinforce their statements. To this she says, “It makes the students feel smart. That has helped.” Again, the faculty member is rightfully excited about how OER can impact the class but the claim that OER can make “students feel smart” can imply that they are not necessarily smart but just can “feel smart.” But without follow up on my end, it is hard to determine if it was this or if the faculty member meant students may be smart but often do not feel smart for a variety of reasons having to do with being a community college student in the 21st century.

Elsewhere when encouraging other faculty to use OER, she mentions, “faculty can avoid the ‘I don’t have the book yet!’ because yeah, you do. It’s right there.” To me, this represents one of the concerns about OER is that it represents to some degree the banking method of learning, where learning is a matter of information consumption (Freire, 2000). The focus on content as the primary reason for pitching OER to other faculty and the elimination of faculty being met with students unable or unwilling to access the course textbook still seem to linger in the camp of seeing learning as putting knowledge but not learning into the hands of students.

Training

Since I focused on the impact on training and faculty practices, this seemed to be an obvious category to code for and turned out to be useful in the ways in which both the ID and ED participants discussed their work. The training consisted of several different workshops over the course of a half-day that addressed how to find OER, open licenses, and also, how to use universal design for learning (UDL) to assure

accessibility for learning. ID #1 emphasized that “I think that this has been another unintended outcome of the project is that injecting accessibility into it and really getting them to understand and start thinking about accessibility from the beginning and not once all their materials have all been developed...” ED #2 reiterated the importance of this push. When asked how her understanding of openness has changed as a result of the project, she explained it changed “perhaps most importantly was accessibility as openness for people with different learning styles either cognitive disabilities, vision, hearing...” The focus on UDL and accessibility can be understood as a step toward asset-based learning in that faculty are considering and framing the course content and activities from a vantage point of the student rather than that of the instructor and thinking about how they can more meaningfully connect with the subject through their own situated contexts.

Faculty Observations

This category was developed when I realized that I needed to parse out some difference between how faculty view students in relation to their abilities and how faculty perceived students’ attitudes and thoughts. Granted, there is definitely overlap but when ED #2 says “the students enjoy the hell out of it because it’s free,” it feels different from when ED #2 says “ But it really has expanded what I can do to exposing students to things...it’s not confined--that is, the discussion of it is not confined to my classroom. That has really helped in the teaching and I believe, as really helped others with learning.” The former connotes an assumption about students that may or may not

have actual evidence from the faculty's practice (and to which I should have asked a follow up question about examples of) while the latter illustrates how the usage of OER has changed practices and experiences by both faculty and students. By

Enthusiasm For OER

ED #1's excitement for OER was palpable; one would hardly know that he was driving in traffic, his enthusiasm came on so strong through the phone. He was not just excited for how it was impacting his classroom but what it represented for higher education. "There's a lot more interdisciplinary inter-collegiate inter-university that's going on now on a level that was never present before." He sees this as the cutting edge and believes that it will result in a national or international database of learning objects that educators will be able to access and use for their classrooms. He also noted how OER is a community of practitioners willing to help one another. "What's really important to mention is that when you're involved in the community that uses open educational resources, everybody so willing to help each other out." When asked her experience with OER and the process, ED #2's answer was clear and simple: "It's been fabulous."

New OER Projects

Everyone discussed how they could move forward with OER and I realized that this was an important consideration. It tapped into the theme of feeling empowered but was still different in that its focus was that what they had accomplished with OER, though important, was also rewarding enough to continue with new OER projects

suggesting that the projects were successful beyond their initial goal. Granted, I should note that some of this is likely a result of the questions I asked the ID participants and also their role as gatekeepers to introduce me to faculty. Though they both mentioned a faculty member who tried OER for a semester before returning to a traditional textbook, they solicited specific faculty for me to interview that they deemed most successful.

While ID #1 noted about shifting some of the conversation to “open pedagogy”, ID #2 expressed the goal to increase Mass Transit Pathway degrees to be entirely OER. ED #1 explained that he had worked with the ID #1 and ID #2 to help a college in Connecticut to start an OER program: “I moved OER into that college and it moved so fast that I was so surprised. They recently just hired a librarian who is specifically dedicated to OER.” Meanwhile, ED #2 anticipates moving forward with another OER proposal: “...if I write a decent proposal and there's not a lot of competition that I may be able to do that this summer.”

Conclusion

This small study has definitely helped me to think more about my dissertation and how I might go about it. I feel that it has also helped me think and discuss better the intersection of OER, faculty training, and faculty practices. I was surprised a bit (but in hindsight realized I shouldn't be) about the impact that the OER training and support had on faculty's practices (e.g. more awareness of OER, and both faculty discussed trying different and new things) as a whole. This discovery will help me better think of

more refined questions to ask future research and also more awareness of how I might go about following up.

The larger implications and to which I look forward to exploring in years to come are the ways in which OER can operate not just as a means of effectively saving students thousands of dollars annually but how it can empower faculty to teach differently and also to consider more student-centered practices in their teaching. This study seemed to ring strong that for all involved, it was more than just trading in one text for another but almost using the text a trojan horse to open up the question about teaching, learning, and course materials.

In total, I feel energized by this study as my first foray into qualitative research. I know (as the following section will layout) there is much work to do but I feel like it's the right path for me as a doctoral student and that it will lead to research that is important and relevant not just for the sake of the dissertation but for the work that I do in general and plan to do in the future.

Part 2: Qualitatively Reflecting

I often explain to my students that teaching is as much about learning as it is about teaching and that in any given class, I learn just as much as them--though it's sometimes different things. That is to say, for me, every process is one in which change (and hopefully learning) occur through interaction. In a very similar vein, this project goes beyond just what I have learned about the subject matter. I have begun to learn about who I am likely to be as a scholar and doctoral candidate. In the simplest terms, I

found this exciting and useful but also an opportunity to prepare a bit more clearly for the challenges I am likely to encounter in my work.

A Phenomenon With a Slice of Socio-Linguistic

In my initial approach, I thought I would more actively rely on a socio-linguistic approach to my research with a hint of phenomenology. Given my interest on considering asset-based and deficit-based views, I thought exploring the language with which faculty described their students would be useful and important. As Rallis and Rossman (2017) note about the socio-linguistic approach's purpose, it is to "explore the meaning participants make of social interactions and settings, but the locus of interest is communicative behavior, messages sent and received, and the ways that signs and symbols convey meaning" (p 87). However, in hindsight, I found my work corresponding more to a phenomenological study wherein I investigated "the lived experience of a small number of people....with a focus on the essence of lived experience" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; p. 85).

The lived experience for this project was the training and deployment of OER in a community college classroom and while I'm happy with this, I recognize that the switch had more to do with my lack of experience, consideration, and self-awareness needed to do this work. I played with some ideas of discourse analysis above when I unpacked a bit of deficit-based views with the two faculty members but I was hardly able "to reveal and confront dominant discourses and ideology" (Blanco Ramírez, p. 25). Even as a phenomenological study, it lacked the merit that the literature encouraged to deliberate

through how to capture the “prereflective, prepredicative experience” or to dig deep on how the participants went through the experience and capture their states of mind in the moments (Van Manen, 2014). Some of this was a result of timing and some of it a result of not really understanding the kind of research I was doing.

In truth, I still struggle with where the research actually sits for this study. I think in the future, I might be able to work more with the socio-linguistic approach, but it will definitely entail more active strategies such as attending trainings and even where possible being present during meetings with faculty about OER; which seems like a much harder possibility. Additionally, if as socio-linguistic, I am to study power-structures, then that would mean I should also be interviewing students about their experiences. After all, if socio-linguistics focuses on power, it would seem problematic to not include all populations impacted by OER at a community college.

One possibility that I am only coming to realize in this paper is that grounded theory may be another possible approach. Corbin & Strauss (2015), Stern (2007), and Tan (2010) all discuss the intricacies of grounded theory and now having gone through the material, it seems to me that a more potent outcome of this research could be to articulate the ways in which OER and the training of it open up more than texts but position faculty to reconsider their courses and their teaching. Thus, I feel like in some ways, I have committed step one (collected data) and step two (analyzed data) but as I move into my dissertation am proceeding with “continued collection and analysis of data based on concepts derived during the research process” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; p. 8).

The Ethical Considerations

Largely, the ethical concerns that I address in the ethical paper held true. The ethos of openness meant that participants were eager to share and comfortable with their names being used. I still erred on the side of caution and used pseudonyms. Ultimately, I think I was right that this isn't necessarily a controversial topic but I also reiterate that it means I need to continue to be vigilant because that view means I'm more likely to miss something pertinent to ethical considerations.

One ethical consideration that I did not necessarily foresee but found myself grappling with was to determine the line between reminding and pestering. I had hoped to have access to the training materials used prior to the interviews so that I could better understand some of the training and maybe change some of my questions accordingly. The OER representatives I worked with were incredibly helpful but it took some emailing for them to share them over. This was not due to a hesitancy to share them (i.e. the materials had Creative Commons licenses on them, indicated they were free to use) but more a reflection of the demands of staff at a community college. Thus, I refrained from emailing them once a week for several weeks until I acquired them, but I did have to think it through and wonder where the ethical line was.

I also grappled a bit about representing participants within this paper. I feel as though I respected and adequately presented their views herein but the section on deficit-based views I do worry may feel a bit challenging to read and therefore, I did my

best to contextualize and offer other considerations about what I was interpreting (something I continue to do with this last two sentences).

I, Researcher: A Work In Progress

Clearly, I've got work to do. A regular truth I bump up against in my professional career, my writing, and my education is that I'm not a details-oriented kind of person. I can work like a mule to produce work, but crossing all the proverbial T's and dotting all the I's (or perfecting citations) has not been my strong suit. I feel that rings true in this project and for me as a researcher thus far.

I believe I've seen some difference and growth this semester as I grapple with one paper that is pushing me to make an intellectually complex argument that requires nuance and detail and with this course which requires me to think, develop and act methodically in the deployment of research. While both have been powerful learning experiences for me this semester, I feel that this project has left me with lots to consider as I move into the dissertation process.

What's more I appreciate that I am coming to this as a result not of the research in and of itself but of the reflective method deployed by the professor. Reflection has been a powerful tool for me in my adult life and increasingly in my professional life. Having the opportunity to reflect with each stage of this course has helped me to be more aware of the missteps that I have taken over and to be more prepared for them in future research.

At this junction, I think the biggest thing I might need to consider is to take another crack at this whole process so that I can refine it a bit more clearer. If possible, I plan to look at one of my electives to see if I can do another small qualitative study in order to work out the challenges I have encountered here and possibly learn what else I am missing. Essentially, I feel as if I much more familiar with qualitative study practices but with that familiarity has grown a greater awareness of what I don't know or have trouble with and I want to practice a bit more with it before feeling I'm ready for the dissertation.

Finally, I feel that this course and study have helped tremendously to think more deeply and practically about the forthcoming dissertation and beyond that, the kind of work I want to do as a scholar and as a practitioner. It has helped me to find some interesting outcomes of OER and its implementation in the community college while also given me a chance to think about the different ways I can and will need to bring more attention to detail in the research that I do but also the ways in which I work. It has also served as a positive reminder as to why I do the work that I do and my overall effort to earn a doctoral degree: to keep learning and pushing the boundaries of what I understand and what I can do.

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