

Hidden Costs of Open Educational Resources



The OER Concept

The idea of an open educational resource (OER) platform for courses and content has been around since the early 1990's¹.

OER is defined as “technology-enabled, open provision of educational resources for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes.”² Content is typically made freely available over the Web or the Internet. Its principal use is by teachers and educational institutions to support course development, but it can also be used directly by students³.

Open educational resources include learning objects such as lecture material, references and readings, simulations, experiments and demonstrations, as well as syllabi, curricula and teachers' guides⁴.

The potential cost savings to students is the most often-cited reason faculty state for considering OER platforms to assemble course material (<http://www.babson.edu/news-events/babson-news/Pages/faculty-survey-open-education-resources-low-but-improving.aspx>). Given the financial pressure facing students, it's easy to understand why.

According to the Washington State University Libraries website, (<http://libguides.libraries.wsu.edu/affordablelearning/oerprocon>) other reasons to consider OER include:

- The potential to customize course materials
- Increasing support for plug and play resources
- The potential to use OER as a means of engaging students more deeply in the educational process
- Support for lifelong learning. Because these resources are open, students are able to return to the content over their lifetime

¹ 2006, Wiley, David, Organization for Economic Co-Operation

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

The OER Reality

As a concept, it is easy to see why OER has grabbed the attention of educators around the world. However, a 2016 Babson College study of over 3,000 teaching faculty indicates that only 5.3 percent of courses are using open textbooks (including public domain and Creative Commons licensed).⁵

What can account for this gap between the popularity of the OER concept and reality?

There are some obvious challenges faced by institutions when implementing OER (<http://libguides.libraries.wsu.edu/affordablelearning/oerprocon>). The most frequently cited challenges are **quality control** over content and the **sustainability** of “most current” content.

Additional challenges include:

- Permanence. Materials can disappear without notice. Will OER survive long term with little to no funding?
- Potential corporatization, as companies like Amazon increasingly compete in the education space
- Complex IP issues. While some content is free, some is licensed, leading to complicated arrangements for use
- Missing ancillary resources. Some open resources lack instructor copies, outlines, quizzes/tests, clicker exercises and other materials that can make publisher offerings attractive
- Cost transference to institutions, from the draw on resources to support faculty working on OER initiatives

There are also some not-so-obvious challenges with implementing OER involving the professional development required for faculty, as explained by Bridget McCrae of CampusTechnology.com (<https://campustechnology.com/articles/2012/06/26/4-challenges-for-oer-in-higher-education.aspx>). According to McCrae, “The vast quantity of resources—tested and untested alike—available online is one key hurdle. Helping instructors develop a mindset around ‘constant revision’ and encouraging ongoing open

⁵ 2016, Babson Research Group, <http://www.babson.edu/news-events/babson-news/Pages/faculty-survey-open-education-resources-low-but-improving.aspx>

course development are two other tricky areas that can make or break an institution's OER initiative."

McCrae adds insight from Geoff Cain, director of distance education for Eureka-based College of the Redwoods. His institution is a member of the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources. According to Cain, "The number of resources [available] is so vast that it can literally paralyze instructors. Helping faculty find appropriate resources is a major issue."

Cain adds that moving to OER also requires professional training to emphasize that the educator, not the publisher, is responsible for curating course materials.

A final challenge is time. Bridget McCrae says, "Educators don't have time to develop their own course materials. Already pressed for time, many professors just aren't wired to produce their own open content, use it in their classrooms, continuously revise it, and share it with the rest of the world."

The 2016 study by Babson College referenced earlier (<http://www.babson.edu/news-events/babson-news/Pages/faculty-survey-open-education-resources-low-but-improving.aspx>) found that faculty awareness of OER was low, but improving, with 25% of the survey's 3,000 respondents claiming they were aware, or very aware, of OER.

Not surprisingly, the study reported the most common factor mentioned by faculty when selecting educational content was the cost to the student. After cost, the most common factor was comprehensiveness of the resource, followed by how easy it was to find.

The Babson study also explored the realities faced by faculty in implementing OER. Three barriers rose to the top:

"Not enough resources for my subject" (49%)

"Too hard to find what I want" (48%)

"No comprehensive catalog for resources" (45%)

Dr. Jeff Seaman, co-director of the Babson Survey Research Group, summed up the study by saying, "There is potential for growth for OER, as many faculty report that they are willing to try these resources. However, while faculty cite cost to the student more than any other factor in selecting educational materials, concerns about the time and effort it takes to find and evaluate these materials remains a significant barrier to wider adoption."

Based on these findings, we believe there are several realities to be considered when an institution is contemplating implementation of OER, including:

- The time and effort required to curate content to make sure it is accurate and meets student's needs
- Time and ongoing effort required to maintain content to ensure it is up-to-date and keep up to date with current research and practice in higher education. The time required for training and supporting educators who will be responsible for setting up an OER and maintaining it
- The monetary value of the educators and staff time to set up and maintain the OER, and the resulting pressure to increase tuition
- The opportunity costs of the entire venture. Where is faculty time and focus best spent—through building an OER, or in the classroom with students?
- Student engagement suffers with OER solutions due to the typical 90% text ratio
- There is no means of immediate feedback on student performance tests and quizzes
- Ability to offer valid and reliable assessments as part of OER solutions
- Ease of LMS integration

OER and First-Year Programs

In our [white paper](#), we outline the need for FYE programs to help meet the anticipated needs of the future workforce. In addition, we share an overview of the range of First-Year Experience (FYE) programs, from remedial programs to more robust curriculum, and their effectiveness in meeting student needs.

Our conclusion is that those FYE programs that provide a more robust curriculum, that has been curated to advance the student's ability to grow and thrive in a new, demanding environment, are most effective in meeting first-year student needs.

Given these findings, we encourage any institution considering OER for its First-Year Experience program to consider several “realities”, including:

- Does your institution have one, and ideally several, faculty, who have members with the background, time and motivation to design a robust FYE curriculum, and source proven, quality content for the course?
- Do faculty embrace the effort required for on-going curation of content for this course?
- What is the monetary value of faculty time to be allocated to the OER program?
- Does your student population have equal access to the technology (laptop, tablet, internet access, etc.) and the skills required to capitalize on the OER implementation?
- Are there other, low low-cost, alternative, comprehensive FYE curriculum available? And how does their cost compare with the real cost of implementing OER?

In our view, comparing the actual costs of implementing OER for an FYE program to existing, low-cost alternatives is the only way to make a wise decision for first-year students.