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Embracing the World Beyond Textbooks by Utilizing Open Educational Resources

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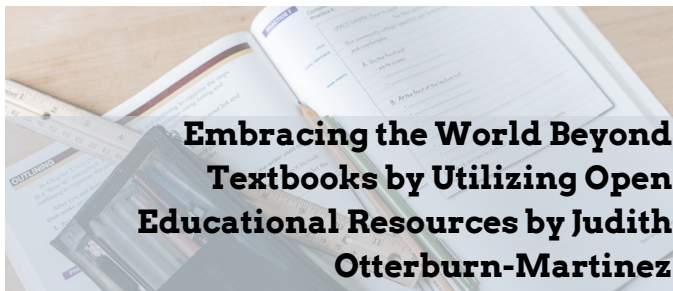
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In the Classroom



Introduction

Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “...higher education shall be equally accessible to all” this is a powerful statement but is not a reality for all. As educators, we want our students to have access to high quality materials, yet the cost is burdensome. To counteract this cost, the application in growth of Open Educational Resources (OER) is now much more widely encouraged and adopted in higher education institutions as it offers high quality materials for free to all.

A clear definition of Open Educational Resources (OER) is:

OER are 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 or re-purposing by others. They include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge (Atkins et al., 2007).

Reflecting upon the philosophy of OER, one can easily understand its attractiveness as there are many societal forces directing educators to adopt OER. Anyone who has been to a US college knows that the cost of college textbooks is exorbitant. “From 2002 to 2012, textbook inflation outpaced consumer price

growth by 192.9%” (Hanson, 2022). Additionally, some students face difficulties buying books, as college bookstores underbuy to save costs. That leaves students scrambling to buy from other sources, often receiving after the course is under way. Also, from my own experience in working with higher institutions in countries like Mexico, Brazil, and Tanzania, there is a lack of access to textbooks and books in general. Furthermore, US colleges and community colleges specifically face decreasing enrollment; therefore, offering no cost textbooks is a strategic tool to increase enrollment. Finally, with the adoption of OER, professors and departments can curate their courses to incorporate material that is current, local and addresses the needs of meeting student objectives more effectively than traditional textbooks can do. Thus, OER is a useful, cost saving tool that helps not only students but also instructors and institutions.

In 2020, the English as a Second Language department of Atlantic Cape Community College, NJ completely adopted OER. This article will outline the procedure of implementation, materials, and lessons learned. This serves to communicate a model to any educator who seeks to do this for their course(s) or program.

Procedure of Implementation

In May 2019, New Jersey passed a law requiring each institution of higher education to submit a plan that included the use of open textbooks and commercial digital learning materials that are free or at a reduced cost. This initiative was encouraged by administrators at Atlantic Cape Community College, so that in the spring semester of 2020, departments were encouraged to apply for grant money from the state of New Jersey to convert courses to OER.

The department of four full time faculty members applied and was initially granted funding to convert the five main integrated skill courses (reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar). These five courses are six credit hours (90 hours instruction) and were converted for fall 2020. After implementing these five courses, the department's four elective three-credit courses (advanced grammar, fundamental grammar, pronunciation, strategies for the American classroom) were implemented spring of 2021.

Implementation

Below is an overview of the steps that were taken to enact OER for the department.

- **Step 1:** Course maps were reviewed collaboratively and updated. Course maps are a tool that outlines how the objectives, assessments, and instruction align. Each of the five integrated courses is broken into: reading, writing, information literacy, listening, speaking, and grammar. As course maps were reviewed for the whole program, the department could ensure that from one course to another, students can gain the skills necessary to reach the program goals upon completion. In this task, the department collaboratively reviewed all course maps and made any necessary modifications.
- **Step 2:** Collaboratively, themes were chosen for each course to avoid duplication. Such themes included topics connected with US History like from Reconstruction to the Jim Crow Era; the environment like lowering your carbon footprint; sports with topics connected to gender and economics; health topics like vaccines, COVID, and obesity; and psychology topics connected with motivation and grit. The department chose four topics for each of the five courses. Topics were general enough so that there would be a large enough pool of resources to choose from and had flexibility for instructors to choose subtopics that were of interest.

- **Step 3:** Faculty were assigned courses and individually found and created appropriate learning activities with supporting OER materials. Each faculty member took one to two courses and developed the course outline, schedule, assessments and activities for each course using OER materials.
- **Step 4:** Work was shared via Google Docs, and faculty met regularly to share materials, offer support, and give feedback.
- **Step 5:** Faculty were paired and completed a formal peer review process. Once a faculty member signed off on their peer's work, then the Dean of Liberal Studies reviewed and approved the work.
- **Step 6:** All work was compiled into a shared Google folder system for use. This organization system took time to organize and set up as it would be used by all members of the department, so it needed to be intuitive to use.

Materials

OER materials are extensive. This section serves to streamline the process and identify helpful tools for any English language educator who seeks to integrate partial or fully OER resources into his/her courses. All sites are free. Some have options for upgrades, but I only use the free version.

Grammar & Vocabulary:

These sites offer practice with engaging graphics and music, games and flexibility for a teacher to adapt content or use each library's content.

- [Road to Grammar - Your Road to Better Grammar](#)
- [Welcome to the new ELC Study Zone!](#)
- [Wordwall](#)
- [Baamboozle](#)
- [Quizlet](#)
- [Quizizz](#)

Reading:

These three sites have diverse genres and choices of readings: fiction, non-fiction, and current events. Imbedded within the readings are comprehension questions and vocabulary support. Instructors can also have class folders to keep students work organized.

- [Newsela](#) (great because instructor and/or student can change the level based on students reading level)
- [Actively Learn](#)
- [Common Lit](#)
- Novels- there are multiple novels on the internet and I make all my own vocabulary, reading comprehension activities, and interactive classroom activities and assessments for each novel I use- 100% OER!

Listening:

These sites are to teach with content. Content for learning about a topic and vocabulary development. They also serve to practice note taking. I develop listening comprehension and discussion questions for any listening.

- National Public Radio
- TED Talks
- [Edpuzzle](#)
- [ello.org](#)

Writing:

In conjunction with using personally developed materials like powerpoints, activities, student essays, and web links from college writing centers (OWL, St. Cloud, UVA etc.) the following are OER textbooks for teaching writing.

- <https://open.lib.umn.edu/writingforsuccess/>
- <https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/wrd/>

OER Organizations:

If you are looking for more OER resources, this a good starting place.

- [Oercommons.org](#)
- [OpenStax](#)

- [Merlot](#)
- [Project Gutenberg](#)
- [OER Africa](#)
- [Currikistudio.org](#)
- [Open Education Global](#)
- [Academic Earth](#)

Lessons Learned

After fully using OER for over two years, the department faculty and students were surveyed. This was the first time that data was collected to gather opinions of the implementation. Up until this point, full time faculty had worked on improving resources and organization of google folders to improve ease of access and modify materials. They also worked individually with adjunct faculty; however, there was no formal training, workshops or information sessions at a department level. As this was implemented during the pandemic, trainings and workshops were cut from the program. Upon reflection, this is a lesson learned and should be part of the implementation plan from the beginning.

Another lesson learned is to pilot courses first before global adoption. Taking more time to try out materials, flow of course and level of materials is necessary before implementing the course. With all finalized resources, adjunct faculty need to be trained on all platforms and technological tools. Hence, programs need to take time to do things thoroughly - rushing into adoption helps no one.

A third and final lesson learned is the power of mentoring. Adjunct faculty are best supported if they have an assigned mentor who can observe, be observed and work together reviewing sound teaching practices with OER for optimal use and success for learners.

Survey Results: Student and Faculty Feedback

In the Spring of 2023, the department surveyed all current students and faculty members with

separate Google form surveys. The surveys were posted on Blackboard and instructors were encouraged to use class time for students to complete. Surveys for both groups were anonymous. For the students, the purpose was to ascertain the pulse of students and their awareness of the OER adoption. For faculty, it was to have an anonymous avenue for them to express their opinions. Out of a possible 107 students, 67 responded. Out of eight faculty, all eight responded. In creating the student's survey, the questions were asked in simple language to decrease language difficulties.

The first question asked students what courses they had taken in the program so that information could be cross checked to see how students answered. This information will be highlighted where important in the discussion.

In the second question (figure 1), students were asked if they were aware of OER; 80% of students reported positively. It is unclear as to why 12 students were not aware, for when their answers were cross checked, they had taken multiple classes and were now in high intermediate and advanced classes. Only two students were new to the program. Regardless, the majority are aware that they do not have to buy text books.

Do you know that you do not have to buy any books for your ESL courses?
67 responses

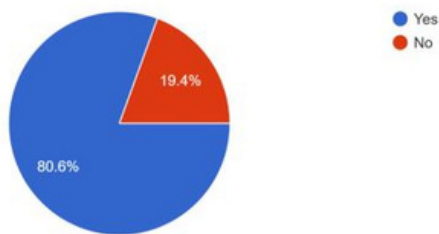


Figure 1

Juxtaposing the financial burden against student contentment of not having a textbook was the focus of question #3 as seen in figure 2. In asking students their feelings about using OER, wording was carefully chosen. It was decided that the term OER should not be used as students would most likely not know this

this term. Again, using simple straightforward language was seen as being most important to focus on this juxtaposition. This information is important for the department as faculty members want to know how students feel about not having textbooks. The results were surprising because only 48% were definitively happy using OER. In looking deeper into the data, it was the lower levels of the program where students were most dissatisfied. This indicates modifications to delivery and more training for those instructors should be investigated. They may also be unaware of the cost of textbooks.

Are you happy that you do not have text books for your ESL courses?
67 responses

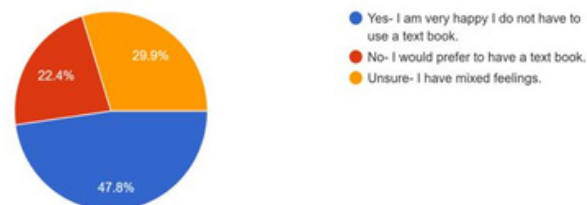


Figure 2

Figure 3 communicated the results of students expressing what they missed from textbooks, 36% did not miss anything; 22% missed having the information all in one place; 46% missed being about to write/take notes in their textbook; and 12% missed having the physical pages. These answers are interesting when one realizes that all e-materials should be on the LMS. Blackboard is the LMS used at Atlantic Cape Community College and it is used for all courses regardless of modality. This desire for all materials in one place might be due to an instructor and/or students who do not use Blackboard effectively. There are undoubtedly learners who miss textbooks as reflected by these responses that no amount of training or printing will be a substitute for.

What do you miss about not having a textbook?
67 responses

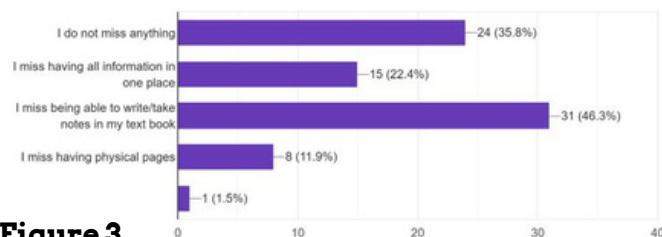


Figure 3

Understanding students' preferences for using screens for learning instead of paper was the focus of the next two questions. Seeing that 19% of students preferred paper over the rest that were satisfied with either at 69% and 12% at online/screen, was comforting but not surprising (figure 4). As the majority of adults use smartphones in their daily lives for social, professional and entertainment purposes, the comfort level of reading on a screen is an increasing trend and indicates a transferability into education.

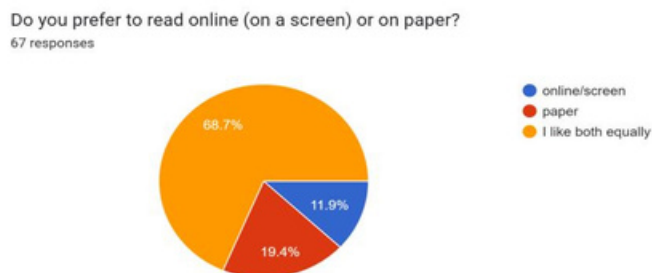


Figure 4

The next question (figure 5) is related to a research question that is connected with a separate research study. The focus again as in the previous question is on comfort using a device to read and complete academic assignments. The results for this question were positive. The expectation was that there would be a lot more complaints about sore eyes and problems recalling information, but they were the minority of responses. It had also been expected that distraction rates would be higher. About 30 students (45%) were sometimes or often distracted in comparison to 55% that were never or rarely distracted. Additionally, the majority of students responded favorably to completing their work

easily and well: N58 to 9. This survey is highly informative to the department as it seeks to make improvements to materials, training and student learning overall. Below are a few of the responses for the last and final question. Responses are broken into two categories: negative and positive.

What is your opinion/experience about using (not) textbooks in your English courses?

Negative:

- “My experience is that I remember that when i use books the information was in my brain more time.”
- “My experience was okay, but I prefer study with using textbooks too.”
- “In my opinion the textbooks is easy page navigation and provide me to have my assignments in one place ...”
- “In my opinion some textbooks may be necessary for people that have a lower level of English because they can physically see the words and acknowledge them better. However, for me they're not necessary.”

Positive:

- “Not using a textbook is awesome because working in a computer makes our work more easy. It’s good that we are not using textbooks and it’s more easy to read from computer.”
- “It’s the best experience I ever had because I never forgot my homework at home.”
- “I like not using textbooks because is more easy and more organized in the laptop.”

What statements are true for you in your experience doing reading and writing assignments on a computer?

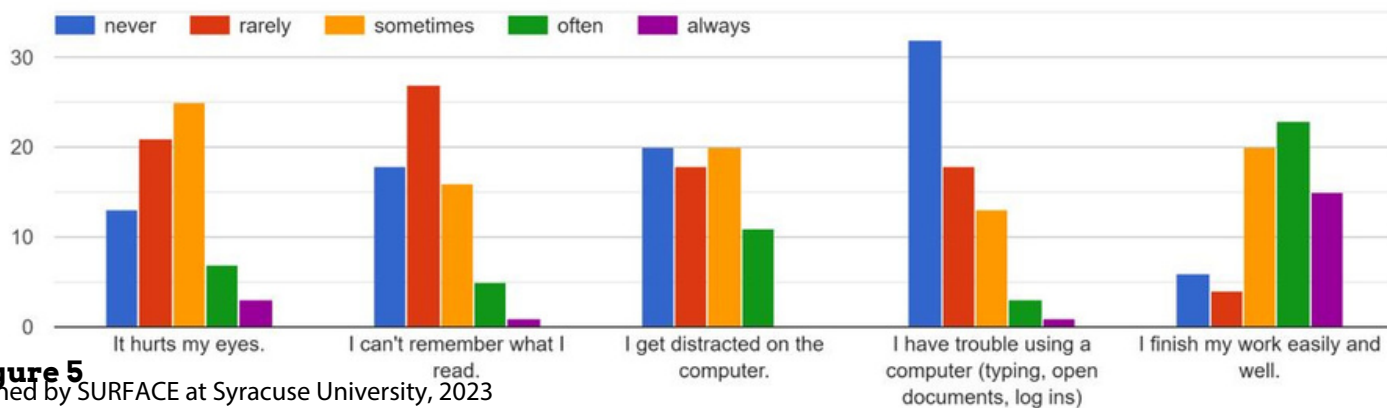


Figure 5

- “I think I do not need to use textbooks because I can find any information on the Internet.”
- “It is a helpful way to study in any place. You can use any device to do the HW, to study and also to read a novel.”

Below are some of the faculty’s responses to the adoption of OER.

What do you not like about using OER?

- “OER could be beneficial only if the teacher is experienced; it’s important to know the sequence of the teaching material, the student’s level and needs. When picking material online, it’s difficult to find the right level, activities which would be on the same theme and in the logical order.”
- “a lot more work- time consuming to find materials”
- “It is hard to keep a congruence between reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is difficult to find listening that are appropriate to specific levels. It takes a lot of time because although the department has course layouts teachers like to find and develop some of their own material and that is a lot to ask of part time instructors.”

What do you like about using OER?

- “The array of materials”
- “Many choices!”
- “I enjoy the creativity and being able to adapt materials to my students and their needs.”

Conclusion

At this time, development of materials is ongoing and offering regular trainings will be the focus for the department. OER has many strengths just like text books. However, the adaptability and freedom to use multiple sources, the flexibility to be creative and having all students- in all corners of the world have access to high quality materials for free is a gift of the internet and one that should be taken full advantage of. With AI technologies

like Chat GPT changing education, educators need to be flexible to adopt new technologies, information and resources. By adapting to the modern world we live in, our students will benefit.

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