

Tilling Rows and Early Harvests

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Introduction

Somewhere in early 2019, my best friend from high school – with whom I have been friends since we were 14 years old – talked me into joining them on a doctoral journey. Together, we applied for and were accepted into the University of Mississippi’s (Ole Miss) Doctor of Education in Higher Education Administration program, which is part of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate. There are six principles which compose the Project’s framework, which I will not outline here, but the primary principle is of relevance to both the substance of this column and to the open educational resources (OER) effort in higher education. This principle states that the professional doctorate in education “is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice” (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], 2021).

This principle forms the foundation of the curriculum at Ole Miss and serves as the driving force behind the program’s dissertation in practice (DiP) model. When faced with this principle, I was motivated to select a problem of practice (PoP) having to do with student welfare, which led me to the topic of food insecurity. I initially thought to study the impact of food insecurity on faculty’s perceptions of open educational resources (OER) as a solution to the problem, but was subsequently directed away from this topic. I was determined to

study OER nonetheless. So, that, and the faculty perceptions part of my initial idea, survived for the final dissertation topic: faculty perceptions of affordable and open educational resources (AOER) at the institution where I worked at the time (Lowe, 2022). While there are many facets of the experience I could and want to write about, it seems appropriate for this column to focus on a particular element of the research: how faculty perceptions have shifted since OER and affordable education resources (AER), often known together as affordable and open education resources (AOER or OAER), took hold in the collective consciousness of higher education as suggested by the findings of my dissertation.

How It Started

My own journey into OER began with my entrance into the open access (OA) movement, sometime around 2009. I was subsequently motivated to begin my own peer-reviewed OA journal, *Codex: The Journal of the Louisiana Chapter of the ACRL*. When I encountered Open Educational Resources about five years later, OER seemed like a natural part of my OA values. I dug into the literature to understand the phenomenon and to identify solutions, practices, challenges/barriers, and other details which would serve me in my pursuit of promoting OER.

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The impression that this casual review of the literature available at the time gave me was that faculty found OER variable in quality, time-consuming and difficult to create and/or implement, and difficult to find/identify (Browne, Holding, Howell, & Rodway-Dyer, 2010; Rolfe, 2012; Sclater, 2010). Faculty struggled with the role and applications of copyright and institutional support, where that notion meant fiscal support, time, and/or the ever-crucial tenure/promotion acknowledgement (Browne et al., 2010). Faculty acknowledged that OER gave them greater control of the material they taught, and they supported the idea of open education, altruism, and the ability to share resources (Rolfe, 2012; Sclater, 2010). Unfortunately, many OER did not have crucial ancillary materials like test banks or study guides that supported or enhanced student learning (Kani, 2015). The emphasis, however, in the literature at that time seemed to be on barriers and challenges, though there was a substantial amount of support and solutions to be found.

Anecdotally, the story at my institution in the early years of OER in Louisiana carried echoes of the literature. Many faculty did not understand the concept of OER. When the notion of affordable education resources emerged, the waters were further muddied. Affordable education resources (AER) are “any required course material that students purchase for less than \$50” (Penn State, 2022), though the notion of affordable can vary from state to state. AER can “include low-cost or no-cost options and library materials that do not have an open license” (Penn State, 2022). The “no-cost” option seemed to imply that they should be OER, but the copyright and licensing contexts which accompany AER seemed to confuse faculty.

Several who understood the concept of OER still rejected it outright, commenting that they could not find viable or quality resources for their disciplines (many of them from the sciences,

unsurprisingly). Many struggled with copyright and fair use apart from the OER question, so trying to explain OER in terms of copyright, fair use, and/or Creative Commons licensing (CCL) was asking for trouble. Of course, these elements also confused the AER aspect for faculty, as noted above. Many questioned the use of OER from within the academic freedom framework and expressed concerns that OER meant having that freedom diminished in some way. Most had not attempted at that time to create their own OER, but those that were experimenting with implementing OER did relate how time-consuming it could be. The lack of support from the administration, regardless of whether that meant financial support, course release time, or acknowledgement in the tenure/promotion process. The lack of articulated support from the administration also seemed to deter faculty as well, since faculty seemed to regard the lack of support as no support (or, arguably, a rejection of the notion). In short, the ground was not exactly fertile at the study institution in OER’s early years.

Making the Shift

Fortunately, the soil could be amended, and one of the ways in which the ground at the study institution was prepared was through a co-facilitated faculty learning community (FLC) run with the then-director of online programs, the director of the office of extended learning and quality enhancement, and myself, the director of the library. The purpose of the FLC was to introduce faculty to OER and related concepts (like copyright/fair use/CCL), and help them, over the course of a year, convert one of their courses to OER.

We received funding for incentives through the university’s Foundation, but when we solicited the faculty for applications for the FLC, we did not let them know that incentives were being offered. We received more applications than anticipated, which

is a problem we were glad to have! Once we selected the participants, we proceeded with a very simple purpose and outline: help faculty understand what OER are; help faculty develop an OER-based assignment for a course they were currently teaching with a view toward converting that course into an OER course; and then actually convert that course into an OER course.

This process ran through three cycles. In the first year, we three directors facilitated the FLC. In the second year, two participants from the first year facilitated the next crop of newcomers while the original facilitators worked with a group of faculty on more advanced topics. In the third year, a new set of facilitators worked with the next crop of newcomers while I was meant to work with a group to work on funding opportunities related to AOER. During cycle two, however, COVID-19 hit, and one of the original directors left the university. Ultimately, the funding opportunities group was disbanded, as several participants dropped out owing to COVID pressures and changes in roles and priorities.

That last cycle was perhaps less fruitful than the earlier cycles, but it allowed me to sow seeds. Overall, the FLC allowed me as the library director and an OER advocate to make connections with faculty who believed in the purpose and benefits of OER and who in turn became advocates as well. In addition to the courses that were converted and the faculty minds that were changed in favor of OER, the FLC also created awareness and connections that would serve me during my dissertation research.

Starting the Harvest

As I noted in the introduction, faculty perceptions of AOER was not my original topic, but both the original topic and the final topic both focused on how faculty perceive AOER. I went the convenience sampling route and used

state-mandated course markings related to AOER to identify potential participants for my research (Lowe, 2022). I sent emails to over 70 faculty members who had or were at the time of the study's start teaching courses that employed AOER in some way. At the end of the recruitment period, 14 faculty agreed to participate (Lowe, 2022). Many of them, but not all, had participated in the FLC, and I attribute their willingness to participate in my study as an outgrowth of the connections built during the FLC. That in and of itself was part of the harvest from the amended soil: that faculty were willing to talk about OER and their experiences. They were, of course, afforded anonymity and confidentiality as part of their participation, but their willingness to sit down and talk about their experiences frankly was extremely beneficial across multiple domains.

The barriers the participants identified were familiar from my earlier peregrinations through the literature. Faculty reported that the front-end time investment was substantial, though they all indicated that it was worth it (Lowe, 2022). They all expressed concerns about the application of that labor, time and otherwise, towards tenure and promotion (T/P) documentation. At this time in the state in which I work, OER efforts – e.g., creating or adapting OER resources or converting courses to OER – are encouraged, and sometimes even incentivized monetarily, but they do not count towards T/P. While several of the faculty members who were interviewed were already tenured and not as worried about this facet of the process, several others were not, and they expressed understandable concerns in that direction (Lowe, 2022).

The quality and discipline-specific concerns also made an appearance in my research, concerns which persist from the earliest years of OER research. The study institution has several healthcare-related programs including nursing and pharmacy and grants doctorates in several

disciplines, from pharmacy to education to marriage and family therapy. A few of the faculty from those allied health disciplines discussed their concerns with highly specialized topics. The sample for my research also contained several psychology professors who commented on the lack of quality OER in several sub-disciplines of psychology, such as adolescent psychology. A political science professor who teaches in the Master of Public Administration program also complained about a lack of resources on specialized topics. All agreed that for more general, introductory, and/or lower-level undergraduate courses, there is a sufficient number of quality OER available. However, for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses, there was a marked dearth of titles (Lowe, 2022).

Another concern or barrier, which persisted from the early literature, is the availability of ancillary materials. Several of the faculty commented on the benefits of traditional commercial texts and platforms (e.g., Pearson MyLabs) that can interface with existing learning management systems (LMS) and provide students with bells and whistles that seem to enhance their learning experience. At least one professor in the physics department, who had converted from anti-OER to pro-OER early on, talked about the benefits of commercial test banks and how he did not have time to create new tests or problem sets for his students. Since that time, such resources have been built, but they are largely (and look) homegrown and are not always as “slick” and aesthetically pleasing as the commercial resources to which students have grown accustomed (Lowe, 2022). At least one professor commented on how students get used to seamless, robust experiences between platforms; when that experience becomes less seamless, engagement can be lost (Lowe, 2022).

Much like the earlier literature, not all of the faculty experiences with OER were bad. Many commented on how they liked how OER allowed

them to tailor or customize courses. They enjoyed how much control OER gives them over course content. Faculty can introduce and explore topics that interest them in more depth and in ways that they believe make better sense for their teaching styles and preferences. Some regard OER as a means to greater academic freedom. Admittedly, some faculty regard the implementation of OER titles within core courses (such as introductory math or science courses) as a violation of academic freedom (Lowe, 2022). It is worth noting this tension between the views of OER through the lens of academic freedom.

Though the earlier literature merely touched upon notions of saving students money, increased access, and equity, these topics permeated my dissertation. Even those faculty who expressed concerns about certain facets of OER – namely quality, availability, lack of ancillary materials, and lack of robust platforms – acknowledged that they appreciated how OER saved students money and increased access and equity. Without exception, all of the faculty talked about the benefit of improving student access to materials, particularly in terms of timeliness (Lowe, 2022). The sooner students have access to course materials, the sooner they can begin to engage with them. Faculty and instructors do not have to delay getting into the heart of their courses just to ensure that all students have access to the course materials. Faculty and instructors do not have to worry about providing copies or access to the course materials for their students. Students do not have to worry about falling behind, as they have timely access to materials, which supports persistence and retention. None of the faculty in my study denied the benefits of such access (Lowe, 2022). This improved access provided by OER enhances equity, leveling the playing field, and ensures that students are better able to start off equipped to manage their course work.

Beyond the Harvest – To Market

I realize that much of the previous paragraph is preaching to the choir, as it were. If you are reading this journal, you are probably (1) a practitioner who is familiar with OER, (2) a nascent user invested in learning more about OER, or (3) someone who has heard about OER and is open to learning more about its applications. In all these cases, I would argue that there is a receptiveness to – perhaps even a hopefulness for – OER as a way to improve student learning and outcomes in higher education, to increase equity and access to learning materials, and/or to enhance one's teaching.

It is, admittedly, a little disheartening to realize that those of us who advocate for and employ OER are still facing the same challenges we were a decade ago. However, in reviewing my dissertation and following the defense of the thing, one of my committee members pointed out how often I said during the defense that I was surprised by certain things that faculty participants said. The committee member indicated that I had certain expectations or assumptions that had clearly been challenged. I thought I had addressed all my assumptions in the earlier writing, but I could not deny that my committee member was right. I was surprised by how positive the faculty were about their experiences.

The earlier literature had predisposed me to expect that faculty would be largely negative about their experiences and the prospects of OER in higher education. However, many participants indicated that they felt that OER was the right direction in which higher education should head and represented a shift in how we support students. Many indicated that even when they were unable to fully implement OER in certain courses, they still supported the philosophy and principles of OER in little ways. Many participants felt strongly that advocating for and promoting those principles,

that philosophy, was as important as practicing them (Lowe, 2022).

Turning Over the Soil

The work is never really done. As soon as we equip a faculty member or instructor with the information, skills, and access they need, we encounter a new faculty member who needs that same support and education. We encounter new administrators and program directors and department heads who do not quite understand OER or how it can be implemented. We question ourselves and our work – how, with all our efforts, can people still be unfamiliar or unaware of OER? The fact of the matter is that being immersed in the thing, we do not always see the edges. We must continue to evangelize for OER, advocate for our students and faculty, seek resources and incentives – do the arduous work of amending barren soil, fertilizing it, tending to it carefully until we see the green shoots coming up, and the fields full and green.

And when we reap what we sow, we do our due diligence and turn the soil over again. We do the work to nourish and cultivate those same fields again and again so they continue to flourish. New methods for engagement, innovative technologies for improved access and platforms, novel resources and repositories are always emerging. We must pursue experimentation, testing these new opportunities to see if and how they contribute to the health and fecundity of our fields. We must share our failures and our successes, so our colleagues and compatriots also learn and thrive. This also allows us to cross-pollinate and produce new cultivars of existing resources, methods, and practices.

I am excited for this new journal! And I am excited to be a part of the inaugural issue. I believe strongly in open access and open educational resources. I am glad that this resource has emerged

to help spread the seeds of OER and foster their germination! Though the work never ends, though we must be vigilant against pests (the naysayers) and disease (budget shortfalls), though the work is laborious and intense, the harvest is always worth it.

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