Where Does Open Fit?: Investigating the Attitudes and Behaviours of University of Guelph Faculty Members on Course Material Selection and Use

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Rationale

Although McLaughlin Library had supported the adoption, adaptation, and creation of open educational resources¹ (OER) since 2017, the understanding of them on the University of Guelph campus was fairly nascent. While results from a Fall 2016 survey gave the institutional Open and Affordable Course Content Task Force (OACCTF) a great deal of student-specific data about how students were purchasing, using, and accessing textbooks and other course materials, this group lacked meaningful data about faculty perspectives and behaviour.

In June 2018, the Open Educational Resources Librarian (a secondment position) was created for the purpose of ascertaining how the university could move forward in terms of providing OER support. In order to ensure any future approach would be contextual and nuanced, the OER Librarian sought out the opportunity to conduct interviews with faculty members from across the university. It was hoped that connecting to faculty in this way would help her establish connections, learn more about disciplinary teaching needs and styles, and explore attitudes and behaviours of faculty when it came to selecting and using course materials in their teaching. This work would be crucial in terms of shaping the role that the library would play around the promotion and awareness of OER and other alternative models for providing course content. As the co-chair of the OACCTF, the Open Educational Resources Librarian provided the leadership and oversight for this project, collaborating with the library’s User Experience Co-op Librarian.

Methodology

Recruiting

Participants were recruited from a randomized list created by the Office of Institutional Analysis in December 2018, which provided the name and email for six women and six men in each of the University of Guelph’s colleges (faculties). We emailed the first woman and first man in each college, explained the project, and gave them a week to respond before moving on to the next person in the list. Our intention here was to go beyond the “usual suspects”² to get more nuanced, balanced perspectives from across campus. All told, we arranged to interview 12 participants. The interviews began in January 2019 and were completed in March 2019.

¹ Open educational resources are educational materials (including textbooks, streaming media, question banks, modules, simulations and more) that are freely available and openly licensed in a way that allows for wide use and re-use, including revising, remixing, and redistributing.
² Faculty who are already frequent users of library services and/or who may participate semi-regularly in interviews or other research conducted by the library.
Interviews

We used semi-structured interviews where each participant was asked a standard set of questions (Appendix I). We asked follow up questions to clarify responses and to dive into interesting and relevant points that were brought up by faculty members. We also allowed opportunities for participants to ask questions of their own, which sometimes led to enlightening conversations and further discoveries. All interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and analyzed. Both the OER Librarian and the User Experience Co-op Librarian participated in the interview process and each stage of analysis. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes.

Participants

Taken together, the 12 participants represented each of the institutional colleges. Six of these participants were women and six were men. We intentionally focused on those who were tenured or tenure-track. Despite the fact that universities are employing sessional instructors in ever-increasing numbers, we felt that the realities of such roles would make our request for an interview unfair. Not only would scheduling a time for all three of us to meet likely prove challenging (as sessionals are often teaching at multiple campuses and are not compensated for “extra” time spent on things other than teaching), but it was our impression that sessional instructors would likely not be given the autonomy to select course materials themselves. Participants had a wide range of teaching experience from 3-43 years.

Results

Types of Resources

Many of the questions we asked pertained to course materials. This is where we discovered user needs, concerns, and behaviours, with a view towards learning how OER can be used to suit their teaching goals. Overall, participants were using course materials that could be considered conventional, including textbooks, books, excerpts and book chapters, lecture slides, cases, videos, peer reviewed journal articles, magazine articles, case studies, and quizzes. These are mostly all materials that one would expect to see in a university course.

It was clear that textbooks were fairly popular among the faculty we interviewed, with the majority (8/12) of them having assigned one for their courses. Those that did not use textbooks taught more specialized upper-year and graduate courses where there tended to be no applicable textbook; there was a single participant who had taught a graduate course where they assigned a textbook. Almost all of the participants that assigned textbooks (7/8) stated that they were supplementary: that they would benefit student learning and participation, but were not absolutely required to complete assignments and tests. Only one faculty member required students to buy a textbook in order to participate in assessments that comprised part of the course grade.
There was a general sense among the faculty we spoke to that many of their students were not reading or purchasing the textbooks. Only 2/12 of the participants could state with any confidence that the majority of their students were purchasing the textbook. None of the faculty members we spoke to had consulted with the bookstore to see how many might have been sold there.

When asked how many students were purchasing their assigned textbook, some responses from the participants included:

- “My guess, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s around a quarter.”
- “I assume very few.”
- “I have a sense it’s on the decline.”
- “If I could ask students right now, I bet you out of 22 students, I bet you four of them have the textbook.”

It is important to note that most had no formal feedback mechanism in place to track how many students were or were not using the textbook. Only one faculty member said they intentionally surveyed students directly about course materials. A far more common approach from many of the participants (5/12) was to gather informal feedback from course evaluations (where students may have happened to reference the course materials), touching base with students in class about the readings, and through observation.

Electronic vs Print

The majority (9/12) of the faculty members expressed a preference for course materials in an electronic format over print. Their prevailing belief was that students were apt to use electronic devices (laptops, phones, tablets, etc.) and therefore would engage with the material better or more substantively. They also believed that electronic materials lowered costs for students, and therefore, increased accessibility. There was no acknowledgement of the fact that not all students have unfettered access to devices or that some lack confidence using these devices.

When our participants were asked about whether they had a preference for either electronic or print, some of their responses included:

- “Well, I want everything electronic at some point. You know because even in the e-book, they can make notes, highlight, and add things.”
- “If something was [available] electronically, I would be more inclined to use it than something that is in print.”
- “Students love electronic, especially the undergrads.”
- “I think the students would use them more if they were electronic, because they take their computer or phone or whatever they have with them. I think accessibility is key. They aren’t carrying their textbooks around with them. They probably don’t even bring them on campus...if they are not studying at home, then they really don’t have access.”
- “If I had to choose between two [course materials] and one was electronic and one wasn’t and they were equal in every other respect, I would choose the electronic one.”
● “If it’s electronically available, I am more likely to use it. If it’s something that is old and in print, I am more cautious about copyright...I probably wouldn't copy it and give it to the student as a class note or something like that.”

Despite the clear preference of faculty members for electronic course materials, a number of participants (3/12) noted that their students either often or sometimes preferred print. This meant that sometimes students would opt to purchase hard copies of the course text (even if it was available in an electronic format) or that they would print off hard copies of resources available in electronic formats, such as book chapters or journal articles.

Among those interviewed, there was a general lack of understanding when it came to the way that certain electronic materials were licensed. For example, several faculty members noted that students could buy cheaper electronic copies of their textbook, believing that the reduced price was associated with printing costs (rather than because they were essentially renting the content, rendering it unavailable on a permanent basis). Another faculty member remarked:

● “If they [students] could somehow access electronic versions of these if they are available, I think it's more cost efficient, user friendly in the sense that they have it with them. And they will have it with them for the rest of their life if they want to have it. Wherever they move, they can take their library with them.”

All of the faculty members assumed that because the students had paid for electronic content, that they would be able to access it in perpetuity.

Cost

All of the faculty we spoke to were concerned about the cost of their course materials. Three participants had even worked with publishers to create a customized version of an existing title so that it would be cheaper for their students. However, a sizable majority of faculty members could not provide us with an exact amount required for their resources, opting to provide estimates instead. Of those that had a cost for their course materials (9/12 in total), more than half expected students to pay more than $50 for a single course. The most expensive resource among participants was estimated to be around $200, but the average cost was approximately $100 per course. Some courses had additional costs on top of course materials, such as studio fees or costs for off-campus events.

We asked all participants what they considered to be a reasonable price to pay for course materials. This question resulted in an average of $100. The lowest suggested price was $40, and the highest was $150. None of the participants said zero, revealing an expectation that students should have to pay something to access “quality” resources. Some of the responses to this question included:

● “If there’s a good textbook, I'm willing to get them to pay 60-70 dollars. When textbooks get to more than that, then I'm a little bit apprehensive about having them be mandatory.”
• “I don’t know... 80-100 dollars would be quite reasonable to me. You probably can’t get most of them [textbooks] for that anymore.”
• “I don’t think you should have to spend more than 100 dollars. That is a lot of money for a student. It’s probably more important for them to spend it on a good computer, or iPad, or some method of linking to the internet, and accessing CourseLink [LMS].”
• “I would say 100 dollars. 5 courses, 500 dollars. I think I’m under 100 dollars?”

Three faculty members mentioned that there were no costs for their course materials because they were available from the library’s course reserve system.

• “One of the biggest problems we have is getting students to actually read, and if the textbook is way too expensive then you are making it even harder for them. Now if it’s in the library, there is no real excuse, I mean they have access to it [the textbook].”

Frequently, we found faculty members conflating “free” and “accessible” as interchangeable concepts. Not a single faculty member acknowledged issues of accessibility associated with materials provided through course reserves, such as lack of copies available to meet demand or insufficient loan times.

Other Factors

There were other considerations that were brought up when participants were evaluating course materials, though none with the same prevalence as cost and format. Other factors included the writing level / suitability for students (4/12), currency (6/12), Canadian context (3/12), and the diversity of voices (2/12) as it pertained to Indigenous and/or gender identity. Several participants also mentioned the influence of serendipity: stumbling across relevant materials in their own research or reading processes, or learning of recommendations through another colleague or a student.

Behaviours

Coordinating with Colleagues

When asked whether they ever coordinated with colleagues in selecting course materials, the majority of participants (8/12) had never collaborated or had never considered doing so. Among those who had collaborated, we saw three different types of coordination: at the course level, at the departmental level, and at the curricular level.

Despite how infrequent coordination was, it was clear that faculty understood the benefits of sharing. When asked this question, many participants recognized this as an important or worthwhile act, even if they were not currently engaging in it. The fact that the majority of participants were not actively collaborating or had never ever considered doing so reveals that faculty tend to think of their courses in isolation and not necessarily as part of curriculum scaffolding or overall degree progression.
Changing and Re-evaluating

The majority of the faculty members (8/12) re-evaluated their course materials every year. Two did so whenever they taught their current course (which was not annually) and the last two said they only did so when there was a newer edition of the textbook. Every participant said they were satisfied with their current course materials: six completely and six with caveats (meaning the materials were not perfect for their needs but were the best they had found). All participants still looked to update and improve them nonetheless.

Most faculty members engaged in a significant amount of labor when it came to finding appropriate course materials to use for their class, as they wanted quality and engaging resources for their students. This runs counter to common narratives that faculty are resistant to change or that they will continue to do things they way they always have in the classroom.

Conceptions of Open

While the majority of the conversation focused on course materials more generally, we were also strategic in asking a number of questions related to OER. Faculty were split, with six having heard of it and six who had not. After ascertaining whether they had heard the term (and if so, where), we asked participants to hazard a guess on what they thought it meant. A sample of their responses included:

- “All the material in the course would be available online.”
- “I go on a website and I check publications, papers, textbooks, and it’s open source. I can download it."
- “Some free way of having resources, is that about right?”
- “I think it means something institutional...accessing tools, techniques, information, that can be used across disciplines, across platforms. It could be in class or online.”
- “Things that are accessible and open to students.”
- “Faculty being open about sharing their teaching materials with each other.”

The quotes above reveal that OER are often not thought of beyond affordability3. Overwhelmingly, responses made mention of digital or online, revealing that faculty think open refers to online, rather than permissions. One of the interesting elements of these answers were the many ways that faculty conceive of open: for some it means open source, for others it means collaborative. There was some interesting divergence in these answers: while some focused solely on resources, others talked about practices or teaching.

It proved difficult for faculty to wrap their head around opportunities or challenges relating to OER, likely because this question felt more hypothetical to them. In terms of opportunities, faculty appreciated that OER would ensure that more students had access, that content could be localized, that alumni could retain access, and that the digital format could provide some much needed interactivity. In terms of challenges, faculty perceived that the quality of OER might be less than desirable and that it would require an additional time commitment to evaluate.

3 Though faculty did not always use the term affordable or refer to cost explicitly, our analysis showed that they often conflated accessibility or availability with free.
and curate. An unfamiliarity with OER-specific tools and other technologies used by creators was also noted.

The thing that was particularly interesting about the challenges faculty brought up was that these concerns ran counter to what they were already doing. For example, while extensive time commitments were brought up by several participants (4/12) as a drawback to using OER, pretty much all participants were regularly analyzing their course materials and vetting everything already. While three faculty members articulated their discomfort with technology, those same participants noted the virtues of using electronic materials, including its perceived alignment with student preferences.

**Other Interesting Observations**

A number of other interesting observations came up in our conversations. While these did not emerge with enough frequency to be considered themes, we found them salient for better understanding how to support faculty in the use and creation of OER.

Faculty are dealing with information overload. While several faculty members (4/12) remarked that they would find it challenging to find and evaluate open options—with one remarking that “the thought of me going and doing it and all that kind of stuff...it’s paralyzing”—two pointed out that they even found searching for information in general to be overwhelming, that they did not know where to start or what to type in. While faculty are characterized as subject experts, it is clear that this way of knowing does not always translate into searching effectively or having an awareness of search tools.

The value of course materials was not necessarily tied to the content itself. While a couple of participants mentioned that they appreciated other aspects of the textbook beyond content (such as adaptive quizzing software or suggested pedagogical activities), two others implied that there was an advantage to the format itself. These faculty members mentioned that the format of the textbook itself (as opposed to discrete readings compiled in an LMS such as CourseLink) signifies an authority to students, especially when they are in first and second year. Since students are familiar with textbooks from their high school days, they tend to see it as a “one stop shop” to find out what they need to know. One provided further context, noting that “there is something about the textbook that gives the course a kind of gravitas.” This same participant noted that once they experimented with curating a list of resources for an introductory course, rather than using a textbook and said:

- “*Without the textbooks, they [the students] are like, what kind of course is this? Where is the book? Where is that gravitational centre?*”

These observations provided us with some further insight into the reasons why so many instructors may continue to rely on a single text.
Conclusion

While one of the oft-cited challenges about using or creating OER tends to focus on the additional labour such a shift will require, it became clear in our discussions that many faculty on campus are already performing the labour of open. More specifically, faculty are putting together modified versions of a textbook, creating their own content to fill in gaps, and curating readings. They are frequently (re)evaluating course materials and for the most part are receptive to student feedback on whether current materials are suitable or sufficient. This finding was further borne out by their answers to a question about what they would do if they had to teach a course for which no materials existed: the majority of participants (10/12) said they had already encountered this scenario at some point in their career and that their solution was to curate existing content or further expand on their course notes to generate new content.

Despite this tension between the perception and reality of faculty, it is crucial to treat their concerns as valid. While the majority of faculty members were excited or intrigued once they had learned what OER were, they continued to display some reticence around quality and that they might not feel comfortable sharing things that they have created with an audience beyond the classroom. Two participants had misgivings around how using OER would impact their ownership of the course, while another explicitly mentioned that encouragement to use OER without attendant support structures would compound issues around lack of time, as it reinforces administrative downloading and the expectation that faculty should always be prepared to do more. One of them further emphasized that

- “Money's not gonna do it, right? It's not the compensation in terms of money. It's time.”

Another participant mentioned that “people [tenure committees] don’t really value the development of a textbook.” Both of these quotes indicate very real, valid concerns which are tied to the material conditions and structures that exist at the university. However, instead of seeing such concerns as an intractable barrier, they should be acknowledged as an opportunity for relationship building and for shaping the future structures around OER support to be responsive to these concerns.

To that point, to increase the likelihood that OER use and creation as seen both doable and desirable, faculty should be met where they are. A “stealth advocacy” approach should be used, bringing OER organically into discussions that arise at UGFA meetings, senate meetings, local teaching conferences or communities of practice, and other relevant spaces as necessary. Faculty must view OER as part of existing institutional, departmental, or personal values and approaches, rather than an add-on requiring additional labour.

Recommendations

The last question we asked participants was what support the institution could provide to make it easier for faculty to use OER. While some of the recommendations listed below are provided directly from faculty, some of them represent themes and ideas that were elicited when analyzing interview transcripts.
1. **Have a designated point person for OER support.** While a few faculty members mentioned the importance of self-serve materials, almost all (8/12) were equivocal in recognizing the importance of having a singular point person to support them with finding, curating, and evaluating materials. Participants thought this person should also be providing training and support for using open tools and fostering connections across campus. For this reason, it is crucial that the OER Librarian position continue. If this is not possible, make it explicit through job responsibilities, promotional materials, and outward facing communications which library staff members can support them and how. Having these staff embedded in New Faculty Orientation, the Course Redesign Institute, Faculty Writing Retreat, and other existing faculty-centric programming ensures that new and existing faculty members will know what supports are available and how to access it accordingly.

2. **Create a faculty education program around fair dealing and copyright.** It is clear from the conversations we had that faculty largely do not understand copyright or licensing as it pertains to their own work or that of others. A systematic approach should be taken to develop faculty understanding of what copyright is, what it means for usage and sharing, and the importance of fair dealing in the classroom.

3. **Scaffold knowledge of OER through all faculty points of contact.** It is evident that faculty have many points of contact for their teaching and curricular needs: the course reserve team, the Educational Leadership in Teaching Excellence (ENLITE) program, educational developers, academic program managers, and fellow colleagues (both within and outside the institution). It is crucial that OER knowledge is built up by engaging in an initial training session among relevant groups, and followed up by proactive, regular communication.

4. **Generate a workflow to ensure faculty are supported throughout the OER lifecycle.** Faculty using traditional, commercial textbooks or other resources (such as ancillary materials) spoke to the ease of using these tools: a seamless interface, curated selections of titles sent right to them, the ability to create customized texts. If OER is to be seen as a viable alternative, a workflow needs to be created and supported by the various stakeholders across the university (McLaughlin Library, Office of Teaching and Learning, Open Learning and Educational Support, and Communications and Computing Services) to ensure that faculty are supported throughout the OER adoption / adaptation / creation process. Given that faculty needs differ greatly depending on personal (teaching style, previous experience) and material conditions (existing materials in a particular content area), a cohesive approach is required to reflect areas of expertise and improve the scaffolding of efforts.

5. **Support and encourage open practices, not just open resources.** As conversations around OER exist in many ecosystems (social justice, affordability, improved pedagogy), it is important to acknowledge and champion the work that faculty are already doing in these areas. The library and the university must foster an environment that encourages openness in teaching and learning practices, not just in research.
Appendix I

1. Demographic information:
   a. What is your name and department?
   b. How long have you been working at the university?
   c. How long have you been teaching for? (ie. Have you taught somewhere other than UG?)
2. Which course(s) are you teaching this semester? Please provide the course code.
   a. What types of course materials did you assign for these course(s)? (ie. articles, textbooks, practice quizzes, etc.).
   b. Are you satisfied with your current course materials?
      i. Why? Why not?
3. How did you decide which materials to choose for your courses this semester?
   a. Is this your normal practice?
   b. In general...
      i. does electronic versus print factor into your decisions?
      ii. how often do you change or reevaluate your course materials?
      iii. do you ever coordinate with your colleagues when selecting materials?
      iv. what other factors shape your selection decisions?
4. If you had to teach a course for which you couldn’t find a suitable textbook, what would you do?
   a. Have you ever created your own course materials (ex writing your own textbook, creating your own videos)?
      i. Why? Why not?
5. On a scale of 1 - 10, with 10 being extremely difficult and 1 being extremely easy, how would you rate the process of finding course materials?
   a. Why?
6. In general, what purpose(s) do your course materials serve? (ie. supplementary, tied to assessment, etc.)
   a. Do you have an idea of how many students purchase or use them?
   b. Have you received any student feedback about your course materials?
7. Do you know how much your course materials cost per course?
   a. What do you consider a reasonable amount for students to pay for course materials?
8. Have you heard of the phrase “open educational resources”?
   a. Where did you hear this?
   b. What does this mean to you?
   c. Could you see any benefits to using OER? How?
   d. Could you see any negatives to using OER? How?
e. Would you ever considering using OER for your courses? Why or why not?
9. If the university wanted to make it easier for faculty to use open educational resources, what could we do to help?
10. Do you have any comments or questions for us?
11. Can we get back in touch if we require more information or clarification?