wisewire

Dispelling OER Myths & Adding Value

Technology moves quickly.

In music, MP3s have overtaken CDs. Smartphones supplanted flip phones. And storage has seen discs replaced by thumb drives and now clouds.

The Open Educational Resource (OER) movement was born in the era of CDs and flip phones but has evolved as a vibrant repository of high-quality content available for educators to use "as is" or adapt for specific classroom needs.

What exactly is OER today, and how can instructors use it in their 21st-century curricula? Let us update you and recommend vetted resources to get you up to speed.

OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

How Did OER Start?

As part of a broad cultural shift toward open knowledge and peer collaboration, the Open Educational Resource (OER) movement emerged out of Germany in the late twentieth century with the University of Tübingen's publication of a video series of online lectures. The OER movement launched large-scale on the U.S. stage in 2002 through MIT's offering of 32 free online courses. In the two decades since, a wealth of high-quality OER materials has been developed, changing the landscape of resources available to educators.

Despite this landmark growth, the concept of "OER" is frequently misunderstood by education professionals who are not on the front lines of OER development. Here, we'll explain what open source materials are, debunk some common misconceptions around them, and dive into how teachers can optimize their use of these materials.

What Is (and Isn't) OER?

OER resources are any material in the public domain or introduced with an open license intended to increase access to knowledge. These materials—which range in format from text, video, and multimedia, to full courseware and textbooks—are open for sharing and often available at no cost.

OER resources carry licenses that grant users the rights to remix, adapt, customize, and then distribute the content for any purpose, so long as proper attribution is applied. The most common licenses for OER are Creative Commons (CC) or GNU General Public Licenses.

5 Common Misconceptions

OER is sometimes misused as a catch-phrase for widely accessible materials. However, OER describes a particular category of resources that are defined by license and usability.

1 All free online content is OER.

Free content is not necessarily *open* content, and vice versa. People often conflate *free* (no cost) with *free* (openly licensed), but cost and licensing are separate issues. It is only when resources, at a minimum, grant the user the right to adapt and share that content, that they can be considered OER. An author can give away a resource for free while still retaining copyright and restricting use. On the other hand, some OER providers charge a small fee for their open digital content to offset the cost of technology, or to support updates and improvements to the OER material to maintain high quality.

Similarly, not all online content is open, and not all open content is online. Some educational resources on the web are copyrighted and cannot be modified and shared. And OER materials are available not just through websites but also in print, DVD, and other non-online formats.

2 "Openly licensed" is the same as "in the public domain."

Both openly licensed and public domain content are free to access and reuse. However, content in the public domain has had its copyright ownership waived by the author, or its rights have expired over time. This content can be repurposed without attribution. On the other hand, open licenses grant users broad rights to modify, reproduce, and distribute content, but the author ultimately retains copyright ownership and receives attribution.

3 Free means poor quality.

The notion that free resources mean low quality is outdated. Today, organizations like the Gates Foundation, 20 Million Minds, and the Hewlett Foundation, among others, philanthropically fund the creation of OER materials. This allows project teams to work closely with academics and specialists who have expertise in educational product development and the peer-review process, resulting in high-quality content.

4 It's difficult to ensure OER materials are being used as intended.

As with any potential copyright infringement, the use of downloadable OER materials is policed via an honor system. However, tools are available to ensure license allowances are clear to users. For example, Microsoft offers a simple add-in for embedding CC licenses into Office documents (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint) that ensures even the most basic materials carry complete license details.

5 Permission is needed to use or repurpose OER.

One of the great conveniences of OER is that it does away with the traditional permissions process of old. By definition, OER materials are accessible, which means use does not require specific permission from the copyright owner. To remix, reuse, or repurpose OER, users must only abide by the specific license restrictions; nothing more, nothing less. Creative Commons licenses, for example, explain in detail what constitutes appropriate attribution for use of the content.

Value for
Institutions & Educators

The broad applications of OER can empower the teaching community to self-serve, innovate, and shift toward a more inclusive and flexible pedagogy.

Investments and Payoff Value

Institutions can maximize use of OER while minimizing content development costs. The main investment with developing curriculum using OER is incurred during the research and definition phase (searching for and selecting resources that achieve intended learning outcomes).

Tracking the use of OER and applying proper attribution may be another expense for institutions, depending on their platforms and processes. However, time and money spent efficiently in these stages can pay in the long run.

Opting to curate OER materials bypasses the lengthy and costly permissions process. Digitized OER affords the convenience of automated attribution through licensing, moving from a system of permissions management and payments to one of tracking attributions. Some institutions find that the permissions budget can be reallocated to invest in an automated credit tracking system—a sustainable tool that lets teachers conveniently optimize OER use at their institution.

Institutions can also opt to create complementary products by modifying existing OER to meet teaching and learning needs (note that these by-products may not be free or open on their own). In this model, institutions may decide to share a portion of the proceeds from their by-products with the original OER author, or use the revenue stream to offset and invest in the costs of OER curation or attribution technology.

Some institutions are working with cutting-edge models where the cost of course materials is included in tuition, so students are assured of having all class resources without the pressure of deciding between spending on a textbook versus groceries. OER makes this achievable and affordable.

Getting Started

OER means instructors don't have to build curricula from scratch. Curriculum planning can be easily customized—from year to year, from class to class, or from student to student for a particular course—when teachers have a library of OER resources on hand. In this content-rich environment, instructors can use or modify OER content to supplement and enhance existing curricula. There are two recommended approaches to integration:

1 "Bite-sized" resources

OER provides instructors "bite-sized" content—like short videos, worksheets, lesson plans, and labs—to enhance or differentiate their curricula. Content curation sites like MERLOT II, YouTube EDU, Wisewire, and Khan Academy are rich repositories for instructors seeking this type of content.

2 "Full-plate" resources

Over the past few years organizations and agencies have recognized the need for large-scale OER resources, such as whole curricula that span subjects and grades. This content can be adopted and then modified to serve specific student populations. Some examples of these efforts include OpenStax from Rice University, MIT OpenCourseWare, and the Open Learning Initiative from Carnegie Mellon.

At its core, OER is about making educational resources more accessible. The abundance of high-quality open source materials available today empowers educators and publishers to do just that. There are clear payoffs to curating, adapting, and using OER. Educators can utilize these resources to build a stronger repository of materials with a model of sustainability that strengthens the future of OER educational content.

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