Democracy's College Podcast

The Possibilities and Challenges of Open Educational Resources

Announcer Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at occrl.illinois.edu.

Host Nina Owolabi: Hello. Thank you for joining us today on Democracy's College. I am excited to have a conversation with Heather Blicher, a coordinator of librarian services for two campuses at Reynolds Community College in Richmond, Virginia. She is an OER enthusiast and educator, as well as the diversity and inclusion advocate. Heather has presented locally and nationally on the topics of open educational resources and distance librarianship and is a recipient of the Association of College and Research Libraries' Distance Learning Librarianship Award.

Most recently, she serves as a curriculum developer and presenter with the ACRL RoadShow, a traveling workshop collective that brings high-quality, professional development focused on advancing learning and transforming scholarship. Thank you for being a part of today's program, Heather.

Guest Heather Bilcher: Thank you for having me.

Nina Owolabi: Well, let's dive in here. Open educational resources, otherwise known as OER, are materials and resources often described as publicly accessible for teaching and learning. Can you share how you became involved in OER and some of your experiences in advancing efforts to offer OER in community college contexts?

Heather Bilcher: Sure. You know, I've been a librarian for many years in public and academic libraries, and at some point I came upon a position where I was given the opportunity to really do a deep dive into OER. It was at Northern Virginia Community College and my focus was on online library services. But I had some really great people that I worked with that knew a lot about OER, and so I set about going online and researching it and taking free webinars and just trying to absorb as much information as I could about it.

And, you know, eventually I became some sort of an expert at my college, at the time, and part of what I started doing for my job was providing training and programming, and even one-on-one consultations with teaching faculty who were interested in OER: beginners, but also people that had worked with OER because they already had an established OER program there, but people that were looking to expand on that. And so that became a part of my job that I just really enjoyed.

Heather Bilcher: And I would say during my time there and the positions that followed, one of the things that I just really enjoyed the most was developing programming for faculty, mainly because I think there's a misunderstanding out there that because OER is free for students, that it's somehow easier to use for the teaching faculty. And really OER, in all honesty, requires time and a lot of support. And so, being a librarian, I'm often in a supportive role, and so that's what I always try to do and trying to get teaching faculty excited about the opportunity to use OER. And also being a part of, you know, Virginia there's a really great academic library consortium called VIVA, and they have a lot of wonderful open initiatives. And so I was able to get support through them and they continue to develop different programs there as well.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you for that. At two-year and four-year institutions of higher learning, key stakeholders in bolstering OER on many campuses are librarians. However, just as you mentioned, there's little attention paid to this kind of critical segment of educators in advancing equitable student outcomes. As a librarian, can you share your perspective regarding the benefits and challenges that you alluded to that are associated with employing OER?

Heather Bilcher: Yes, definitely. And thank you for bringing that up because sometimes I'm not sure why librarians can get left out of the mix. And of course every institution handles OER differently, but librarians in particular, a big part of our job, traditionally, is information literacy. And the short definition of that is being able to find, evaluate, organize, and communicate information in all different formats, and that's what we often teach our students. When academic students come to the library and they're looking for resources, we teach classes in information literacy, actually.

And so that is such a big part of OER, and we really want to put those skills to work. And we're also called upon to assist instructional designers and teaching faculty in developing course content. And I really see us as being a great link between resources and those that are teaching the OER courses because it's a lot to manage, there's a lot involved with OER. And that is what I would say is the first challenge of OER—there's a lot involved, and I would say the biggest challenge is time.

So, like I mentioned earlier, even though OER is free for the students, it does require financial support from the institution because of the time that takes to track down that OER, adapt it, remix it, and even to create your own, you know, original OER that you want to use in your course. There are so many different ways to go about this, but when it all boils down, it's all about time. And I personally think that's *not* a big ask. And here's why: because the benefits really outweigh the challenges. And I would say generally what you hear, you know, the benefits of cost for students, no or low cost for students.

For teaching faculty, it's academic freedom. They have that ability to, you know, instead of being held to one particular textbook where there's a certain order of chapters and a certain content that's in that textbook that costs hundreds of

dollars that every student is required to buy, instead they can be very specific and they can say, "Okay, you know what? I'm going to use this piece of OER and this piece of OER, and I'm going to have it scattered throughout my course within the learning management system. I can adopt an entire textbook that's open, and then I can change around the order of the chapters. I can only use one chapter." It gives you a lot of freedom in how you plan your course and develop that course so you're no longer reliant on those traditional textbooks.

And that leads into something I think that's even more important, which is representing marginalized and diverse voices in the content. Because, you know, traditionally textbooks are written by white males, Western voices, and, you know, there are just so many other perspectives out there that aren't included when they could be. And when I think about students, especially students that attend community college, I think they want to hear those different voices.

Success in college, yes, it's about finishing a course, and passing a course, but how else can we promote students to be successful?

It could be making sure that we use diverse images in the learning management system within each online course so that they see a reflection of who they are rather than a stock photo, but it can also be, "Hey, you know, I'm being exposed to some really interesting perspectives and voices that I've never been exposed to before, people that have information about a topic that previously might have been ignored." And so, it's such a *huge* opportunity to target those voices and to bring them in and be inclusive. For me, if I'm excited about a topic and the content, then I'm going to be so much more successful in completing that, and that's how I think about our students.

Nina Owolabi: One thing I would just say is kind of in my research of OER, there's this talk about accessibility, but there's accessibility in kind of another way that isn't always incorporated or maybe even discussed in these larger conversations, and if you'd be able to speak to that that would be awesome.

Heather Bilcher: Well, are you saying we normally talk about accessibility as in alt texts and things like that?

Nina Owolabi: As in costs, so costs being what makes OER accessible for students -

Heather Bilcher: Oh, okay, I see.

Nina Owolabi: I don't necessarily hear about the accessibility for students with disabilities as you're kind of mentioning the alt text or captioning or transcription, screen readers, you know, things of that nature.

Heather Bilcher: Sure. So, yeah, like you said, of course we talk about OER being accessible because students are often hit with so many textbooks that they have to buy

and they're having to deal with that cost. But then there's also accessibility in regards to things like how do we make the content accessible on the very first day, so that when the student opens up the learning management system, they log into their online course, they can access it right then and there?

That can be because the professor has already uploaded an open textbook or other pieces of OER, because we're very concerned about accessibility like, you know, including alt text. If we're using videos, we're concerned about having transcripts and captions. You know, when you're building a course and you're using OER, you're very diligent about making sure that before you upload those pieces of OER, you make sure that they're accessible in those ways so that students with various disabilities are able to access that content.

Nina Owolabi: Frequently, OER proponents share accessibility—reduced or no cost—as the chief advantages of using OER. Yet there *is* more to consider relative to issues of *access*, such as culturally relevant and decolonizing materials, universal design, et cetera. As community colleges serve significant numbers of racially minoritized students, students with disabilities, and students from low-income, underserved communities, what role can OER have in facilitating more equitable student experiences and outcomes for the most marginalized and vulnerable student populations?

Heather Bilcher: Well, I think it's a really great opportunity for teaching faculty to take a look at the course content that they're requiring their students to read and interact with in their courses and decide whether they would like to be more inclusive in the voices that they include. It's been shown that textbooks are traditionally written by privileged Western voices, and if there's an opportunity to include a marginalized or diverse voice in the content of a course, and moving away from that sort of traditional, privileged approach, you know, I think it can make a *big* difference to a student.

Just as if a student opens up their course online and they see a stock photo of a group of Caucasian people, and that's not who they are, they might not be too excited about the course. And so a simple way of dealing with that is using diverse and inclusive image repositories instead of your traditional stock photos, so that at least when they open up that course online, they see diverse people looking back at them. But then, when you think about all of the different courses that are out there that *could* include diverse voices, in *all* subject areas, and I'm not, you know, I'm not an expert, but I do have an interest in a lot of different subject areas.

And it's amazing to read books written by people with diverse voices. You know, you would have to take a very specific course like African American American literature or something like that when, you know, why not include those voices in a traditional American literature class? You know, you could bring this up for so many different subject areas. And so, I think making a course *exciting* to students of, you know, marginalized backgrounds is a *key* component to helping

them be successful. All of those things are *so* important because it's just better to plan ahead and make sure that your content is accessible.

And it's so much easier to do that, I believe, with OER than with other resources than to wait for, you know, as often happens in a community college, or really any other educational institution, is sometimes they wait for a student to fill out a request with—the offices have different names, but, you know, the offices that basically handle those accessibility requests. And then those people reach out to the teaching faculty and say, "Hey, you need to make sure that your course is accessible." In this way if you approach it head on, right from the beginning, before that content is loaded up, then you have no issues and everyone from the very first day can access that content.

So, I guess what I'm trying to get at is that there are a lot of different ways that OER makes a more equitable experience, and I'm glad we're talking about it.

Nina Owolabi: What call to action would you offer faculty, librarians, staff, and administrators on implementation of OER at community colleges?

Heather Bilcher: Well, this relates back to something that I said a little bit earlier that OER is open. It's free, right? OER is free, but, in fact, for the time and the effort that it takes to actually make sure that that OER is ready for student consumption, it requires the administration to support and fund those OER efforts. I myself have experienced being in a position where OER was just sort of an add-on to my position. So, if you have time, go ahead, do some OER work with faculty. But I honestly think that there should be dedicated staff to organize and push these initiatives forward. OER isn't a fad. It's not going away and we need to treat it like that.

And then, you know, funding for the teaching faculty who are the ones that are building these courses and putting their passions into these courses by gathering content and adapting it or creating that original content—that takes time. And whether that is time away from the classroom or stipends to work on this and complete it during the semester, like a summer session or something like that, there has to be some sort of exchange so that faculty feel appreciated and not overworked and burned out, because with OER comes work and we don't want to lose our passionate teachers.

And also, I do want to say that I've been seeing positions that *are* specific to OER being dropped and not funded during this extraordinary time with the current state of the world with pandemics and the continuing social injustice. And this is a time when OER could really have a *positive* impact on our students, especially our community college students who are being rushed to move online and adjust to so many things. And if we had administrative support to really pull these initiatives together, I think we could really make some massive improvements to collaboration on OER in our different areas and to make things happen.

Nina Owolabi: Just as you were talking about COVID-19 and just the impact of students immediately having to switch to online and being a difficult thing for many students to do, what role do you see OER playing to support those students?

Heather Bilcher: Well, I know when the pandemic first started, it was a way to very quickly bring that content online so that students could access it right away. Some students never buy the textbook, and they won't admit to it, but they just can't, and they won't. So, they will set up a schedule with a friend so that they trade off the textbook between each other; each one has it a couple of days a week. They will use library copies of older textbooks that we have on reserve.

Well, when all the schools suddenly closed, and the libraries weren't opened, they didn't have access to those. So, you know, OER is a way to cut out that middleman and let them have access, especially, you know, we're not really sure how things are going to move forward. My library is currently open. Many other academic libraries are open, but we just don't know what's going to happen with COVID. So, if we make that push now to support OER, I think it could have a really positive impact on the students, especially those that were relying on other ways of accessing that textbook.

Nina Owolabi: That's actually been a point that I've been just wondering about, especially as we think about the publishers and, you know, those relationships with colleges and whatnot. What tension do you see there, particularly, like, with the publishers and almost like OER cramping their style, like, what tension do you kind of see?

Heather Bilcher: That's a good way to put it: "cramping their style." You know, I want to focus on the positive because I'm very aware of colleges where people working with OER have a really positive relationship with their bookstore, and they work together and collaborate to come up with a plan because, hey, if students aren't buying the textbook, and they're getting an old copy from the library or just sharing it with a friend or not buying it at all and just trying to pass the course without it, then those books aren't being sold in the bookstore, either.

OER, there are so many different variations of it, but in some cases, well, and this relates to accessibility, some students prefer to have a physical copy of a textbook. And so, in cases of that, the bookstore has options and ways to print off that textbook but offer it at a much lower cost than it would be from a traditional publisher. So working with the people that are organizing these efforts, they can have students coming into the bookstore and buying those things. And I've seen a lot of collaboration happening and I've been reading about it, so I think it's something that I hope will continue, and we'll just continue to expand on that because those of us that work with OER, we never want to be hating on the bookstore. That's not what it's about.

OER is so much about collaboration. And it's so important for people all over the institution to work together: teaching faculty, librarians, bookstore, administration, and even students. In community colleges, I haven't seen this as

much because we have, you know, nontraditional students who are, you know, have families, they're working jobs, they're also taking courses, so they may not be as active in certain initiatives. But I've heard about four-year institutions where students who are actually a part of creating OER or a part of advising groups that, you know, are working together with the faculty and other groups that are intent on creating OER. So, it really is like a big group of people collaborating together, so we want the bookstore to be a part of that.

Nina Owolabi: What have I not asked or what have we not talked about kind of regarding OER and how it can support equity?

Heather Bilcher: Well, I think one thing I forgot to bring up that I was going to is that OER is not perfect. It's definitely helping us make strides in creating a more equitable experience for students, *but* there are challenges, like lack of culturally relevant OER, unintentionally biased content. And, like we talked about, there's that need for diverse content creators. So OER is not perfect and so that's something I would say, the administration and everyone else involved in OER gets involved in it, you can quickly overcome these challenges.

I don't want to give the impression that you can just go out and randomly pick a book—although there are some really great resources for that—and just be done. You still want to use those information literacy skills that librarians happen to have and really look at that content and make sure it fits what you want. And if it doesn't, then you need to take that time to make it culturally relevant, make sure there isn't this implicit bias.

Nina Owolabi: What is the starting place for a faculty member, or maybe even administrator, who might be interested in introducing OER? What is a step that they can take because the process at times can feel very overwhelming. But what is the step they can take to kind of ensure that quality? What should they even be looking for when we're thinking about quality OER materials?

Heather Bilcher: I would say if they don't have anyone at their current institution that has OER knowledge, like if they've checked with the library, they've pulled their teaching faculty and no one has any knowledge of OER, which at this point probably won't happen because I think, you know, as you said before, libraries have really been taking on key roles. And one of the things that we try to do is create websites or guides that can be accessible online that really break it down because there *is* so much overwhelming information about OER. So, if that doesn't exist on their campus or at their institution, I would say to reach out to another institution that they respect and trust.

In addition, there are so many places to go to get information about OER. And I can mention a couple of those, but I also want to just say as a caveat that the list is so long. It's so long, so I don't want to show favoritism. But, just off the top of my head, I would say they could read more about OER with the BC Open Campus Textbook Project, the OER Commons. And, throughout the world, everyone is using OER, but Canada is really doing so much in this area; that's

why I mentioned the BC Campus Open Project. The Open Education Network—that used to be called the Open Textbook Library—that is a really great resource that I recommend to teaching faculty who are, you know, a little bit intimidated about finding pieces of OER and kind of putting them together.

If they want to see what other teaching faculty have put together in a full textbook form, they can go to the Open Education Network, and they can see listings and covers of these textbooks with a description. And it gives the information about the author, where they work, what institution, when it was written, and then it also has reviews that are written by teaching faculty from *other* institutions that are basically giving it five stars or two stars. So, it's very open and you can see honest opinions about things there, so that's a good place to start, too.

Nina Owolabi: Thank you so much, Heather.

Heather Bilcher: Thanks again. Bye.

Nina Owolabi: Bye.

Sal Nudo: Tune in next month for the Democracy's College podcast, when Rita Ali and Jennifer Foster talk about the Workforce Equity Initiative funded by the Illinois Community College Board. Ali is the vice president of workforce and diversity at Illinois Central College, and Foster is the deputy executive director of the Illinois Community College Board.

Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.