

**The Significance and Benefits of Open Education in Academic Libraries**

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**Abstract**

This article describes what Open Education (OE) and Open Education Resources (OER) are and explains how faculty members working with librarians in an academic library can help students, and communities learn by providing their course materials for free online. The purpose is explained, the significance, and the benefits as well as ideas for helping to promote OE and OER.

*Keywords:* open education, open education resources, academic libraries

### **Introduction**

The purpose of Open Education (OE) is to provide knowledge freely. While OE has a different definition than Open Education Resources (OER) the two do go together. So both will be discussed here. This article will look at reasons faculty members working with an academic library would want to give away course material as well as some of these benefits of doing this.

Faculty members can help students prepare for the classes they teach by sharing their course material. Sharing material prior to taking a class can help a student decide if the class is one they are truly interested in before signing up for it. It can also help them prepare for the class and possibly help them perform better. A motivated student can go through the course material ahead of time and think about areas that they have questions about. They can take notes, and perhaps do a little research of their own so when it comes to class time they can get more out of the class helping them to gain further knowledge.

### **Open Education an Open Education Resources Definition**

Wikibooks (2009) defines OER as, “digitized materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and re-use for teaching, learning and research”. OE on the other hand refers to education institutions or organizations that offer their education resources freely to the public. It seems, however, that it would be difficult to have OE without OER.

OE goes along with the mission of libraries in that it provides information and knowledge to people for free. Providing information and allowing people the opportunity to gain knowledge without cost helps our society. It is important to allow people equal opportunity to education. This benefits our communities and our society as a whole. Knowledge gained

through education helps build better societies. Academic libraries working along with faculty members provide the perfect place to offer OER.

### **Significance and Benefits of Open Education**

Faculty members want their students to succeed and academic libraries want to help students with their studies. By offering course materials online for free faculty members and librarians can help students gain insight into the class before the students take them. This will allow the students to gain knowledge about the topic and possibly learn more from the class than had they not had this opportunity. It seems that the information that needs to be taught can be too much for the class time allotted at times. In this regards, OE is a great way to give the students a head start on the classes and possibly open them up for a more involved and in-depth learning experience. Students will have time to think about questions that will enhance their learning.

As stated by the National Center for Education Statistics (2011): “between 1999–2000 and 2009–10, prices for undergraduate tuition, room, and board at public institutions rose 37 percent, and prices at private institutions rose 25 percent, after adjustment for inflation”. With education costs rising, OE becomes even more important if people are to continue their education. While OE can be used to enhance an education that is typically paid for or gained through scholarships and grants, it can also be used instead of college for people that cannot afford to go and are not able to get assistance to help them. Another way to use OE is to enhance your current work skills. Employers cannot always afford to pay for employees to return to school to learn new skills, or to brush up on ones they have. OE is a way for employees to do this and make themselves more valuable to their employers. In todays world every little bit of knowledge gained without extra cost to employers can only help.

Even though faculty members may not gain much from people that just want or need to learn without spending money to attend traditional classes, there are still hidden benefits in knowing that they are helping to contribute to the greater good of their communities and society by providing their course material freely online. Offering course material freely will help faculty gain visibility to potential students as well as the community. Academic libraries, on the other hand, could work with local communities and businesses to provide help for people that are using OE to replace a paid education, or to enhance their skills. An OE outreach program to their local communities and businesses would be a great way for academic libraries to gain support. A program like this could have greater impact than just helping people learn.

### **Greater Awareness of Open Education**

Awareness about OER's existence should be available not only to potential students but to the community as a whole. Academic libraries have the ability to help make this happen. They can post the OER on their Web sites, providing a central location where the material can be found. Faculty can either upload the material or provide it to the library to do so. The academic library can then make sure that the material is preserved in case changes occur. These libraries and librarians can also find ways to promote OE. They can print brochures that explain what class material is offered online and how to access it. Librarians can go to local bookstores and community events with these brochures and other material about the benefits of OE to promote and showcase the OER that they have available. An added bonus to this is that academic libraries would also be promoting their schools by doing this.

### **Open Education Gaining Ground**

The statistics posted on Read Write Web (2011) show that MIT's open course ware (OCW) is being used more now than ever before. MIT is the forerunner in providing OE. They

have been doing so for ten years now and judging from the statistics, it is still gaining in popularity with 1.9 million zip files downloaded in 2010. Out of all the 17.5 million visits to their OCW only 275,000 of them were from the MIT community. This shows how wide their outreach is when it comes to their OCW. It also tells us that OE has the potential to reach people from every corner of the world.

Putting librarians and faculty members together when it comes to OE can further the movement even faster. Faculty members have a built in support system with librarians. Librarians have the ability to share OER by posting them on their websites and they can promote it to the students and the community.

### **Conclusion**

There are several advantages for faculty members that provide their course material online for free. When knowledge is disseminated and can be accessed at no charge more people can learn. This in turn helps students that want to take these classes as well as those that just want to gain passive knowledge or perhaps even greater knowledge of a topic of interest, regardless of the reason. It is a trickle down effect, the more we help ourselves the more we help each other. We help ourselves to the knowledge that is provided by the faculty members and then this knowledge is then applied in our daily lives, which in turn helps others.

Academic libraries can play a big role in helping faculty members distribute their course material. The libraries can host the information, keeping preservation copies when material is changed or dropped. This reduces the risk of losing material that may need to be retrieved later. With the assistance of outreach from librarians, faculty members can reach more people to use their OER.

Resources

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