AN OVERLOOKED BENEFIT OF OER: SHOWING STUDENTS WE CARE

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ABSTRACT

Advances in technology and cultural shifts towards a more open sharing of information afford college instructors additional methods to establish a powerful teacher-student connection. By creating and curating Open Educational Resources (OER) for students, instructors customize the learning experience for their students and show them that they care about student success. Human connection is a critical part of the learning process and students are more likely to be engaged, participate, and perform better in a course when they feel that their instructor cares about them. Sharing and explaining to students the time, care, and effort that are spent by instructors curating OER material might have a tremendous impact on students' attitude and engagement with the subject.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, OER, instructor caring, faculty concern, teacher-student relationship

1.0 INTRODUCTION: An Overlooked Benefit of OER: Showing Students We Care

Educational Resource (OER) materials have grown exponentially, especially in the last decade. OER is defined similarly by Hewlett Foundation, Creative Commons, and UNESCO as "teaching, learning, and research materials in any medium – digital or otherwise – that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions" (UNESCO, 2021). Faculty have used OER to substitute high-cost commercially printed textbooks to improve students' access to textbooks. Figure 1 shows that within a 10-year period between 2006 and 2016, textbook costs have increased by about 88% while the cost

for all other items has increased by about 22%. Such an increase in absolute, as well as relative terms to other goods and services, is disturbing and has led to many attempts and efforts by faculty to incorporate and curate OER materials in their classes.

Figure 1 College Textbook Costs Index from 2006 to 2016

Consumer price indexes for tuition and school-related items, not seasonally adjusted, January 2006–July 2016
January 2006=100
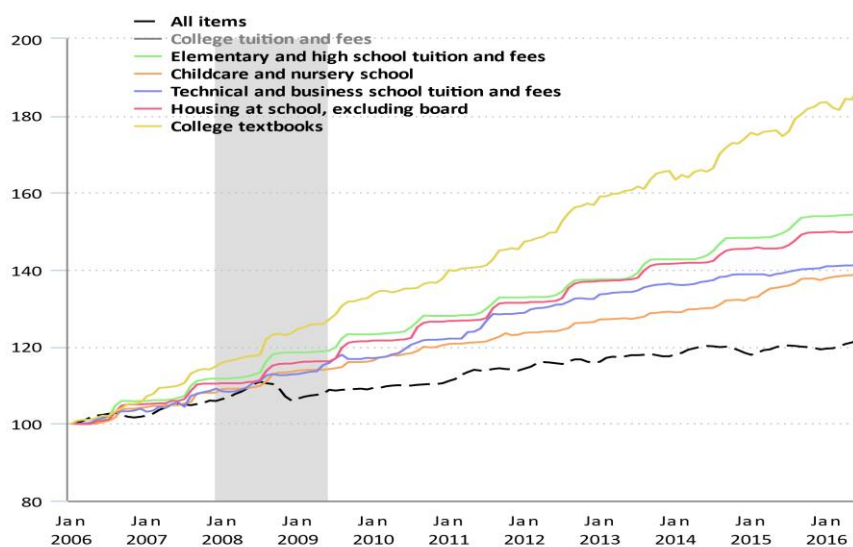
Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.
Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Note. This graph was produced by the Bureau Labor Statistics Bureau of Labor Statistics, from The Economics Daily "College tuition and fees increase 63 percent since January 2006."

The implementation of such OER materials has been welcomed by students as data suggests from surveys run before and during COVID-19. According to an anonymous survey distributed in 83 campuses across 19 states and Washington DC during Fall 2019, 63% of 500,000 participants reported the negative impact of the increasing costs of textbooks (Nagle & Vitez, 2020). According to a CUNY wide survey distributed during Spring 2018, 55% of the respondents reported cost savings as the major benefits of using free accessible materials (Brandle, et al., 2019).

During COVID, in a survey distributed to students enrolled in one of the CUNY Community Colleges in fall 2020, students were asked an open-ended question to capture their challenges and benefits with the OER material used in their courses. Among the benefits, cost-saving was a significant recurring theme in students' feedback. About 53% of the students' comments referred to the cost-savings benefits from the use of OER materials (Tila, 2022). Table 1 extracts some sample comments provided by the students relating to their difficulties during COVID-19, as well as the importance of cost savings and feelings of empathy by their professors in their courses.

Table 1: Some Students' Comments regarding Cost Savings on Textbooks

Sample of Students Quotes
"Consideration and empathy to the circumstances most students face during these unprecedented times"
"During COVID I could not afford it do free material helped a lot"
"During the pandemic, students can't find a job to work and no income, it can make it easier to our life if the courses using free materials"
"Saving on cost for textbooks was a huge plus! I'm currently unemployed during this pandemic so having not to worry about experience textbooks was a blessing."
"Free access to material at all times and more money for food"

Note. These are some comments of 383 students out of 1,175 participants of an anonymous survey distributed at Kingsborough Community College during Fall 2020 (Tila, 2021).

While cost savings and other factors are significant, even more so during COVID-19 when students also report being insecure about the future and financial instability, an important dimension that yet needs to be explored by faculty implementing OER material is instructor empathy. Its importance is also mentioned by one of the students shown in Table 1. Sharing and explaining to students the time, care, and effort spent by their instructors in curating such free material might have a tremendous impact on students' attitudes and engagement with the subject.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW: The significance of showing students you care

Research shows that students are more likely to be engaged, participate, and perform better in a course when they feel that their instructor cares about them, in part because they appreciate someone caring enough about them to put in the time (Eliason, n.d.). When asked about what they love most about the best teachers they've ever had, students often point to the ones who showed that they cared. This is consistent with Watson's (1996) theory that learning is not only a cognitive process but also an interpersonal human process. Faculty compassion and caring have also been shown to have an enhancing effect on student performance (Torregrosa et al., 2016).

Knowing students' names, being available after class hours, and attending student events are some of the foundational and more traditional ways to build a rapport with students and express care (Briggs, 2015). More recently, Girton (2018) encourages instructors to use empathetic marketing to focus on the core emotional needs of students and demonstrate how the institution can meet those needs in order to show students that staff genuinely care about them, their success, and the myriad of additional life obligations they might be juggling. Currently, advances in technology and cultural shifts towards a more open sharing of information now afford college instructors additional methods to establish that connection.

More than at any other time in history, Open Educational Resources (OER) allow instructors to customize the learning experience for their students. Technology, coupled with the increasing availability of openly licensed content that allows for easier sharing of content, provides a plethora of customizable options available right at students' fingertips. Unlike many one-size-fits-most traditional textbooks, OER enables instructors to mix and match

chapters, tailor supplementary resources and personalize assessment materials, as well as easily add timely videos and news articles. Additionally, instructors may also choose to create original text, and multi-media and interactive content.

Among the primary benefits of OER adoption often cited is the access that it provides for college students, both in its affordability and in its ability to be available to all students on the very first day of class or even sooner ("What is OER", n.d.; Brandle, 2019). For example, OpenStax has estimated a cost-saving of $1billion for students who used Openstax books from 2012 to 2020 (OpenStax, 2020). Another benefit has been perseverance as shown by lower withdrawal rates in postsecondary courses with open textbooks (Clinton & Khan, 2019). By allowing instant and continuous access to all students, the use of Open Educational Resources supports equity and flexibility and represents a shift in educational practice ("What is OER", n.d.).

An additional benefit of OER not always highlighted, however, is the impact and significance of the instructor's time, effort, and energy that is expended to curate and create the materials to make the course the best it can be for students. Why is this so important? It shows students that the course was designed with their specific needs in mind, and in doing so shows students that the instructor cares about them. Showing students that the instructor cares and the efforts used in cultivating OER materials, allows students to understand and acknowledge the instructor-content relation, which in turn may help the instructor-student relationship. This might create a suitable environment to nurture student-content relationships and open education. Such perceptions were identified by a qualitative study capturing faculty's perceptions and recommendations on OER (Kauffman, 2021).

3.0 FINDINGS: Tell students that you had them in mind

Instructors show concern for their students when they take the time and effort to curate and create OER to help students succeed. In order to fully reap the rewards of this effort, and to elucidate this connection for students, instructors must inform students about the process and rationales involved. Some helpful tips:

1. Ensure integrated messaging: The course should not only be designated as low or no-cost in course catalogues or on registration forms, but the syllabus and other course materials should explain what Open Educational Resources are, why the instructor chose to use OER, and the instructor's involvement in the creation and curation of the material.

2. Establish an atmosphere of care: On the very first day of class, the instructor should reiterate the thoughts above, making sure that students understand that the effort was made for their benefit. For example, the instructor may clarify that part of his intention was to make sure that all students have access to course materials regardless of cost. Similarly, the instructor can highlight that she chose an online platform for course materials and assignments to make it easier for students, for example, to access the materials on the way to or from work without having to carry around a heavy textbook.

3. Highlight the customization aspect: Throughout the semester, remind students that the course material was designed specifically with their needs in mind and was intentional in the amount and types of resources included.

4. Request student feedback: Ask students to provide feedback about their experiences using the OER and related materials. It is especially important to see if they identify the same benefits that the instructor anticipated at the outset and/ or any unanticipated drawbacks.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interestingly, while the rise of OER adoption today correlates directly with the increased technological advances that make its utilization possible, its impact also aligns directly with some of the most foundational theories of student success and engagement that have anchored pedagogy over the last few decades. For example, among the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," distilled by Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda Gamson (1991), is the importance of establishing contact between students and teachers as vital to students' success, in part, because instructors show their concern when establishing these relationships. Similarly, the culturally responsive teaching framework set by Wlodkowski and Ginsburg (1995), and, in particular, the inclusion condition of the framework, encourages creating an atmosphere where both teachers and students feel respected by and connected to one another. Regardless of time or place, human connection is a critical part of the learning process and the act of curating and customizing OER material for students is a new way to strengthen the critical instructor-student bond that facilitates optimum learning. The nurturing instructor-student bond by also working on the instructor-content relationships might create a ripe environment to foster student-content relationships and open education.

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