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The Opportunity of Now: Adopting Open Educational Resources in the Sociology Classroom and Beyond

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Abstract

There is no better time than now for sociologists to adopt open educational resources (OER), and sociology as a discipline is well positioned to lead. Adopting OER takes seriously the well-documented financial challenges faced by many students, supports classroom and campus goals of equity and inclusion, and allows for increased instructor flexibility. However, OER are not without their difficulties and limitations. This conversation article suggests four ways for instructors to begin or advance their utilization of OER: Ask your librarian, start with an open textbook, join the existing OER conversation, and incorporate OER within one's broader commitment to inclusive and empathetic pedagogy.

Keywords

OER, inequality, equity, inclusion, textbook affordability

During the 2020 spring semester, after colleges and universities had moved online in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a student emailed one of us (Francis) asking if there was an alternative to an upcoming book that was assigned for the class. The book was a paperback trade publication that cost about \$30 if purchased new from an online vendor. Sensing that more was at stake than met the eye, Francis asked the student why she wanted an alternative. The student had lost her job due to the pandemic and did not know how she would afford the text, modestly priced as it was. Francis had already enlisted the help of the university's subject librarian, coauthor Hill, and was already using several free, online textbooks for the class. With Hill's help, Francis quickly identified a text that the university had the rights to that was very similar to the paid option that had been assigned. Francis adjusted the syllabus for the whole class to allow for the use of this free alternative, knowing that if one student had this need, others would as well. The alternative was well received and accomplished the same learning outcomes intended with the paid text.

There are several reasons why there is no better time than the present for sociologists to adopt affordable and/or open educational resources (OER). The COVID-19 pandemic altered pedagogy in numerous ways, including opening many instructors up to online and electronic resources in ways they had not previously considered. Even as many institutions return to "normal," there is a golden moment to lean into the lessons learned during the pandemic rather than retreat to old ways of teaching. This is also a moment in higher education when many institutions are facing declining enrollment and financial strain, and thus, they need all possible tools to attract and retain students. Because OER reduce barriers for many students, as we discuss in the following, they can be part of these

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recruitment and retention efforts. And finally, because of the proliferation of OER services and supports, including the expertise possessed by many university librarians and other support staff, instructors should feel well supported in pivoting to OER in ways large and small.

Not only is this a golden moment to consider OER, but sociology as a discipline is also uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of OER adoption. In his 2001 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, Joe Feagin highlighted several facets of sociology that we think incline sociology toward OER (Feagin 2001). First, sociology is naturally broad and inclined to interdisciplinarity, which opens it to collaboration. Second, sociology has always had what Feagin terms a “countersystem” tradition, which makes it more inclined to challenge and disrupt existing structures and hierarchies. Finally, Feagin argues that sociology in the new century ought to reclaim its commitment to social justice. Almost 20 years later, another ASA President echoed this point. In her 2019 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, Mary Romero proclaimed, “Sociology has, from its inception, been engaged in social justice” (Romero 2020:1).

In this conversation, we argue that adopting OER has at least three benefits: It takes seriously the well-documented financial challenges faced by many students, supports classroom and campus goals of equity and inclusion, and allows for increased instructor flexibility. Our example at the beginning of this conversation speaks to each of these benefits. First, identifying a free alternative text acknowledged the financial needs among students that were only exacerbated by the pandemic. Second, this alternative text, aside from being of no cost to the student, was also available in multiple formats: online, on the library’s eBook platform, and downloadable as a PDF file. Third, having access to a no-cost, immediately available alternative text offered flexibility to the instructor to make a midsemester change that is much less likely with traditional, pay-to-play options. As we demonstrate, sociologists can use OER in various ways from texts to classroom activities. However, as we also discuss, OER are not a panacea and might not always be appropriate or without limitations and challenges.

WHAT ARE OER?

According to the website of the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), OER

are “teaching, learning, and research resources that are free of cost and access barriers, and which also carry legal permission for open use” (SPARC n.d.). Although other definitions exist, this understanding of OER is broad, clearly stated, and extensible. OER and the conversation around them shifts rapidly, and this definition frames the concept *openly*. This definition has three parts: (1) “teaching, learning, and research resources”; (2) “free of cost and access barriers”; and (3) “which also carry legal permission for open use.” The first component, “teaching, learning, and research resources,” encompasses virtually all of what is used to support teaching, learning, and research—in and out of the classroom. In the realm of teaching and learning, OER can encompass everything from open textbooks and syllabi, such as those found in most OER repositories, to cutting-edge technologies such as AI-generated content, open pedagogy-based assignments, and VR anatomy simulations. As we discuss in more detail in the following, open teaching and learning resources go far beyond student-facing resources like textbooks to include assignments, activities, assessments, and more. Similarly, “research resources” is a broad-based term that includes everything from open-access academic journal articles to open data sets to an entire Open Science Framework, such as the Center for Open Science.

The second characteristic of OER according to SPARC (n.d.) is that they are “free of cost and access barriers.” In this sense, a resource qualifies as open if it is available to the public for free, in perpetuity, via the internet. This component is most simply illustrated by presenting examples of common digital education materials that do not meet this criterion. For example, a video lecture hosted on a university’s learning management system (LMS), such as Blackboard, Canvas, or Moodle, is free to currently enrolled students, and maybe to other users of the LMS, but not to the public. Another example is an online homework system that is bundled with access to a digital textbook. Many faculty think of the homework system as “free” to their students because it comes with the textbook. However, if the student is unable to purchase the textbook, they must either purchase an access code or they will be unable to complete their class assignments. Finally, consider an online article published in a peer-reviewed journal. The article may be accessible to someone enrolled at or employed by a university through a library subscription to the journal, but it is behind a paywall for the general public. Instructors may have good

reasons for using each of these types of resources, but they are not open according to the SPARC definition. It is worth noting that “OER” does not have to mean an item that is exclusively online. Although most OER are available online, some open textbook publishers, such as OpenStax from Rice University, offer print versions at cost because they know that many students still prefer to read textbooks that way.

The final component of the definition, “legal permission for open use,” refers to the type of license that the authors of OER use to ensure that their work is available for free. Most authors use a Creative Commons (CC) license, which Green (2017) argues provides the legal foundation of the open education movement. CC licenses are licenses that use copyright to enable sharing rather than restrict it. While copyright is typically applied in an “all rights reserved” manner, CC licenses are applied in a “some rights reserved” manner in which the rights that are reserved are up to the author to determine. There are several different types of CC licenses. As librarians, Hill and Overmier have witnessed many faculty confuse online commercial textbooks with OER, which stems from a misinterpretation of the “O” in “OER.” Access to commercial online textbooks is subject to the typical copyright restrictions, which means they are not licensed to be used freely. Rather, they are to be accessed in the way that the publisher specifies, which means that student access is often limited to a single semester or that libraries are barred from purchasing an online copy at all.

(AT LEAST) THREE BENEFITS OF OER

Since the term “open educational resources” was coined in 2002, there has been almost two decades of increasingly sophisticated research about OER perception and impact on students and faculty in higher education. Much research examines one or more aspects of what has come to be known as the COUP framework: costs, outcomes, use, and perceptions (Bliss et al. 2013). A helpful starting place for understanding OER research are two meta-analyses of OER research conducted by John Hilton, one for the period of 2002 to 2015 (Hilton 2016) and the other for 2015 to 2018 (Hilton 2020). The first analysis covers 16 studies with over 45,000 respondents. Hilton writes that while many of these studies are limited methodologically in ways that might introduce pro-OER bias, he nonetheless concludes that the overall consensus of

peer-reviewed OER research for this period is that the use of OER does not negatively impact student outcomes and that faculty and students alike perceive OER as comparable in quality to commercial textbooks (Hilton 2016). In the second meta-analysis, Hilton examines 36 OER studies published between 2015 and 2018 involving over 120,000 respondents. Again, Hilton finds a general consensus across these studies that student achievement is the same or better with OER and that a majority of the students and faculty had a positive experience with OER and would use them again (Hilton 2020). In light of these conclusions, Hilton asks: “If the average college student spends approximately \$1000 per year on textbooks and yet performs scholastically no better than the student who utilizes free OER, what exactly is being purchased with that \$1000?” (Hilton 2016:588). In what follows, we review three benefits of adopting OER based in the existing literature.

Benefit 1: Removes Course-Level Financial Barriers for Students

Early in the spring semester of 2020, one of us (Francis) had a student stay behind after a class. The student, through tears, shared that she was recently homeless and was currently experiencing food insecurity. Over the coming days, Francis worked with others on campus to get her the immediate support she needed, which included a renewed effort on campus to support food-insecure students. This student’s situation should come as no surprise, even at elite colleges and universities (Jack 2019). According to The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, rates of food insecurity among students at four-year institutions ranged from 33 percent to 42 percent between 2015 and 2019 (Baker-Smith et al. 2020). This situation has, if anything, been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Hope Center surveys collected during the pandemic suggest that nearly three in five students experienced basic needs insecurity (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice 2021).

It is in this broader context of student need that the cost of textbooks has come into focus (Hendricks, Reinsberg, and Rieger 2017; Hilton 2020; Jhangiani and Jhangiani 2017; Martin et al. 2017), with many students reporting behaviors like not purchasing required textbooks or materials, altering course selections due to the cost of course materials, and dropping or withdrawing from courses due to cost. According to a 2016 report

from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, textbook costs rose 88 percent between January 2006 and July 2016, more in percentage terms than college tuition, fees, or student housing (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Some estimates suggest that textbook costs have risen over 1,000 percent since the late 1970s (Popken 2015). While textbook costs may seem negligible compared with tuition or room and board, the average student spends \$1,240 to 1,460 per year on textbooks and supplies (Ma et al. 2019), which is about three-quarters the cost of tuition at an average two-year institution and one-quarter the cost of an average four-year public institution (Jenkins et al. 2020). Furthermore, evidence shows that the high cost of college textbooks disproportionately affects historically underserved students, making textbook costs a social justice issue (Cox, Masuku, and Willmers 2020; Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter 2018; Jenkins et al. 2020).

Perhaps the most straightforward reason for sociology instructors to adopt OER is the reduced cost it means for students. While the pedagogical and academic merits of OER might be debated (a topic we explore in the following), there is no question that adopting no- or low-cost texts and materials saves money for students, many of whom are already under great financial pressure. From among all the potential benefits of adopting OER, students report appreciating the reduced cost the most (Ozdemir and Hendricks 2017). In one study among community college students (Ikahihifo et al. 2017), researchers found that a majority of respondents put the money saved from using OER toward other school expenses, and about 30 percent of respondents applied the money toward day-to-day expenses like paying bills or buying groceries or gas. Estimates for the accumulated cost savings of using OER range widely, but one recent calculation puts the global estimate at up to \$1 billion (Nyamweya 2018). Addressing textbook and course material costs alone will not make campuses equitable, but knowing of the ongoing efforts on many campuses to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (Clauson and McKnight 2018), the possibility exists for continued alignment of OER with principles of social justice (Lambert 2018), not least of which is socioeconomic disparities between students.

Benefit 2: Contributes to Educational Equity and Inclusion

Cost savings, while important for equity, are not the only benefit of replacing commercial textbooks with OER: OER support learning outcomes at least

as well as commercial textbooks. As Guring (2017:243–44) notes, it might be worth it for a student to spend \$150 on a textbook if the evidence shows that the student will benefit in the long run: “What if a poor student saves money by going OER but earns a grade lower and hence is beaten out by a higher scoring affluent student?” However, as Hilton (2020) finds in his second meta-analysis, 95 percent of research published about OER finds that open resources do not lead to lower student outcomes, putting the onus on those who choose texts and materials that require significant student financial outlays. Not only do OER save students money, but they also can reduce barriers to student success.

Research on student perceptions of open textbooks consistently demonstrates that students find OER of equal or better quality than commercial texts (Bliss et al. 2013; Hilton 2020). OER have been well received among various student populations, including those at public universities (Clinton 2018; Watson, Domizi, and Clouser 2017), a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution (Jenkins et al. 2020), and community colleges (Grewe and Davis 2017; Hilton and Laman 2012; Ikahihifo et al. 2017; Vollman 2021). Benefits go beyond perception. Studies have consistently shown no diminishment in student learning with OER (Hendricks et al. 2017; Hilton 2020; Jhangiani et al. 2018; Ozdemir and Hendricks 2017), with some studies showing gains in student achievement (Grewe and Davis 2017). There is evidence that students using OER are more likely to access course material in the first week of class, engage with the course material more overall, and find OER content easier to obtain (Vollman 2021). Importantly, there is evidence that underserved students, including Pell grant recipients and students from historically underrepresented groups, show increased grades with OER and decreased rates of dropping, failing, and withdrawing from courses (Colvard, Watson, and Hyojin Park 2018). However, while OER have many benefits, certain student-level characteristics still play much greater roles overall in student success than the use of OER (Winitzky-Stephens and Pickavance 2017), an important reminder that OER alone are not a panacea for all that ails higher education.

Benefit 3: Increased Instructor Flexibility

Regardless of the benefits of OER, course texts and materials are ultimately the decision of instructors, who value the ability to choose their own materials (Harley et al. 2010). Adopting OER does not restrict

this instructor choice but, rather, opens new possibilities. For example, one of us (Francis) chose a textbook for a course that was free to students as an eBook through the library's holdings. It became clear after a few weeks of the course that the book was not working as intended. Because the students had not purchased the text, Francis was free to drop that eBook and pivot to other resources in the middle of the term. With a traditional textbook, an instructor may have felt committed until the end of the course, only being able to explore other resources the next time teaching the class. On this note, there has been extensive research into faculty perceptions of and experiences with OER, which show that faculty have generally had positive experiences when using OER (Jung, Bauer, and Heaps 2017) and show a willingness to use OER (Belikov and Bodily 2016). And faculty—like students—are motivated by the opportunity to save students money (Belikov and Bodily 2016). But what about the other benefits and drawbacks of OER from the faculty point of view?

One particularly helpful article regarding faculty perceptions of OER is Belikov and Bodily's (2016) analysis of the qualitative responses of 218 faculty members from a broader study of 2,144 faculty about perceptions of OER. While faculty were generally open to OER, several barriers to adopting OER emerged in the qualitative responses. The most common response category was faculty seeking more information about OER, which suggests the need for additional information rather than an unwillingness to consider OER. A second major barrier among faculty in this study was a difficulty in being able to find and access OER, again suggesting a gap in access rather than an unwillingness. Related concerns raised by faculty in the survey were a lack of time to evaluate new resources, concerns about a perceived lack of quality, and the beliefs that no OER resources existed for their disciplines. Finally, as already mentioned earlier, the authors found a tendency among faculty to conflate OER with digital-only resources, a misunderstanding that resulted in some faculty pitting OER against more traditional modes of instruction with which they are comfortable. The promise of the study is that despite several barriers, most challenges are easily remedied with additional education and support.

If faculty are educated and equipped with the opportunity to teach with OER, there is evidence that pedagogical practice itself can be positively impacted by OER. In some cases, adoption of OER shows the increased potential for new teaching and

learning behaviors (Jung et al. 2017; Lane and McAndrew 2010; Petrides et al. 2011), and OER offer a flexibility that allows instructors to be more responsive to student needs (Pitt 2015). Additionally, as detailed in part by Jenkins and coauthors (2020), there are many other benefits of OER that go beyond those stated thus far, including promoting social and educational goods like social inclusion (Bossu, Bull, and Brown 2012), multicultural competence (Lin and Wang 2018), public engagement (Scanlon 2014), classroom ecology (Blyth 2014), organizational culture (Cox and Trotter 2016), digital proficiency (Ramírez-Montoya, Mena, and Rodríguez-Arroyo 2017), and inclusive practice (Hockings, Brett, and Terentjev 2012). Faculty can also take heart that they are not alone in using OER: Almost half of universities are using an OpenStax textbook (Ruth 2018). At bottom, evidence shows that faculty are willing to use OER, but they need support and assistance (Martin et al. 2017), which is the topic to which we now turn.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SOCIOLOGISTS

The ways that OER can be integrated into the classroom are so numerous, it can be overwhelming for educators who are just getting started. We offer four suggestions to sociologists as places to start.

Suggestion 1: Ask for Help at Your Library

Librarians have been involved in the open education movement since the beginning, and libraries remain an ideal place for sociologists to explore OER. As professionals who typically deal with textbook vendors, librarians have witnessed the escalation of the prices of textbooks and other educational materials and are aware of the effects on students and universities. Librarians have often devised creative workarounds for financially vulnerable students, like textbook reserve programs and controlled digital lending. Librarians are generally eager to remove barriers to educational access. For any sociology instructor, there is likely someone in the institution's library who is willing to help curate OER and navigate licensing to fit the instructor's needs. Many libraries have an OER specialist, but even without a specialist, subject librarians can help locate materials that will fit their needs. The library can provide course content and help navigate OER in the following ways:

Navigating OER repositories and library content, curating content to support faculty needs. One of us (Overmier), in her role as a university librarian, began offering an OER consultation service to overcome the biggest barrier that faculty at her campus encountered when exploring the OER landscape: being overwhelmed. By utilizing a series of structured interviews and a collaborative content-mapping tool, Overmier co-curated resources that are aligned with the course content the teaching faculty have used in the past. For faculty, working directly with a librarian has the added benefit of better utilizing resources that are already in the library collection that the faculty member may have overlooked, in addition to adding OER. Such resources are often referred to as “open and *affordable*,” which typically include content such as library-owned eBooks, journal articles, and low-cost, open-source courseware such as OpenStax Tutor. Library resources, although not technically classified as OER, can play an important role in making a course more equitable in that they do not pose additional costs to students.

Providing textbook reserves (print or digital). Traditional course reserve models have long allowed faculty to provide copies of academic works for students to review in the library for limited borrowing periods. These models are changing and expanding in the face of growing textbook costs and electronic availability of materials. For example, Marymount University, where Overmier previously worked as a university librarian, began offering a comprehensive textbook reserve program in the spring of 2017 through which the library was able to purchase at least one copy of every required textbook. The textbooks are available to be checked out by students for up to two hours at a time. The library also purchases digital versions of the textbooks as they are available. To cite another example, UNC-Greensboro is focusing on digital textbook acquisitions, having adapted its policy from two other universities: “The Libraries purchase electronic versions of textbooks *when unlimited access is available*” (emphasis added; UNC Greensboro Libraries 2018). They use this statement to point out how major publishers will not often sell unlimited access versions of their textbooks, and they introduce students and faculty to the idea of adoption of OER and other library-licensed or owned materials.

Helping faculty locate relevant eBooks that are already in the collection or purchasing content to support each course. If the library does not own a book that an

instructor would like to have electronically available to students, faculty can ask for it to be purchased. Coauthors Francis and Hill have placed several orders for eBooks over the last few years to supplement students’ reading lists. When they were unable to purchase an eBook version, the next best thing was to purchase or borrow the physical book from another library to provide limited digital access to required sections.

Helping instructors navigate licensing. The complexity of licensing and copyright is ever evolving. Earlier in the article, we mentioned CC licensing. This less restrictive licensing comes in many varieties but allows users some degree of all the following uses, commonly referred to as the 5Rs:

- **Retain:** the right to make, own, and control copies of the content (e.g., download, duplicate, store, and manage).
- **Reuse:** the right to use the content in settings like classes or study groups, on websites, in videos, and so on.
- **Revise:** the right to adapt, adjust, modify, or alter the content itself (e.g., translate the content into another language).
- **Remix:** the right to combine the original or revised content with other material to create something new (e.g., incorporate the content into a mashup).
- **Redistribute:** the right to share copies of the original content, your revisions, or your remixes with others (e.g., give a copy of the content to a friend).

The level of use permitted is noted by a series of acronyms combined to represent the author’s reserved copyrights (e.g., CC-BY indicates that reusers may distribute, remix, or adapt the material so long as attribution is given to the creator). When content comes from a commercial source like a journal, book, or movie, the author protections are more extensive, and use falls into only two main categories: fair-use-and-free or permitted-use-by-fee. Fair use, unfortunately, is not delineated clearly like CC use. The courts continue to arbitrate copyright infringement cases with confusing and sometimes inconsistent results. Librarians who specialize in copyright keep current on the nuances of legal theory to support faculty in using and providing copyright-protected content in classes.

Connecting instructors with other faculty who are working with OER. Not only can an OER or textbook affordability specialist answer an instructor’s

particular questions, but they likely can also connect the instructor to other faculty who are working to replace their commercial textbooks. Coauthor Overmier, in her previous role as Open Education Librarian at Marymount University, saw this need and began incorporating faculty panels into her OER workshops, thus connecting faculty to each other directly. She built a directory of open courses at Marymount with the affiliated faculty, creating a strategic initiative to encourage faculty to find each other. The long-term goal was to create a community of practice at her university and the surrounding universities to support more systematic approaches to textbook affordability.

Suggestion 2: Use Open Textbooks as the Gateway to the Possible

There are innumerable ways to provide “free” resources to students, but open textbooks are the ideal place to start. Open textbooks can be found on several repository sites, among the largest and most used being MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching), OER Commons, OpenStax, and Open Textbook Library. Instructors can search by subject or education level to find the best fit. One of us (Francis) has been using the Introduction to Sociology textbook through OpenStax for several years, which is available online, as a free PDF download, or as a well-constructed hardcover book for \$29. Another option for Introduction to Sociology courses is *A Sociology Experiment* (<https://www.sociologyexperiment.com/>), an online collaboration of about 20 sociologists where students can download chapters for \$1 each with no minimum number of chapters required. Many open textbooks, just like their traditional counterparts, come with additional pedagogical materials such as premade slides decks, quiz and test banks, interactive and virtual resources, and LMS compatibility. Instructors are understandably particular about their materials, but the argument can be made that as long the quality of an open textbook is comparable, the burden of proof is on the decision to choose a traditional textbook, not an open one. In this way, we return to Hilton’s (2016:588) aforementioned question: “If the average college student spends approximately \$1000 per year on textbooks and yet performs scholastically no better than the student who utilizes free OER, what exactly is being purchased with that \$1000?” We acknowledge there is a startup cost to pivoting to a new resource, which is why it is important to catch new instructors early.

One idea in this vein is inviting a librarian or OER specialist to new faculty orientation.

Pivoting to an open textbook also gives instructors a high degree of flexibility with materials. For example, instructors can mix and match chapters from different open texts to match the needs of the course, and there is no undue pressure to use every chapter of an open text knowing that students have free access to all the material. If an instructor is considering replacing a commercial textbook, the process of evaluation is no different except that one does not have to wait for the publisher to send a complimentary copy. Every month, new textbooks and course materials are added to repositories. Universities and libraries are providing funding to faculty to create new, quality OER. If an instructor cannot find something that works now, it is entirely possible that something will become available soon. For example, one of us (Hill) teaches an introductory media writing course every few years. Two years ago, when looking for an open textbook, Hill was not able to find one that would fit the course outcomes. This summer, the same search yielded eight different titles, one that is almost identical in chapter topics to the commercial text used previously. It has been well reviewed by 18 faculty from various universities, includes embedded multimedia content, and has extremely straightforward writing.

As mentioned, OER are not limited to texts: There are open assignments, exams, and activities. While these may not save students money, they can expand an instructor’s toolbox. For example, consider the instance of a sociologist and librarian who used open pedagogy to involve students in the evolution of a class activity that is now available as an open resource for others. (Open pedagogy engages students as the creators of knowledge, instead of just consumers of it, and then the student-created content often becomes OER for future classes.) Librarian Greg Bem and sociology professor Sharon Raz had collaborated previously, but in the fall of 2018, Bem proposed adding an open pedagogy project to Raz’s Sociology 101 course. They designed a card game that was employed that fall, with students providing feedback on mechanics of play and content. Over the next few quarters, the project expanded to involve students in the process of improving the core deck of sociology concepts and creating expansion decks on sociological topics. In the fall of 2019, some cards were written to include definitions of terms to support English-language learners enrolled in the course. When COVID-19 moved all class activities online, Raz adapted the game to a Canvas discussion board,

and the student-selected expansion theme was “Life in a Pandemic: Social Distancing,” illustrating the adaptability of open pedagogy practices. The game’s website includes all game files and a rationale for the use of this type of open activity in a sociology course. As Bem and Raz (n.d.) explain,

While the game’s premise is primarily centered on the relationship between sociological concepts and information literacy, this game was developed to promote open pedagogy... Students were and will be encouraged to participate as an opportunity to bring their own representation and identities into the course space, creating more equitable exchanges of knowledge and teaching/learning practices.

The game can be used in sociology courses as it is or expanded on as an example of open pedagogy, as it is licensed under CC-BY 4.0 (reusable, remixable, attribution to original authors required).

Suggestion 3: Start Listening to the OER Conversation

The open movement is a big one, and it can be overwhelming to know where to start. If the thought of switching textbooks is overwhelming, faculty can start by listening to the OER conversation. The following list of forums and listservs are just a sample of places to start an OER journey.

- The Open Education Network: Membership includes more than 1,100 campuses across the country, and the community provides numerous trainings for faculty and librarians working with OER (<https://open.umn.edu/otn/>).
- OERu Forums: An independent network offering free web-based classes worldwide. The active forum community discusses everything from establishing OER collections to teaching strategies (<http://forums.oeru.org/>).
- OER Commons: Register for free to receive a quarterly newsletter and access OER Hubs and Groups to connect you with state-level or subject-based communities of practice (<https://www.oercommons.org/>).
- The OER Digest: This is a joint project between SPARC, Creative Commons, and Student PIRGs. Register to join the mailing

list for the biweekly newsletter with updates, opportunities, and reminders (<https://oerdigest.org/subscribe/>).

- SPARC Libraries and OER Forums: SPARC allows nonmembers to be part of the robust community of exchange, which is led by many of the movement’s leaders. SPARC hosts an email discussion list and a monthly open call (<https://sparcopen.org/our-work/sparc-library-oer-forum/>).

Another great opportunity for concentrated immersion in the OER movement is Open Education (OE) Week. OE Week celebrates the global community of OER through workshops, speakers, symposiums, and more. In addition to the OE Week speakers, independent programs are based at universities all over the globe. They are all free and open to attend, and most are archived for later viewing. OE Week is usually early in March, but related programs start late February and continue throughout the month.

Suggestion 4: Consider OER as Integral to Inclusive and Empathetic Pedagogy

Many university instructors have a commitment to inclusive pedagogy, defined by Tracie Addy as “being responsive to the diversity of our class and designing learning environments that include all of our students” (Stachowiak 2021). However, discussion of open educational resources is often absent or underdeveloped in literature about best practices in pedagogy or inclusion. The prevailing presumption is that instructors will assign cost-bearing materials and might only supplement with “web-based” resources to cater to different learning styles. Discussion of copyright issues, while important, is sometimes substituted for robust exploration of OER. Open resources, to the degree they are mentioned in some pedagogical texts, are included in the discussion of classroom technologies and teaching tools but not as integral aspects of inclusive pedagogy that address equity issues like access and cost.

Thankfully, the winds are changing. For example, the excellent new book about inclusive pedagogy, *What Inclusive Instructors Do* (Addy et al. 2021), notes that the cost of course materials can be a barrier to some students and commends OER as a solution. Multiple recent studies have found that textbook costs keep more than half of students from purchasing required texts; at best, they end up

sharing with other students, but more likely, they go without (Nagle and Vitez 2021; Spica and Biddix 2021; Wittkower and Lo 2020).

OER offer a practical tool for instructors to live out their commitments to access and inclusion. A good first step for instructors is knowing how much it costs our students to take our courses. For example, how much does the university bookstore charge for the texts of a course? This is another case where Suggestion 1—working with the library—proves useful. When an instructor opts for cost-bearing resources, which is understandable in some cases, librarians can still obtain free or lower-cost access through eBooks, textbook reserves, and the like. Instructors themselves can engage in a form of arbitrage by buying up lower cost, used versions of key texts at the end of the term that they can lend out to students themselves or turn over to the library to increase the number of copies for textbook reserves. Course costs should be a primary consideration for instructors committed to inclusion, especially for those that teach at colleges and universities that serve underrepresented students, many of whom not only work to pay for their course materials but also to support themselves and often others.

DIFFICULTIES AND LIMITATIONS OF OER

While we believe strongly in the power and possibility of OER, they are not without their difficulties and limitations, a few of which have already been mentioned. A global study of OER perceptions and practices in 2011 identified five barriers faculty faced when they wanted to use OER: lack of institutional support, lack of technological tools, lack of user skills (and time), lack of quality or fitness of OER, and personal issues, including lack of trust and time (Andrade et al. 2011). Many of these barriers have not been sufficiently addressed in the intervening decade, as anecdotal and scholarly evidence show. As instructors and universities are continually asked to do more with less, there might be an inertia of the familiar that makes adopting and supporting new approaches prohibitive. Furthermore, the technical tools and user skills requisite for incorporating OER into classrooms and universities may have been mitigated by the visibility of OER repositories and rise in eBook usage, but copyright concerns remain for interested educators. In interviews with faculty, Martin and Kimmons (2020:137) discovered that “though faculty expressed a verbal desire to comply with copyright law and university policies, this was coupled

with frustration, fear, and lack of understanding that [copyright support] offices existed.” Despite the ways that OER have gone from peripheral to mainstream, more work is needed to bring instructors and universities along, including dedicated attention at mitigating the barriers to adoption that remain.

Second, existing OER may not be sufficient to meet the pedagogical needs of some courses, in which cases a commitment to keeping a class free or low cost can pose significant extra work for a faculty member or simply be unattainable. For example, faculty who teach courses like Sociological Theory, where primary texts may be an important part of course readings, might prove difficult to transition to OER. As mentioned previously, we encourage instructors with courses that seem difficult to pivot to OER to still reach out to their librarians for assistance. While making some course materials of no cost to students might be out of reach, the university may have access to resources unknown to the instructor. Furthermore, creative workarounds might be possible, such as using arbitrage to buy up required texts at the end of term for a low cost, then making those available to lend to students in subsequent terms.

Finally, we acknowledge there is a lack of faculty time to examine new resources, not to mention the work it takes to revamp an entire course with new texts. As mentioned previously, an analysis of faculty perceptions of OER found several barriers to OER adoption (Belikov and Bodily 2016), including a lack of time to evaluate new resources. In a world where tenure-track faculty face many pressures and adjunct faculty labor in precarity, it is understandable if some instructors find a move to OER one demand too many. Faculty may also struggle to find the information necessary to make a switch to OER even if they are willing. As Martin and Kimmons (2020:138) note, “For more specific subjects there are relatively few [OER] options, and among those that exist, faculty noted that it is often easier to find information on how to donate to the provider than it is to find actual content and reviews.” The fact that faculty are able to quickly find reviews from publisher or bookseller websites handicaps OER because reviews for a resource may not be colocated with the resource itself depending on where it is found on the web.

CONCLUSION

In this conversation, we call on instructors to adopt open and affordable educational resources in teaching

sociology. How—and at what scale—remains up for discussion as faculty navigate university promotion and tenure requirements, meet classroom demands for equity and inclusion, and balance personal time investments for teaching innovation. We first provided a broad definition of OER and offered a literature review of the value and efficacy of OER for students and faculty. There is evidence in the literature, as well as our personal experience, that the incorporation of OER supports equity and inclusion, student success, and instructor flexibility. We also recognize that OER are not without drawbacks. Conversation must continue if educators are to overcome the hurdles of technological issues, legal use and monetization concerns, inconsistent reviewing practices, and arbitrary evaluation standards. If nothing else, a good first step is establishing common ground for conversation with colleagues, staff, and administration about the ways that open resources might support university mission and student learning.

Sociology is a discipline uniquely centered around issues of justice and equity. As such, it is well equipped to examine and dismantle the hidden curricula of higher education, which includes the ways that existing practices can perpetuate marginalization and exclusion. Open pedagogy confronts these challenges and invites our students into the teaching and learning process: “One principle of open pedagogy is that we should engage students as creators of knowledge, not just consumers of it” (Pradt 2021). Given the disruptions of the pandemic to education and the growing pressures on higher education from many sides, there is no better time than the present for sociology instructors to consider OER.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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