

Lori Lysiak

Division by division, book by book

Using licensed e-books as a gateway to OERs

Even after the COVID-19 pandemic thrust academia into a fully virtual educational environment, open educational resources (OER) remain a slow sell to many faculty members at Penn State-Altoona. Although faculty members care about the cost of textbooks for their students, the work of selecting or creating a new open access textbook or other OER option seems to be an insurmountable barrier for many. The vast majority of faculty still ask students to purchase (or rent) print or electronic texts from the bookstore. To help those students who cannot afford their textbooks, some faculty place required texts on course reserve at the library. But the number of faculty that embrace OERs has remained low.

There are a few models in the professional literature on promoting and sustaining OERs and achieving faculty buy-in. Steve Rokusek and Rachel Cooke, for example, cite a 2016 national survey that found 37% of faculty responded that they needed more information before adopting OERs. Other perceived barriers included OER discoverability (17%), and time required to review OERs (11%).¹ This article seeks to contribute to the professional literature through a multiphase project focused on breaking down barriers book by book.

In 2018 and early 2019 wave after wave of OER workshops hosted by librarians and early faculty adopters from other Penn State locations were well attended at the Altoona campus. Participants asked thoughtful questions and seemingly took notes and accepted additional resources, but something was off. Even though open textbooks and OERs held promise, most faculty were reluctant. When the OER workshops started to run dry, the librarians were looking for a new action plan to stimulate faculty interest when an unexpected pattern emerged.

In the same timeframe that OER workshops were offered, serendipitous reference desk interviews revealed that many students were buying their required texts at the bookstore or through Amazon when the library had already purchased the license for several of the full text e-books. Moreover, they were instructed to do so by their teachers. We needed to go back to the basics with our faculty and focus on the money saving aspects of library owned e-books as textbooks. We needed to make sure our communications prepared the faculty, particularly recent hires and transient adjunct faculty, on the selection and application of electronic resources.

Rokusek and Cooke describe several benefits of e-books that are excellent talking points to help faculty begin thinking in terms of electronic resources, rather than solely print:

Lori Lysiak is reference and instruction librarian at Penn State-Altoona, email: lal29@psu.edu

- Library-provided e-books are free from the students' perspective, making them just as attractive as OERs.

- E-books are generally easy to use.
- E-books come from established publishers, so instructors are assured of their quality.
- Instructors may already be using the print version, which lowers course prep time.
- The instructor copy and supplementary material are still available.
- Bookstores still carry hard copies for students who prefer them.²

To improve communications and help the Altoona faculty understand their options for electronic resources, it was important to find an approach to make it easy for them. In other words, it was important to reduce the stress of the initial learning curve. By sharing the Rokusek and Cooke talking points and taking on the onus of searching all the required texts for them, we wanted to show how students can successfully use e-books as textbooks and how that saves them money. With that foundation in place, the adoption of open access and OER materials would be a logical next step.

Approach

The Penn State-Altoona reference and instruction librarian decided to take on a methodical approach with a multi-phase electronic resources project. The focus of Phase One was to invite faculty to share their required texts so the librarian could investigate e-book options. This phase took place over the course of two years (four semesters) and included additional OER support when e-books were not available. Phase Two entails the librarian searching required titles not voluntarily shared. This phase is currently underway for a spring 2022 launch and envisioned as an additional year (two semesters). Another phase will be transitioning select faculty members to independence with OERs.

Phase One took place during the fall 2019 semester, followed by three subsequent semesters. Prior to each of those four semesters, every faculty member in each academic division (Arts and Humanities; Business, Engineering and Information Sciences and Technology (IST); Education, Human Development, and Social Sciences; and Mathematics and Natural Sciences) was emailed an invitation to have the librarian determine if the library already provided access to their required texts in print or e-book format. If no e-book was found, it was purchased through EBSCO's GOBI Library Solutions, provided it was available for unlimited users. Using a spreadsheet, every faculty member who participated was tracked along with the semester, required texts, library holdings, library purchases, class size, and bookstore prices. The online schedule of courses was used to locate the class size and required texts and prices through the bookstore. Participating faculty members were then emailed a list of their texts available in print with a link to request placing these titles on course reserves, and/or the persistent e-book link to embed directly into their Canvas course, and/or the links to explore alternative OERs.

This approach is similar to the Rokusek and Cooke model used at Florida Gulf Coast University in 2017. Using the online enrollment system, every section of the fall courses offered in the social sciences was identified and listed prior to the start of the semester. The class level and size of each class was also recorded. Each course section listed in the enrollment system linked out to the bookstore webpage showing all course-assigned texts. All course adopted texts (CATs) for every section being offered, along with the bookstore price of each

text, was captured. Additionally, each book was identified as either a true textbook designed for class use, or something different. Using EBSCO's GOBI Library Solutions online platform, each CAT was checked for its availability as a library owned e-book or new purchase. Available e-books were classified as either suitable or not suitable. Suitability was based on the best available e-book purchase option with unlimited use being preferred. In all, 152 CATs were identified, and 27 of them were available as suitable e-books. But the numbers were lower for true textbooks: out of 108 true textbooks, seven were available as suitable e-books.³

Findings

The Altoona faculty were more than happy to have the confusing and laborious task of looking up e-books in the library catalog assumed by someone else. Doing so also ensured that if e-books were available, the persistent links would be readily given to them. Likewise, if e-books were not available, unlimited access would promptly be ordered or other suitable OER options would be provided to them as backup. This process served as an excellent springboard for faculty to understand how e-books serve as a gateway to using OERs. Daniel S. Dotson and Aaron Olivera at Ohio State University reveal similar findings with overwhelmed faculty. They cite the example that unlimited user access to e-books is not always possible due to license restrictions. Like the Penn State-Altoona electronic resources project, Dotson and Olivera encouraged faculty to work with them to select resources that provide the most access while bearing in mind the following caveats about e-books:

- A defined user limit does not mean there is not an option to buy an unlimited user license.
- If the Libraries do not have an e-book, it does not mean one is not available.
- If the Libraries cannot get an e-book, there is likely a print book, DVD, or streaming video that can be purchased.⁴

After four semesters, the Penn State-Altoona Library saved students more than \$23,100 in textbook fees while the library expended slightly more than \$3,000 [Table 1].

	Faculty	E-books Owned	E-books Purchased	Library Cost	Student Savings
FA 2019	22	12	23	\$1836.57	\$13,145.98
SP 2020	12	0	5	\$1103.16	\$9,288.59
FA 2020	10	3	2	\$102.95	\$762.10
SP 2021	4	3	0	n/a	n/a
Totals	48	18	30	\$3,042.68	\$23,196.67

Limitations

E-book availability was only determined by searching GOBI. If an e-book was not available in GOBI, the faculty members were given links to explore other open access options with the invitation for librarian support. It is suspected that most faculty members did not explore these options and instead simply resorted to print, although there is no feedback to support this. This opportunity was offered to all the academic divisions where patterns of e-book availability can be traced through four semesters. Notably, the Division of Arts and Humanities had greater electronic availability since more non-textbooks are assigned in these disciplines. Conversely, the Division of Business, Engineering, and IST used more textbooks without electronic versions. Since four semesters were tracked at only one Penn State campus location, the findings may not

apply to other universities with multiple campus locations and/or similar structures in academic divisions at those locations.

Next steps

To celebrate our findings and promote further outreach on e-books, a workshop was offered near the end of the fall 2019 semester. Twelve were in attendance with one faculty member on Zoom and three that requested a recording for later viewing. The key takeaways explored how to:

- promote free e-books to students (before they purchase print materials),
- place e-books in Canvas (using strategies and other tips), and
- navigate EBSCO and ProQuest (with built-in features).

The intention was to offer workshops each semester, using faculty suggested topics related to e-books and OERs, however the COVID-19 pandemic delayed further workshop offerings throughout 2020 and 2021. With Penn State-Altoona back on site for the fall 2021 semester, the expectation is to resume workshops during the spring 2022 semester.

Phase Two of the electronic resources project will also launch in spring 2022. Identifying required texts for fall 2021 and spring 2022 is much more streamlined than in years past. As early as 2012, Christina Mune and Ann Agee outlined their process of matching a list of texts shared by the campus bookstore to their collection, reformatting mismatched data by hand.⁵ But now, with help from Penn State's Open Education Infrastructure Specialist, every required text, recommended text, equipment item, course pack, current OER, and pending order for each course is available on a spreadsheet. Of those, only the required texts and current OER materials are being searched. E-book purchases with unlimited access will be made, and the persistent links will be offered to the faculty without them lifting a finger or volunteering information on their required text needs. OER alternatives, when available, will also be offered to the faculty.

Finally, an OER LibGuide on library-licensed content and open access materials for Penn State-Altoona instructors will be heavily promoted during the spring 2022 semester. The guide includes electronic reserves, e-books, streaming videos, open resources (organized by division), and a community of practice listserv for continued conversations on how to implement OERs. The goal is to have the same 48 faculty members who reached out for e-books during the last four semesters, bridge over to exploring the possibilities of OERs. If even a quarter of them successfully transition to independence with OERs, those faculty champions will serve as a model to new and established teaching colleagues, thus building campus-wide synergy to save students hundreds of dollars throughout their academic careers.

Notes

1. Steve Rokusek and Rachel Cooke, "Will Library E-Books Help Solve the Textbook Affordability Issue? Using Textbook Adoption Lists to Target Collection Development," *The Reference Librarian* 60, no. 3 (2019): 169-81.

2. Rokusek and Cooke.

3. Rokusek and Cooke.

4. Daniel S. Dotson and Aaron Olivera, "Affordability of Course Materials: Reactive and Proactive Measures at the Ohio State University Libraries," *Journal of Access Services* 17, no. 3 (2020): 144-63.

5. Christina Mune and Ann Agee, "Getting Faculty into the Fight: The Battle Against High Textbook Costs," *Against the Grain* 26, no. 5 (2014). *z*