5 Professional Development Tips for Open Educational Resources

Here are five ways to make sure your school's teachers are ready to use and embrace open educational resources.

- By Bridget McCrea
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Accustomed to using textbooks, pre-developed assessments, and other standard materials in their classrooms, today's college professors are using more open educational resources (OERs) than ever. With these re-usable, non-copyrighted, curriculum materials come a few key professional development challenges. The vast quantity of resources--tested and untested alike--available online is one key hurdle. Helping instructors develop a mindset around "constant revision" and encouraging ongoing open course development are two other tricky areas that can make or break an institution's OER initiative.

Below are four professional development areas all higher education OER champions should pay attention to--and a few tips for working around the issues.

Too Many Resources
OER may be a new concept for some professors, but that doesn't mean there aren't enough resources to go around. In fact, Geoff Cain, director of distance education for Eureka, CA-based College of the Redwoods, said the number of resources is so vast that it can paralyze instructors. "Helping faculty find appropriate resources is a major issue," said Cain, whose institution is a member of the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources.

To combat the problem, Cain said his department looks first at the individual instructor's needs and then seeks out appropriate OERs to match those requirements. Should the number of OERs available on a specific topic overwhelm a biology instructor, for example, Cain and his team would confer with other community college biology departments, via the consortium, and find out what they are using.

"Armed with that information, we can figure out where the gaps are and what students really need," said Cain, "and help educators pick the best possible OERs for their situations."

"The Textbook is the Course" Mindset
Many publishers suggest that the textbooks they sell are themselves college courses. "That's how they sell their materials," said Cain. "That's led some instructors to think the same way."

This situation presents an ongoing professional development challenge for OER leaders who must train educators on the fact that both they and their students--and not the textbook publisher--are responsible for the open learning materials.

Cain said impressing upon the educators the fact that they already "adapt" coursework and textbooks to
meet student needs is a good way to help break them out of the "textbook is the course" mindset.

"Teachers skip chapters, incorporate current events, and drill down on specific student needs all the time," said Cain. "OERs are really just an extension of that."

**Educators Don't Have Time To Develop Course Materials**

Already pressed for time, many professors just aren't wired to produce their own open content, use it in their classrooms, continuously revise it, and share it with the rest of the world. One way to get educators on board is by incentivizing them to jump into the OER game.

The University of Massachusetts-Amherst's (UMass Amherst) Open Education Initiative for example, doled out $17,000 in grants as stipends to instructors who produce open instructional materials. The materials replace commercial textbooks and are available to students at no charge.

Matt Sheridan, digital repository resident librarian, said he estimates that the university is saving its students more than $135,500 by paying 15 professors to produce open content.

To encourage participation and ongoing use of OERs, the school has used professional development workshops and one-on-one consulting sessions and makes lists of OERs--culled by reference librarians--available to faculty members.

**Many Faculty Members Don't Know About OERs**

Sometimes all it takes is a good dose of peer pressure to get faculty members thinking about how to integrate OERs into their classrooms. Sheridan says one of UMass Amherst's most effective open resource strategies centered on a handful of high-profile faculty members who were already using OERs in their classrooms.

"They became focal supporters for our campus-wide initiative," said Sheridan.

Those OER champions were encouraged to get in touch with faculty members and get them interested in the stipends that UMass Amhearst was offering open content producers.

As another outreach effort, the university notified deans, department heads, liaison librarians, and other influential individuals about the new program.

"They helped filter the information down to their individual faculty members," said Sheridan, who said she sees word of mouth as a powerful force for schools that want to round up support of OER. "Without doing much advertising at all we were able to spread the word and get a lot of people involved in our initiative."

About the Author

Bridget McCrea is a business and technology writer in Clearwater, FL. She can be reached at bridgetmc@earthlink.net.