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Supporting Open Education with the Wind at Your Back: Lessons for OER Programs from the Open Textbook Toolkit

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Abstract

What does it take to move open education from idea to practice? In this session we led a discussion about what supports instructors need to engage with open education and how we can make adoption and adaptation easy and inviting. We set the stage with an overview of findings from our IMLS-funded research (LG-72-17-0051-17) on the needs and practices of psychology instructors for adopting or creating open textbooks and OER. We then shared some lessons on what faculty say they need and where they feel we can do better, as well as offered some insights from our research on student needs and desires in learning resources. Next, we opened a conversation about how transferable these lessons are and the unique needs of other academic communities. This paper describes the project and documents our discussion about these issues.
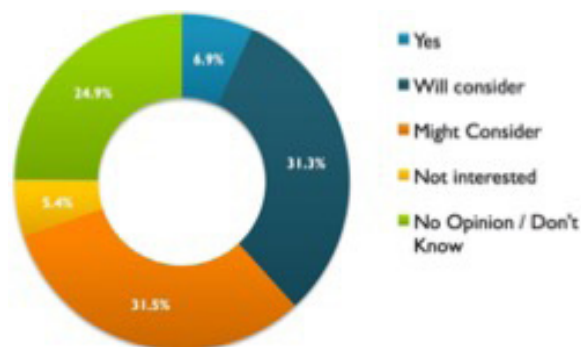
Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the Supporting Open Education with the Wind at Your Back session held at the Charleston Conference 2018. The session was designed to continue and expand a conversation about faculty comfort with open educational resources (OER) and what supports are needed to move faculty instructors from interest to engagement. It presented our findings in one area—psychology—and asked participants to talk about how these findings did or did not resonate in other disciplines.


Developing the Toolkit

We began the session with an overview of the Open Textbook Toolkit project (OTT). Supported by a planning grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (LG-72-17-0051-17), we have been working to gather information about the practices and needs of instructors in one discipline—psychology—who may be interested in adopting or creating open textbooks and OER. Our research has identified gaps in support for these areas that make it more difficult to create robust, tailored materials. In addition, our project explored student needs and desires in learning resources, and whether or not a toolkit approach would serve the needs of psychology educators and their students.

In order to introduce our research and seed discussion, we shared findings from the Babson Survey Research Group's 2015 and 2017 National Higher Education Report *Opening the Textbook: Open Education Resources in U.S. Higher Education, 2017*. These findings established the opportunity we have to tell the story of open educational resources since most faculty reported that they "will consider," "might consider," or "do not know" if they will use OER in the next three years. In order to explain this opportunity, we offered the "pencil metaphor" for adoption of new practices and technologies, arguing that we need new supports to move from the "lead"ers into the "wood" that makes up the bulk of instructors.

Our ultimate intention is to develop a toolkit that facilitates this move. At this stage, however, we are focused on gathering information from stakeholders in psychology. At the time of the presentation we were in the final stages of a study that had begun roughly a year earlier. In that time, we launched a survey of psychology faculty and a parallel survey
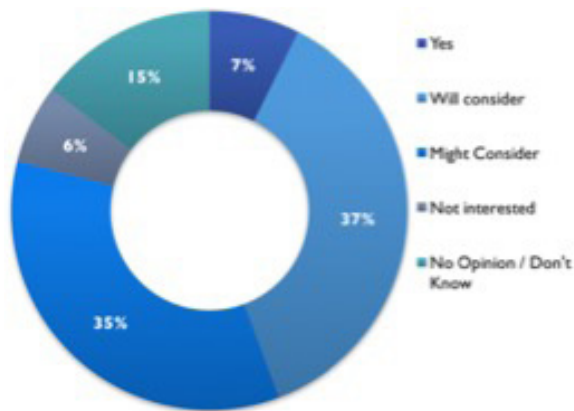
of students majoring in psychology. The instructor-facing survey was focused on gathering information about the practices and needs of instructors around the adoption or creation of OER, as well as identifying gaps in support around creating robust open learning materials. The student-centered survey explored student needs and desires in learning resources, whether or not they were openly licensed.

We used initial findings from these surveys to seed a series of hour-long focus groups with psychology faculty across North America. Most of our focus groups were held at regional meetings of the American Psychology Association's Society for the Teaching of Psychology (APA-STP), as well as the annual APA-STP meeting in San Antonio, TX. Findings from these focus groups, as well as from the initial surveys, were used to develop a set of questions that were asked in a series of follow-up interviews with survey participants who had volunteered to speak with us on a short telephone call.

At the time of our presentation in Charleston, we were still conducting follow-up interviews and in the process of coding responses, so we offered a general
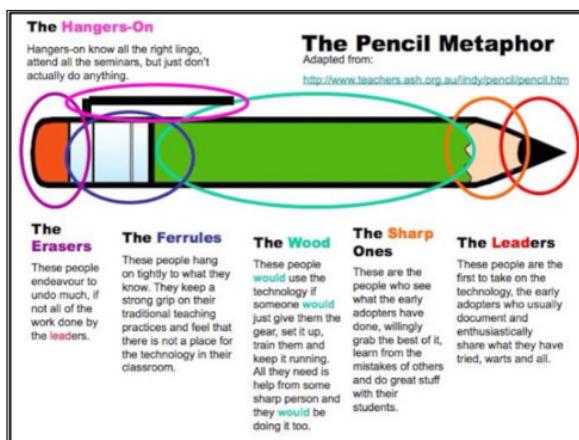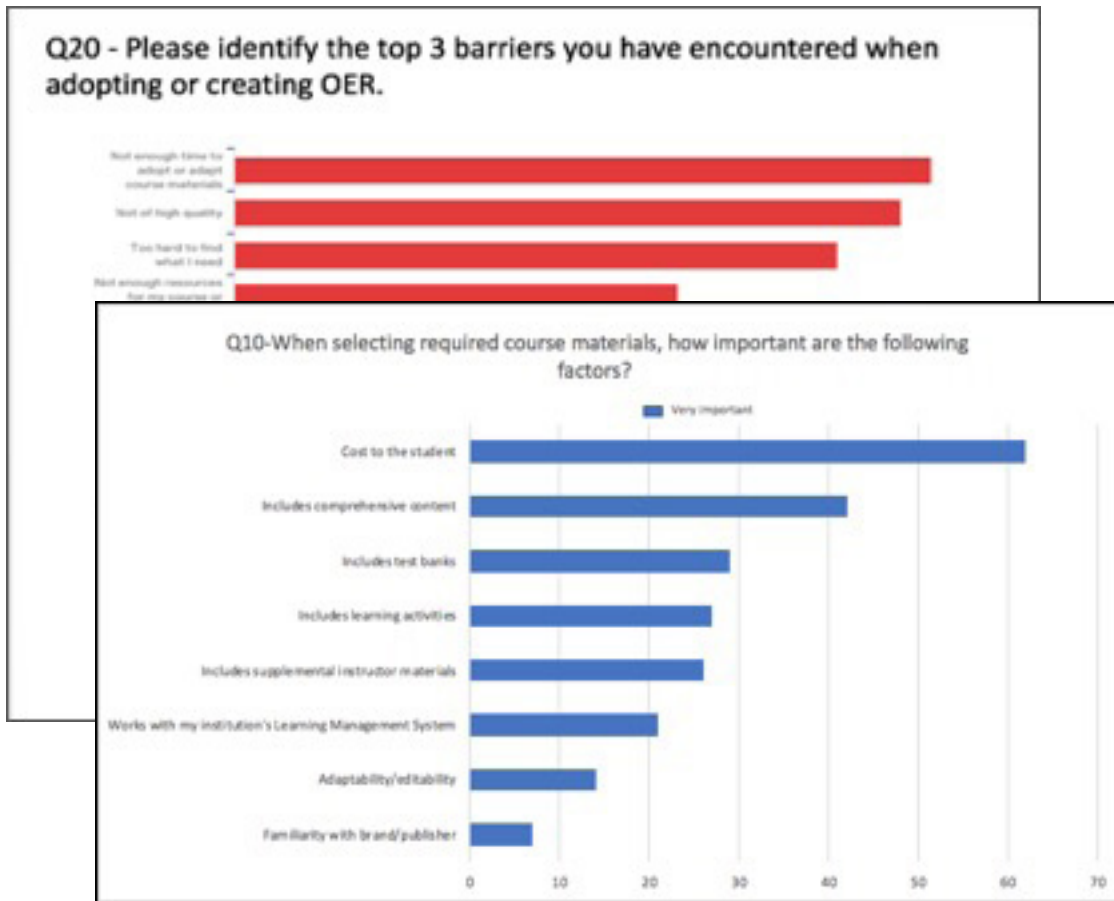

overview and highlighted several specific areas we felt were particularly interesting or illuminating.

The first set of observations we shared were responses that affirmed many assumptions about faculty and OER. The most frequently mentioned barriers to engaging with OER mirrored what faculty had reported in other venues such as the Babson report. Faculty reported being open to—and often intrigued or inspired by—open education, but struggled to discover resources they viewed as being of sufficiently high quality. A second issue compounded this challenge: faculty reported that they do not have enough time to either conduct a more complete exploration of the environment or to adjust and improve the imperfect resources they did discover. Taken together, our research reaffirms the core challenge at the heart of open education today: many faculty would love to adopt or adapt open educational resources, but just do not feel that it is achievable. As one faculty member wrote, "I'm very supportive of OER, but am not at a point where I'd be willing/able to take the time to create my own resources. At the moment, there do not exist any (at all or high quality) materials for the specific courses I teach."

In addition to sharing these established challenges, we also shared several challenges that have not been discussed as heavily or that were grounded in the specific context of psychology as a field. First, we noted that many faculty members stressed the importance of technical issues such as integration with a course management system or optimization for the phones and tablets that many students use as their primary digital device. Likewise, many faculty members expressed frustration with the lack of supplemental materials even for OER that were otherwise perceived as being of high quality. This was particularly challenging when OER were needed for an entire department or set of instructors teaching different sections of a course. Introductory courses are often seen as the most promising avenues for high-impact use of OER, but since many are taught by graduate students and adjuncts, they may also be the type of course that most require robust ancillary materials. As one faculty member told us, "I support OER, but have to get my whole department on board. One major drawback is the lack of instructor materials—a lot of our PSY 100 adjuncts use the publisher lecture slides and I have not seen an OER for Intro PSY courses with PowerPoints provided."

One final theme we shared in this presentation was a constellation of related challenges around

Q20 - Please identify the top 3 barriers you have encountered when adopting or creating OER.

Q10-When selecting required course materials, how important are the following factors?

presentation of materials. Faculty frequently commented that they struggled to adopt OER because of issues related to "readability," "consistency," or "polish." As one faculty member described their frustration, "edited texts offer a level of consistency and coherent integration absent in OERs. I miss textbooks." This theme of tone, voice, and consistency spoke to the value of strong editorial support that some faculty found to be absent from many open educational resources.
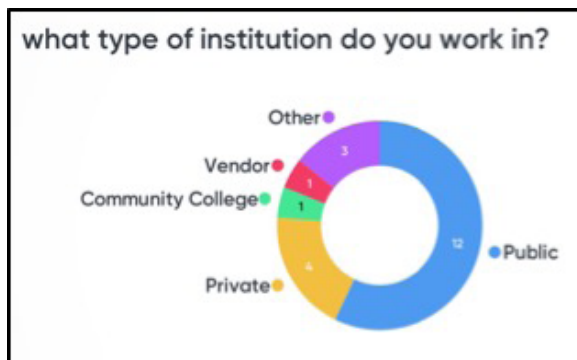
We also observed some psychology-specific challenges, which we used as a bridge to our open discussion. For example, the most common source of open educational resources identified by faculty in our study was Noba (nobaproject.com), a psychology-specific catalog that "covers the traditional scope of introductory psychology and then some." The ubiquity of Noba resources is likely to act as a lurking variable in many observations from our study, which may color our findings when applying them to other disciplines. Further, many disciplines lack any sort of recognized, discipline-specific analog, adding more complexity to our discussion about the transferability of these findings to other disciplines. As discussed below, however, attendees at this session indicated that our findings were indeed illuminating and often resonated with their own experiences across many different fields.

Discussing the Toolkit

Discussion Question One: Type of Institution

After sharing preliminary findings from our research, we engaged session participants in an interactive conversation to explore whether the lessons we had learned were applicable to the participants' varying situations and needs. In order to facilitate active participation and seed an active discussion, we utilized Mentimeter, an online, cloud-based tool that can be used to create questions, get answers from the audience, and share the results, all in real time. To get a sense of the

what type of institution do you work in?

Which of the following types of expertise would be the most helpful in using or supporting OER?

audience and to help them become familiar with using Mentimeter, we began by asking participants to identify what type of institution they worked in and gave them the following choices: private, public, community college, vendor, and other. The majority of participants, 12, identified themselves as working in public institutions, followed by 4 in private institutions, 3 in other, and 1 in community college and as a vendor. Since we had anecdotal evidence that the type of institution can be a factor in support needs around educational resources, and in particular open education resources, we were pleased that the audience demographics included representation in all the institution-type choices. When we asked the participants who identified as "other" to provide more information, we learned that they either worked for multiple institutions that spanned the types listed or worked for a library consortia. Interest from library consortia in our session was not a surprise to us, since we were aware of the increased engagement from library consortia, both in negotiating with vendors around alternative textbook product models and in facilitating open educational resource use.

Discussion Question Two: Type of Expertise

Next, we asked the audience which of the following types of expertise would be the most helpful in using or supporting OER: Web discovery, publisher/editor, copyright/licensing, instructional design, or other. When we originally came up with this question, we struggled with how to phrase it and the answers in a way that would apply to both librarians and others working with instructors, as well as to the instructors themselves. We also recognized that participants might define the options we were providing for the types of expertise differently than we were. The choice of "other" was included to acknowledge that we had provided limited options and that we might have missed a key area of expertise that would be

helpful around OER use and support. While none of the participants chose "other," including it gave us the opportunity to expand our discussion beyond the listed options. During the discussion around this question, we explored each of the four listed types of expertise and discovered that, while we might not agree on which one is "most" helpful, all four were necessary to facilitate use and support of OER. We also realized that experts for all four identified areas—Collection Strategist, Copyright Expert, Instructional Designer, Librarian—were participating in the session. In addition, we talked about how these areas of expertise addressed some of the key barriers, such as discovery and quality, identified by the Babson report and the preliminary findings from our Open Textbook Toolkit planning grant. For example, "professional"-grade editing can contribute to the perception of quality for a textbook.

Discussion Question Three: Markers of Quality

The question of quality is one that comes up repeatedly for OER, so it is important that we are able to identify what the indicators of quality are for instructors. Much of what we shared from our findings around quality and educational resources resonated with our audience, and given the opportunity to answer the question, "What do you see as the strongest markers of quality in an educational resource?", participants' free-form responses were very much in line with our findings. In this section, participants listed both traditional markers like author reputation, peer-reviewed references, and reviews, as well as some nontraditional markers such as star rating reviews and location of resource. Participants called out comprehensiveness and clear language as key indicators of quality. Given that quality can be difficult to quantify and universally define, an important milestone is being able to clearly articulate a set of markers for quality in OER.

What do you see as the strongest markers of quality in an educational resource?

What is the greatest challenge you have found in using or connecting instructors with OER?

Discussion Question Four: Greatest Challenges

Our final discussion question focused on what participants felt was their greatest challenge in using or connecting instructors to OER.

The challenges span operational, technical, structural, and personal areas. From information overload to improving quality to faculty inertia, the challenges to enabling and supporting OER creation and adoption seem steep; however, participants in our session showed a deep commitment to and investment in OER. Furthermore, discussion around the challenges uncovered that many participants have experienced success in starting to build infrastructure for OER in their institutions and in moving some faculty from interest to adoption of OER.

Conclusion

Overall, this session revealed strong ties between faculty instructor needs across different disciplines. While the specific context of psychology naturally includes several unique factors such as the shadow of the reproducibility crisis and the presence of a discipline-specific OER repository, this discussion suggested that many of the most significant themes sounded in our study resonated deeply with attendees, regardless of which discipline they came from. These insights will be incorporated into our ongoing research and, ultimately, help build a stronger Open Textbook Toolkit.