

Against the Grain

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The Coming Wave of Affordable Textbooks

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The Coming Wave of Affordable Textbooks

by **Joseph Esposito** (Senior Partner, Clarke & Esposito) <esposito@gmail.com>

This year at the **Charleston Conference** I had the pleasure to moderate a panel on the library's role in providing affordable textbooks to students (see <https://2018charlestonconference.sched.com/event/G8SM/the-librarians-opportunity-in-affordable-textbooks>). The panel consisted of **Mark Cummings**, editor and publisher of **Choice/ACRL**, **Gwen Evans**, Executive Director of **OhioLINK**, and **Mark McBride**, library senior strategist at **SUNY**. This panel came about serendipitously, as all three are clients of mine who expressed an interest in the textbook market and how it could be transformed in some meaningful way. (The relationship with **Mark McBride** comes via *Kitchen* contributor **Roger Schonfeld** of **Ithaca S+R**, who asked me to participate in a project at **SUNY**.) We convened in New York, hosted by **Roger**, to compare notes. It became clear that big changes in textbooks are coming, and libraries will be at the center of them.

Slides from the panel can be found at <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/11/19/the-coming-wave-of-affordable-textbooks/?informz=1>.

How to think about this market? Putting aside more ambitious transformations such as courseware, textbooks, whether print or digital, fall into three categories:

- **Traditional textbooks.** These are the books we are all familiar with. They are published by companies that specialize in this market and provide the basis for a course designed by the instructor. The publisher markets these books not to the students but to the instructors, who select (the term of art is “adopt”) a particular title for the class, and the students then are told to go out and buy that title. Some do, some don't; some want to, but find the price to be prohibitive. I wrote about why these books are so expensive on the *Kitchen* a few years ago (see <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2012/10/10/why-are-college-textbooks-so-expensive>).
- **Open Educational Resources (OER).** There has been a lot of activity in this area, and even more publicity, over the past several years. OER are open in two respects: they are free to the end-user and they enable configuration by the instructor. OER are kin to the Open Access (OA) movement in some respects, though they are perhaps closer to the world of open source computer programs. There is a large group of dedicated people seeking to make OER the norm in college publishing, but market acceptance to date has largely been in niches.
- **Inclusive access programs.** OER's less ambitious cousin aims to lower

the price of textbooks, but does not seek to make them free. **Gwen Evans** wrote back-to-back posts on this on the *Kitchen* see <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/10/30/affordable-learning-requires-a-diverse-approach-part-1-playing-the-short-game-and-the-long-one-to-secure-savings-for-students> and <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/10/31/affordable-learning-requires-a-diverse-approach-part-2-applying-consortial-power-to-leverage-student-savings>. In inclusive access traditional textbooks are put in all-digital programs and librarians or other university representatives negotiate with publishers for lower prices. Instructors still select the titles (academic freedom is not compromised by these programs) and students pay for them through the university bursar when they sign up for a course (the equivalent of a lab fee). Instructors like these programs because they don't have to redesign their courses as they do with OER, students like the lower prices, and publishers like the fact that just about every student buys a book, whereas in a traditional situation without inclusive access many students buy used books (no revenue to the publisher), get pirated copies, or simply do without.

Good market data on college textbooks is hard to come by. The total market in the U.S. comes to perhaps \$9 billion at retail (that is, not what the publisher receives, but what college bookstores, **Amazon**, rental companies, etc., receive — which is the same as how much students pay for books), but that includes a lot of books that no one would call a textbook — for example, a paperback novel taught in an English class. It's worth taking a ride at the **Open Syllabus Project** (see <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2016/01/26/the-open-syllabus-project-altmetrics-and-a-new-dataset>) to see how such books are used in the classroom. At <http://explorer.opensyllabusproject.org/text/10312428>, for example, is the link for a search for **Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible***, a book that no one would call a textbook even though it is regularly used in many classrooms.

The market that is addressable by OER and inclusive access is perhaps just short of half the total — about \$4 billion. That market segment is dominated by just five publishers (**Pearson**, **McGraw-Hill**, **Cengage**, **Wiley**, and **Macmil-**

lan), and these publishers are not going away anytime soon. More likely is that they will adapt to OER and inclusive access or even come to co-opt it, much as the largest STM publishers (**Elsevier**, **Springer Nature**, **Wiley**) have cleverly co-opted the market for Gold OA. Indeed, inclusive access programs are likely to ensure the market dominance of these large publishers as they are built around the offerings of those publishers, albeit at sharply discounted prices. There are many texts, however, that are not likely to get brought into inclusive access programs simply because they don't cost nearly as much as, say, a **Cengage** textbook for an introductory course on organic chemistry or a **Pearson** text on calculus. University presses, for example, cumulatively have classroom sales of perhaps \$100 million a year (if anyone has better figures for this segment than I do, I would love to see them appear in the comments to this blog), but they tend to be priced relatively low already, giving even the most aggressive negotiators on students' behalf small opportunity to effect a big change.

While it is customary nowadays to think of things in purely binary terms — something must either be wholly this or wholly that — it seems likely that textbooks have a pluralistic future, with the three models summarized above each finding their place in an evolving marketplace. The traditional model dominates today and will play a large role in the foreseeable future. Inclusive access is starting from a tiny base today, but is likely to expand rapidly, in part because librarians have their hands on these programs and can swiftly mobilize their immense community. OER occupies a niche today and will continue to grow, but it has a structural limitation in that it requires highly motivated instructors to create syllabuses around them. We have all had such teachers, but *all* teachers? How about the adjunct teaching five courses this semester or the lofty senior researcher who treats that one undergraduate lecture course as a burden on her time? One of the appeals of inclusive access is that it does not require that instructors do anything that they are not doing already.

My own forecast of how things will play out longer term is that OER will evolve into the laboratory for all instructional materials. The OER advocates will continue to invest in new materials and in exploring new teaching meth-



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deeper, the individual nature of acquisitions workplaces and workflows, along with the need to be skilled trouble-shooters were main points underlying the response. Discussants noted that on-the-job and situational training and learning would be more productive channels for learning than a course.

With the general consensus in place that “they didn’t teach that in library school” doesn’t reflect our situations or serve our purposes, we challenged the participants to begin to engage with the topic as an opportunity to share knowledge and build professional capacity collectively. Fundamentally, we believe time has come to absolve library school and to build something better together. As a group, the participants were ready to engage in addressing five big questions.

1. What are the core knowledges for beginning acquisitions librarians?
2. How did you gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for library acquisitions work?
3. What worried you the most at the beginning of your work in acquisitions?
4. What did you feel most unprepared for?
5. What acquisitions duties most surprised you?

The first prompt, “What worried you the most?” led to active conversation around areas of anxiety including the fear of making mistakes, particularly because of the budget implications. The choice of the word “worry” was deliberate, as **Cronk** and **Fleming** had identified anxiety as one of the central issues confronting library acquisitions workers. Anxiety around budget and finance responsibilities was very common, ranging from

finance workflows to negotiation and power dynamics of vendor relationships. A lack of clarity about existing practices also emerged as a concern. A participant discussed her fear of the unknown, explaining that without documentation of her predecessor’s process, she felt pushed to pantomime efforts without understanding why the approach was in place. Many in the room verbally agreed with this point, and it was echoed in many of the written responses as well.

The second prompt, “What were you most unprepared for?” provoked lively discussion of a variety of tools, techniques, and practical realities including data analysis, licensing, budget projection methods, and institutional process. In written responses to the second prompt, common responses highlighted being unprepared for considering and pivoting to see the “big picture” of library acquisitions. Moving from the emotional effort and toll of acquisitions work to the practical and logistical discussion of process provides an interesting counterpoint. Responses indicate that acquisitions workers find themselves unprepared not only for the daily work of acquisitions, but also for asking the more fundamental questions. Taken together, the expressed need is for resources that engage and support acquisitions workers holistically.

The third prompt, “What acquisitions duties most surprised you?” led to a discussion of the multifaceted and evolving role of acquisitions librarians. Acquisitions librarians must be knowledgeable in finance, university operations, library collections, publishing, electronic resources, and more. The scope of the work, the mechanics of the work, and the many stakeholders (donors, reference and outreach librarians, vendors, and administrators) all amplified a sense of being unprepared. Written responses indicated communication might be the most important skill in acquisitions work. Acquisitions workers must translate needs and demands

across disparate groups, often without tools or resources which could make that work easier. Throughout the discussions, we see that many of our information and training needs overlap, as do our collective experiences. How can we share experiences and approaches to ease the transition into acquisitions work?

In terms of identified core knowledges, written responses included a wide and ranging collection of thoughts, the top ten most frequently occurring consolidated and summarized below:

1. Change Management
2. Relationship Management
3. Systems Management
4. Ordering/Invoicing/Records Management
5. Assessment Skills
6. Finance Understanding
7. Licensing Practice
8. Negotiation Skills
9. Critical Thinking
10. Institutional Knowledge

Many of these are elusive concepts, and largely contextual or at least partially situational. Deeper investigation is needed to plan for resources and tools that would begin to address these areas of knowledge, skill, and understanding. For instance, institutional knowledge is entirely contextual. Successful ways to approach gaining institutional knowledge, however, might be a useful area to explore.

As **Cronk** and **Fleming** move to continue to explore and code the feedback and findings from this initial engagement, focus will shift to a deeper investigation of needs and a plan for future exploration. Future activities and opportunities for participation will be detailed at “*Everything Nobody Taught You About Library Acquisitions Work.*” 🌱

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provenance, subject, target audience, licensing, accessibility, adaptability, content quality, pedagogy, interface design, ancillary materials, and competing works. A set of standardized rubrics accompany these elements, along with text boxes for more detailed analysis.

It is important to recognize that course materials are evaluated and adopted by the instructors themselves, who care first and foremost about the quality of the instruction they offer. If they are advocates of open education, they have become so only after a thoroughgoing assessment of its value for their students. For OER to become accepted as alternatives to commercial works, it is essential that instructors have confidence in them, meaning, specifically, that their quality be judged equal to or better than that of their

commercial counterparts. Rigorous, objective reviews, written not as advocacy but as analysis, can play an important role in this process, creating quality benchmarks supporting the enormous creative energies liberated by the open education movement. 🌱

Endnotes

1. The results of our study are summarized in a **Choice** white paper written by **Steven Bell**, Associate University Librarian at **Temple University**, available on our website at <http://www.choice360.org/librarianship/whitepaper>.
2. The **Choice** review template is available at <https://choice360.org/content/1-open-choice/choice-oer-review-template.pdf> and is published under a CC-BY license. Please use freely and share your suggestions for improvement with us!

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odologies; the traditional textbook publishers will bring these ideas into their offerings; and many of those textbooks will find their way into inclusive access programs as librarians take charge. OER, in other words, though likely to hold only a small share of the market, will emerge as the shaper of new instructional materials offered under all business models, triggering a wave of investment in innovations in the college market, which the good lord knows badly needs it. 🌱