

The British Columbia Open Textbook Project

Background

High textbook prices have become both a financial and an academic barrier for students pursuing post-secondary education. In North America, textbook publishers, under increasing pressure to recoup costs in the first year of a textbook release in order to undercut the second year used textbook market, have been increasing the price of textbooks dramatically. The rise in the price of textbooks has outpaced the rise in other consumer products 3-to-1 over the past 30 years. As a result, students are taking drastic measures to combat the price of textbooks. Many are taking fewer classes as a direct result of higher textbook costs, leading to longer program completion terms. Some are forgoing buying textbooks altogether, which can have significant detrimental effects on their learning.

To help alleviate this, the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education launched the British Columbia Open Textbook Project in the fall of 2012. The goal of the project is to reduce the cost of higher education for students by promoting and developing openly licensed textbooks. To date, the province has provided \$2 million dollars to help promote the use and development of open textbooks within the province of BC.

Given its history administering collaborative OER projects within the BC post-secondary system, BCcampus was asked to develop and administer the program. BCcampus is a publicly funded organization that encourages the collaborative development and use of Open Educational Resources in the British Columbia post-secondary system. This is done primarily through grant funding initiatives to institutions for the development of Open Educational Resources. BCcampus also hosts SOL²R, a learning object repository where post-secondary educators can share openly licensed teaching and learning materials.

Keywords and OEP themes

OEP keywords: Lower costs for students

Project Implementation and Key Initiatives

Shortly following the fall 2012 announcement, BCcampus brought together a provincial wide steering committee to advise BCcampus during

the initial start-up phase of the project. The steering committee included a number of different stakeholder groups representing various institutions from across the province, and included representation from student groups, faculty, senior administrators, institutional librarians and bookstores, teaching and learning centres, and the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT).

In the initial funding grant, the Ministry of Advanced Education targeted the top 40 most highly enrolled undergraduate subject areas within the province of BC. Enrollment analysis was done to determine the top 40 subject areas within the province. From this list, BCcampus undertook an environmental scan to determine if there were existing open textbooks that had been created in other jurisdictions that could be matched to the top 40 list. A number of existing open textbooks were found and, by April of 2013, an online repository was launched with 10 textbooks.

In order to begin to engage faculty with the textbooks and to address the common concern over the quality of open textbooks, BCcampus launched a textbook review program in which qualified faculty from any of the 25 institutions from BC were paid \$250 to review a textbook in the collection. The reviews were based on a standard rubric and publically posted alongside the textbook in the collection.

In the Spring of 2013, the first Call for Proposals were released; one focused on

finding faculty who wished to adapt one of the existing textbooks in the collection based on the faculty reviews, while the second focused on creating new textbooks for subject areas where no existing resources could be found.

While these specific textbook projects got started, there were a number of parallel initiatives focusing on system engagement underway. These included:

- Numerous presentations on open textbooks to discipline specific articulation committees and institutional departments;
- a number of both face to face and online workshops on how to adopt and adapt open textbooks were delivered;
- launch of the annual Open Textbook Summit, bringing together faculty, administrators, staff, students and open education advocates from across the system to discuss open textbooks;
- the development of the BCOER Librarians Community of Practice to help develop institutional support systems for faculty looking to adopt open textbooks;
- the development of an Accessibility Toolkit in cooperation with CAPER-BC (The Centre of Accessible Post-Secondary Educational Resources) to ensure that the development of open textbooks are done with accessibility front and centre;
- the development of a Faculty Fellows program and embedding three teaching faculty from across the system deeply into the project as advisors and participants.

The Faculty Fellows have also been leading the BCcampus Open Textbook research program in partnership with the OER Research Hub at the Open University in the U.K.;

- content creation “sprints” where small groups of faculty gather together to collaboratively create open textbooks and ancillary textbook resources in short, intense multi-day content authoring events.

All resources developed as part of this project have been openly licensed, including a faculty authoring guide.

Outcomes

While there has been some formative program assessment and metrics collected as the project has matured, there has been no formal summative project evaluation done as yet. This is scheduled to be completed in the fall of 2015 when the final textbooks in the project have been released. However, a number of outcomes are being tracked as part of the project, some of which are of specific interest to key stakeholders. For example, the Ministry of Advanced Education has provided funding based on the number of textbooks that are made available for faculty to use. In this regard, there will be 120 open textbooks in the collection by the fall of 2015 that align with the top 40 target subject areas from the first round of funding, and a number of target areas in trades and skills training programs that was announced in the second round of funding.

A more telling outcome has been the number of displacing adoptions of open textbooks across the system. A displacing adoption is where a commercial textbook has been fully replaced by an open textbook in a course section which results in direct savings to students. To date (June 2015), open textbooks have been used in 174 course sections across 15 of the 25 public post-secondary institutions in BC. This translates into direct student savings of between \$541,000 and \$721,462.

Issues & challenges

During the course of the project, a number of issues and challenges were experienced. As an Open Educational Resource Project, our challenges are not uncommon.

1. Faculty have difficulty finding suitable open textbooks. The paradigm of open textbooks does place more work on faculty to find and vet resources on their own. This is in comparison to a commercial textbook publisher who often has an assigned sales representative to support and guide faculty who are looking to adopt a textbook.
2. Faculty lack the time to adequately redesign their course to accommodate a new textbook. Adopting any textbook, open or commercial, often requires a significant investment in terms of redeveloping or redesigning course material.
3. There is a lack of understanding about how open licenses work. Potential open textbook adopters remain confused as to how open licenses work, what can and cannot be used, and how to properly attribute the resources they use.
4. Lack of ancillary materials for open textbooks is a barrier to adoption. Prebuilt question banks, presentation slides, online homework systems, and an instructor’s manual are often requested resources that are not often available with open textbooks.
5. Lack of technical understanding of how eBooks work. When made available electronically, open textbooks are free and can take advantage of digital affordances that are unavailable in print. However, many students and faculty are still unaware of how to effectively use e-book formats such as ePub, and the uptake of ePub among both students and faculty is still low.
6. Tracking adoption statistics is challenging and time consuming. Faculty who adopt an open textbook are under no obligation to report that adoption to BCcampus. While we do have access to download statistics and website analytics, finding out what textbooks are being used in which courses, and if that textbook has displaced a publisher’s resources is a manual process that relies primarily on faculty self-reporting to BCcampus that they have adopted a textbook.

Insights and Recommendations for National and/or Institutional Development

1. Adopting an open textbook cannot be the responsibility of a lone instructor, at least not yet. There are many barriers for the average faculty member juggling a full course load, and they do require support systems within the institution to help them make the transition to open textbooks. This can be in the form of assisting faculty with sourcing high quality open textbooks, adapting and customizing open textbooks to fit their pedagogical needs, and providing instructions on how to work with openly licensed learning content.
2. Recognize that adopting an open textbook often requires a significant amount of course redevelopment by faculty. There should be support systems in place to assist faculty with deeply embedding the open textbook within their course so there is strong alignment between the textbook and the course.
3. As our work shows, a great number of open textbooks already exist. Therefore, a major textbook initiative should not focus on creating new material, but instead focus on the curating, adapting and enhancing of existing open material. These adaptations could be to add or remove content, regionalizing the content, or enhancing by creating supporting ancillary resources that would lead to great adoption.

Contact person and details

Clint Lalonde, Senior Manager (Acting),
Open Education, BCcampus
clalonde@bccampus.ca

