CONSIDER THE ADVANTAGES OF OER

Open education resources (OER) are free textbooks, lesson plans, activities, videos, and quizzes that are used for instruction. We began to see their development over a decade ago as a response to the skyrocketing cost of textbooks. In the years since, as the use of OER has grown, we've learned more about how the cost of these materials impacts our students, and have also realized the numerous and significant pedagogical benefits that OER provides.

It might seem like purchasing instructional materials is insignificant when compared to tuition and other university expenses. However, consider that food insecurity at US colleges and universities hovers around 50%, and somewhere between 11% and 19% of students at 4-year schools are housing insecure. For many students, food and housing simply must be prioritized over books. This often means not having access to course materials for the start of classes (or ever), placing many students at an immediate disadvantage. This often snowballs into poor grades, course withdrawals, and difficulty persisting in university endeavors. Because OER are free or very low cost and carry a copyright that allows for sharing, editing, and revising, students can have access as a course is beginning, and can retain access to materials once the course is completed.

Pedagogically, OER provides numerous benefits. Rather than requiring an expensive textbook (and sometimes leaving large parts unused), instructors can choose or create only the materials they need. OER materials can also be reorganized in a manner that makes sense for the instructor. Further, educators from a wide range of disciplines have created materials that go beyond readings. Activities, lesson plans, homework, and other media can also be found. OER also presents an ideal opportunity to revise course materials to take advantage of our most current, evidence-based understanding of best practices in teaching and learning.

Now, take a moment to consider your current textbooks and/or course materials from a perspective of diversity, equity, and inclusion. To repurpose a question raised by Michael Apple, **"Whose knowledge is of most worth?"** Whose voices, perspectives, and images predominate? Whose are excluded? OER provides us with the opportunity to revise, edit, or create anew educational materials that are not only more reflective of our diverse society, but also include voices and perspectives that might be missing from one's content and conversation.

OER also offers an opportunity to make instructional materials accessible and equitable. Examples presented in the linked article include making use of descriptive hyperlinks, adding captioning to videos, and formatting materials so that they are clear and consistent, especially across multiple devices.

Initial questions about the quality of OER are understandable. Yes, there is some work to do when reviewing OER for adoption. An open license does not guarantee quality. Sometimes, OER goes through a peer review process, but vetting for accuracy and rigor is up to faculty who want to make use of it. So, careful review is imperative. While this review is a necessary step, you will often find that materials are of high quality. An in-depth examination of peer-review studies on OER quality and efficacy found the vast majority of OER as good, or better than traditional materials…and, by the way, creating original OER materials is a valid (and valuable) scholarly activity.

Here at La Salle, several of our colleagues have created and/or make use of OER. In fact, our BUSCA program is entirely OER-based. **La Salle's OER Working Group** is in the process of developing a survey to learn more about the use of OER across campus.

With the support of our Provost, and the Deans of each of our schools, the goal of the OER Working group is to create the structures that will help more of us understand, find, develop, and use these materials. **OER is not the right solution in every class or program**, but the opportunities it presents are numerous and significant for pedagogy, learning, the well-being of our students, their attendance and persistence, our institutional mission, and our own scholarship. So, we invite you to learn more and investigate whether or not OER can meet your needs.

Join us at one of our OER 101 sessions (2/16 or 3/28 in the library). If you are further along, or if you are currently using OER, please let us know!

ENGAGING PRACTICES ON CAMPUS

Barbara Allen, Associate Professor of History writes:
Since 2018, I have employed Reacting to the Past (RTTP) pedagogy in my classes. Specifically designed for higher education, RTTP games employ role play, writing, speaking, and debate. They encourage students to take leadership roles, cooperate, compete, and innovate.

Students assume the roles of historical characters representing philosophical, scientific, cultural, or ideological perspectives, and must attempt to achieve goals specific to their character. In factions composed of characters with similar views, students work together to accomplish objectives. Instructors operate as guides on the sidelines and assess student work while they run class sessions. Students do not operate according to a script. Contingency, individual personalities, and group dynamics influence voting, so the result of a game can differ from historical reality. Nevertheless, students' grades depend on representing their character's views faithfully.

Games usually unfold over three to four weeks of classes but can be compressed or expanded. Materials include a "game manual" comprising a historical narrative, game rules, and primary sources; an instructor's manual; and role sheets. During setup, instructors guide students through the historical background and primary sources. A postmortem session dissects how historical reality compares to how events unfolded in the game. Games are available for a range of disciplines.

PRACTICE TESTING IMPROVES LEARNING

In class, I often make my thoughts and actions explicit for my students (many of whom will be teachers). That way, they gain insight into my thinking and behavior as an educator. Recently, following the review of the first quiz in my EDC 103 class, I asked them what they thought about the purpose of quizzes. Almost all of the responses were a version of, "so that you know if we learned the material", or "so that you can give us a grade"…but, that is not why I use quizzes, nor is it how I suggest (during this conversation) they think about quizzes.

I start with the idea that **we learn by thinking, and that learning is about getting information out of our brains, rather than in.** The more we can practice retrieving information, connecting new information with concepts we already know, and using new knowledge to solve problems, the better we learn. In addition, we need to work hard at that recall (before checking for an answer or reviewing notes or text). So, from my perspective, a quiz is a **structured opportunity for retrieval practice**. In fact, because students know about these quizzes in advance, they should have prepared with retrieval practice on their own leading up to the in-class quiz.

Practice testing, in fact, all forms of retrieval practice, consistently benefits student learning. The linked meta-analysis found medium and large effect sizes in almost 60% of the studies analyzed. However, it is a challenging strategy for students to use, because to fully benefit, one must work at it consistently. To support our students we need to make retrieval practice part of our instruction and use it in ways that benefit our students.

David Didau suggests that **retrieval practice lead to success** for students. Cognitive effort has to be applied in that students should not immediately check for answers, but retrieval practice that does not quickly lead to success could create learning setbacks. Outlines where students work to fill in missing information can be a beneficial starting point. Next, information being retrieved needs to be useful. So, helping students focus on information that is frequently necessary is important. Finally, we need to support students as they engage in retrieval-based in-class activity and homework, so that they use the practice regularly.

Practice testing, especially of the low or no stakes variety, and retrieval practice in other forms should be part of our instructional practice because we know it impacts learning in significant ways. However, our students are typically not used to it, or don't employ it effectively. By building the practices into our work with them, we can both help them learn our content, and perhaps also provide them with new learning strategies for work in other areas.

Willingham writes: "If your students consistently do not ask questions, you should wonder about your relationship with them… They're quiet because they see asking a question as taking a risk. Ask yourself why this is."

and, from this, develops in them facile knowledge and competencies. With those tools at their disposal, the world can become their oyster!

So, what do learners take away from our courses? In the long haul, their authentic apprenticeship within our fields is among the most valuable…that they will have become expert (not in a finite sense), so they continue doing and applying and learning the ins and outs of finding solutions to ill-structured problems that do not have answers at the back of the book. What ChatGPT and AI cannot yet replace are the fruits of *constructivism* and *constructionism* (Sawyer, 2009) that learners would integrate.

Let us apply methodologies intentionally to help make our intended outcomes visible, practicable, well-reasoned, and socially responsible. Get to know students, too, insofar as they are the voices of the communities to which we belong and to whom we owe tangible and valuable goods and services for their and our benefit. Indeed, ours is still a worthwhile enterprise.

Sawyer, R.K. (Ed.) (2009). *The Cambridge handbook of the learning sciences*. Cambridge

Visit our archive to access materials from our workshops and helpful resources to support teaching and learning. Find past issues of the DLSI Newsletter here.

TEACHING FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Br. Don Alger, Instructor, Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry

At the end of the day, we teachers share our giftedness with those confided to us for we do not impart what we ourselves do not already possess. To be sure, our students enroll in courses to satisfy degree requirements. But there's more: when we ignite their inner flame, students begin to acquire a passion for some discipline, theory, idea, or research project with which they got involved through our mentorship. T**he masterful instructor starts with recognizing that which students bring to the table**

(Image generated by DALL-E)