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Open Educational Resources for the Kingdom

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Abstract

"OERs can reduce the financial burden for our students and promote Kingdom values in education."

Posting about the educational value of open source software from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

https://inallthings.org/open-educational-resources-for-the-kingdom/

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One of the things I love about my work as a mathematics professor at a small university is that I get to stretch outside of the esoteric subdiscipline of mathematics that so fascinated me as a graduate student and cover less familiar territory with my students. One of the key resources for instructors in my situation is the textbook. However, commercial college textbooks and other course resources are expensive; their cost has increased at several times the rate of inflation in recent years. This has often resulted in students simply opting not to purchase required texts for their courses. Fortunately, a growing movement toward *open educational resources* (OERs) provides some relief, and, as we'll see, supports a vision of education that would have all students flourish.

What are OERs?

A helpful definition of an OER is provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which has supported the development of several such resources: OERs are "teaching, learning and research materials in any medium – digital or otherwise – that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions." A typical OER license allows the user to *retain* the resource (to make, own, and control copies of the content); *reuse* the resource (use the content in a wide range of ways); *revise* the resource (adapt, adjust, modify, or alter it); *remix* the resource (combine with other material to make something new); and *redistribute* the resource (share copies of the original or remixed versions with others).

In short, OERs are free to access (though possibly low-cost physical copies may be produced) and free to use in nearly any way the user sees fit. Numerous examples of OERs include the mathematics texts *Active Calculus* and *Rings with Inquiry* (my own

contribution to the OER movement), the entire LibreTexts library, which includes texts from across the disciplines, and WeBWorK, an open source platform for online homework.

Why use OERs?

As David I. Smith has identified, even the smallest pedagogical moves can have an enormous impact on how students perceive the Christian character of their education. The choice of textbook and accompanying educational resources is no different. I claim that the adoption of OERs is an affirmation of certain Kingdom values: *stewardship*, *love of neighbor*, *community* and *freedom*. Let me explain.

Stewardship: There is no doubt that the use of well-chosen OERs enables students to better steward their financial resources. Studies suggest that college textbooks can cost students over $1000/year, a number that often causes students to simply not purchase even required texts for their courses. It will not matter how excellent an instructor deems a text if students decide not to buy it. OERs push against this by being freely available, usually digitally, in many formats for students to access as best suits their needs.

Love of neighbor: Relatedly, adopting OERs is an opportunity for instructors to show love to their students. Since OERs are freely accessible, students don't have to wait for financial aid to come through or books to be shipped–they have access to course materials on Day 1. The use of OERs sends the message to students that the instructor intends to create an open and inclusive classroom, in which not having $100 or more to buy the textbook is not a barrier to participation. It is true that the lack of supporting resources (e.g., slides, solutions manuals, etc.) provided by a typical commercial publisher may mean the instructor has to supplement the OER with their own materials. However, this is just another opportunity for the instructor to show love to their students. It is also a chance for the instructor to make meaningful contributions to the community surrounding the OER.

Community: OERs have their philosophical roots in the Open Source Software (OSS) *community*, which leads to a benefit identified by Karl-Dieter Crisman in his article, *Open Source Software and Christian Thought*: the community of users and contributors that springs up around an OSS (and OER!) project. The instructors adopting the OER feel more invested in its success than an instructor adopting a commercial text. This can lead to instructors making corrections, suggestions, or possibly writing new material for the OER, which in turn encourages the author(s) and others in the community to continue to refine and improve the resource.

Freedom: One of the hallmarks of OSS is *freedom*, in the senses of both cost and speech. Translated to OERs, I'll suggest the following freedom: *free knowledge of Creation*. Christians have interpreted the cultural mandate as a command to develop the potential in Creation. Much of this work has involved studying it and building the systems of knowledge which have formed into the academic disciplines we know today. Knowledge of these disciplines is required to meet the challenges of contemporary culture. Storing this knowledge in expensive commercial textbooks makes it inaccessible to large swaths of humanity and necessarily restricts their ability to learn, grow, and flourish as image-bearers of God.

Despite the arguments presented above, OERs are not a panacea. While they do reduce the cost of education for students, poorly written OERs can cause unsustainable support burdens for instructors. Additionally, there are real questions about how to adequately fund the creation, maintenance, and hosting for these (often digital) resources. If you are looking to reduce your dependence on commercial texts, look for OERs that have been classroom-tested; your professional societies may maintain a list of vetted resources, such as the American Institute of Mathematics' Open Textbook Initiative. However, when used wisely, OERs can reduce the financial burden for our students and promote Kingdom values in education.