Moving forward on OERs: Building Capacity through the creation of a cross campus dedicated OER team

The University of Alberta Library has supported the promotion, development and use of Open Educational Resources (OER) for a number of years, but 2020 led to significant growth in our OER activities. With the rapid onset of emergency online teaching and learning requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a dramatic increase in demand for promoting, locating, and creating OER. To respond to our campus’ needs during this time, we established an ad-hoc group to identify high demand textbooks and locate OER with the potential to replace existing course materials. At the same time, the library promoted its open textbook publishing program to University staff who were interested in creating or adapting OER. As subject librarians got involved in a campaign to reach out to instructors, some also became interested in creating OER to support their online library instruction. Outside of the library, open education activities were also growing rapidly, with a web of collaborations happening across our campus and beyond: an OER awards program jointly funded between the Provost office and Centre for Teaching and Learning completed a round of funding, and grassroots groups including campus and provincial advocacy groups bolstered support for OER.

As the academic year progressed, we recognized the need for a coordinated approach, and moved to formalize and expand our activities with the creation of a Open Education team. With a mandate to increase OER adoption and use and reduce textbook costs for students, the OE team is responsible for bringing together the Copyright Office, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Students’ Union and the Library. Additionally, the team features a diverse range of library staff, covering multiple subject areas and functional positions. This broad membership gives us leverage to work together to build awareness of OER across campus, a key component of the first UNESCO OER Recommendation.
A significant goal of the Open Education team is to build capacity for OER both within and outside of the library. We seek to achieve this by integrating OER work with Library programs, communications and workflows; by working with other campus partners to develop mechanisms for faculty and students to become better aware of affordable options for course materials; by developing custom approaches to engage disciplines and faculties with OER; and by creating and sharing professional development opportunities for library staff to develop expertise around OER.

Although the team is still new, several promising activities are already underway: information sessions around copyright and OER were offered during our annual spring training for library staff; the OER library guide is going to be further developed and new promotional campaigns rolled out to increase the visibility of our work; faculty advocates are being identified and a community of practice is being established; and we will partner with the Student’s Union in support of their efforts to display textbook cost indicators during course registration. To support users, we have also developed expertise with the Pressbooks platform. Advocates within the library who have learned to use Pressbooks are, in turn, offering training for other staff and faculty. We have built awareness about OER as a no-cost and web accessible option for textbooks, which has inspired instructors to adapt or create their own OER. As more instructors on campus adopt the platform, we set up a series of drop in Pressbooks office hours to help with troubleshooting and answer questions.

In March 2020, our Pressbooks platform was also expanded to include any institution across the province of Alberta seeking to use Pressbooks, free of charge. The Open Education Alberta program hosted by the University of Alberta Pressbooks infrastructure currently provides Pressbooks access for ten institutions, directly supporting the UNESCO OER recommendation of building capacity of stakeholders to create, access, re-use, adapt and redistribute OER. ISBNs and DOIs are assigned to all published Pressbooks OER which are shared in multiple open repositories. This ensures the accessibility of OER, allowing for others to find, adapt and reuse them for the greatest impact.

There have been many lessons learned during the creation of the Open Access Team. In previous years, our OER program has been reactionary, responding to needs as they emerge, and
building relationships across campus as possible. The creation of a designated Open Education team has established a new way for our library to strategically approach OER work. For example, working with the Student’s Union to promote OER at annual Be Book Smart events and collaborating with the Centre for Teaching and Learning for Open Education Week. The most important lesson learned is that it is important to develop a proactive approach to OER work instead of reactionary response to campus needs. This creates a more sustainable workflow for librarians involved with OER outreach and service delivery.

One challenge we face is that the University of Alberta is a large campus with multiple libraries and specialized units. It can be difficult to ensure messages have reached all staff and that these staff are sharing consistent information about our OER services with their users. A team OER approach can be utilized to get key stakeholders from across your library system informed and up-to-date on the status of OER on your campus to ensure that the entire library system is on the same page.

One important recommendation is to include external partners in work being done at the library to help coordinate services that meet the needs of your campus. This also avoids duplication of work.

By sharing our efforts to coordinate more impactful and sustainable OER services for our campus, we hope these lessons will encourage others to think of how they can implement a successful OER program on their own campuses.