What are Open Textbooks?*

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Abstract

An overview of what open textbooks are, how they are created, and how you can participate.

The module "Students and OER[1]" presented OER activities you can use with your students. This module, "What are Open Textbooks?," provides an overview of open textbooks.

1 What are Open Textbooks?

An emerging development in OER is **open textbooks**, which are textbooks that are freely available with nonrestrictive licenses. Covering a wide range of disciplines, open textbooks are available to download and print in various file formats from several web sites and OER repositories. Open textbooks can range from public domain books to existing textbooks to textbooks created specifically for OER. Open textbooks help solve the problems of the high cost of textbooks, book shortages, and access to textbooks as well as providing the capacity to better meet local teaching and learning needs.

1.1 What do open textbooks look like?

There is a wide range of designs for open textbooks. The number of sites that provide access to them reflects the diversity of their design. Several file formats are often provided for open textbooks; typical formats are: HTML, Adobe PDF, and plain text. To download an open textbook, locate one from an OER repository or web site. The following list illustrates the vast landscape of sites that make open textbooks freely available. Go to one or more of these sites to locate an open textbook of interest to you:

- Project Gutenberg[2] was the first producer of free electronic books. See their top 100 downloads: http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/scores/top[3] .
- Wikibooks[4] is a Wikimedia project started in 2003 with the mission to create a free collection of open-content textbooks that anyone can edit. Wikibooks provides support for multiple languages[5] .
- Free High School Science Texts[6] (FHSST) was initiated by young South African scientists and now brings together volunteers from around the world who are willing to contribute to the writing of the books.

*Version 1.7: Feb 26, 2009 2:33 pm -0600
†http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/
[1]"Students and OER" <http://cnx.org/content/m15224/latest/>
[2]http://www.gutenberg.org/
[3]http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/scores/top
[4]http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Help:About
[5]http://www.wikibooks.org/
[6]http://www.fhsst.org/

- The California Open Source Textbook Project[7] (COSTP) is a collaborative, public/private undertaking. It has been created to address the high cost, content range, and consistent shortages of K-12 textbooks in California.
- Open Book Project[8] is aimed at the educational community and seeks to encourage and coordinate collaboration among students and teachers for the development of high quality, freely distributable textbooks and educational materials on a wide range of topics.
- Manybooks.net[9] provides free eBooks for PDAs, iPods, or eBook readers. Books are available in several languages.
- The Assayer[10] provides a catalog of books whose authors have made them available for free.

1.2 Using open textbooks in teaching and learning

There are a number of advantages to adopting an open textbook over a traditional textbook. The ability to customize a text so that it is more closely aligned with one's teaching philosophy and pedagogical approach is a benefit to teachers. Students benefit from this as well; with targeted topics, activities, and assignments customized for their individual learning needs, the possibility of a higher engagement with the material is more likely than with a traditional textbook. The capacity to customize a text into discernable chunks offers a more personalized approach to learning.

The following table compares the capabilities of open and traditional textbooks.

Open textbooks	**Traditional textbooks**
dynamic	static
modifiable/customizable	non-customizable
targeted in-depth material	generic material
timely	dated
personalized for local conditions	standardized content
addresses multiple learning styles	assumes a uniform learning style
free	costly

Table 1

Read about a teacher's experience in adopting an open textbook: No Books, No Problem: Teaching Without a Text[11] .

Read about how an editor from a major publisher gives his insider's perspective[12] of the inner workings of textbook publishing.

Read Monte Wolverton's humorous look[13] at the textbook creation process (via Edutopia's web site).

See a list of ideas for How-To: Toss the Text[14] .

[7] http://www.opensourcetext.org/
[8] http://www.ibiblio.org/obp
[9] http://manybooks.net/
[10] http://theassayer.org/
[11] http://www.edutopia.org/banish
[12] http://www.edutopia.org/node/1195
[13] http://www.edutopia.org/images/graphics/001300_73pop.gif
[14] http://www.edutopia.org/how-toss-text

1.3 How are open textbooks created?

Here are two stories of how two different groups collaborated to produce open textbooks in a **peer production** environment.

A South African graduate student saw a need when a group of high school students told him they did not have a science textbook. This encounter led to a worldwide initiative called Free High School Science Texts[15] that provides free science and mathematics textbooks for Grades 10 to 12 science learners in South Africa.

An interested group of individuals started a Free Textbooks group during the 2007 iCommons[16] Summit in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The group seeks to create a knowledge base to help educators worldwide develop Free Textbook projects. For more information, go to: http://wikieducator.org/Free_Textbooks[17] . Subscribe to their mailing list: http://freeculture.org/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/freetextbooks[18] .

1.4 How can you participate?

Open textbook projects rely on volunteers who are committed to a vision of providing high-quality, freely available textbooks to the worldwide community of educators and learners. Most of the projects mentioned in this module have information on their site on how you can participate in their project. There are many levels of participation; for example, you can:

- subscribe to their mailing list or news feed
- proofread pages
- contribute content you have already created
- help locate authors who may want to contribute content
- author new content
- create images
- write a review about an open textbook
- provide translation support for content
- donate funds to keep the project running
- use open textbooks in your teaching and learning and talk with your colleagues about your experience
- host an in-person event for content creators to gather and work together
- contact the project's coordinator and ask what is needed and how you can help.

1.5 OER stories from around the world

It's 2 am in South Africa[19] and a delivery van is taking 100 hard copies of the free high school science text to a school in a small village ...

Your experience using open and freely shared course-related materials is valuable in the reuse and evolution of the materials. Tell us your story[20] ; how you've used these materials and how their use has impacted how you teach or learn.

2 Activity: Review an Open Textbook

Using the sites mentioned in this module, review a few open textbooks that you can use in your teaching and learning. If you are not ready to replace your existing traditional textbook with an open textbook, analyze what topics are weak or missing in your present textbook and use the open textbook for supplemental materials.

[15] http://www.fhsst.org/
[16] http://icommons.org/
[17] http://wikieducator.org/Free_Textbooks
[18] http://freeculture.org/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/freetextbooks
[19] http://elearningnetworks.com/OERCommons/stories/southafrica.html
[20] http://elearningnetworks.com/OERCommons/stories/submityourstory.html

3 Activity: Share Your Experience

We're discussing the new avenues for teachers and learners to select and augment learning resources that meet one's unique teaching and learning needs, including open textbooks. In the OER Commons discussion "Teaching and Learning,[21] " share your thoughts about this important issue. Here are a few questions to consider in your post:

1. If you have used an open textbook, share your experience.
2. If you haven't used an open textbook, what are the adoption issues?
3. What have been your students' reactions to using an open textbook?
4. What are your thoughts or experiences with participating in open textbook projects? What role(s) did you take? (e.g., authoring content, editor, etc.)

4 For More Information

The following resources have been selected to provide more information on concepts we covered in this module.

- OER Commons textbooks: http://www.oercommons.org/courses/material_types/textbooks[22]
- Public Domain Textbook Sources: http://cnx.org/content/m14471/latest[23]

5 Other modules in this course include ...

- Why OER?[24]
- Finding OER Materials You Can Start Using Now[25]
- Tagging, Rating, and Reviewing OER Materials[26]
- My OER Portfolio[27]
- Submitting Materials to OER Commons[28]
- OER Licensing and Conditions of Use[29]
- What is Localization?[30]
- Students and OER[31]
- OER Case Study
- Glossary[32]

6 OER Commons Links

For more information about OER Commons, send an email to info@oercommons.org[33] .

Use this feedback form[34] to send OER Commons general feedback, a feature request, or information about a bug/problem you had using the site.

[21] http://www.oercommons.org/matters/oer_topic/teaching-and-learning
[22] http://www.oercommons.org/courses/material_types/textbooks
[23] "OER Public Domain Textbook Sources" <http://cnx.org/content/m14471/latest/>
[24] "Why OER?" <http://cnx.org/content/m15211/latest/>
[25] "Finding OER Materials You Can Start Using Now" <http://cnx.org/content/m15213/latest/>
[26] "Tagging, Rating, and Reviewing OER Materials" <http://cnx.org/content/m15214/latest/>
[27] "My OER Portfolio" <http://cnx.org/content/m15215/latest/>
[28] "Submitting Materials to OER Commons" <http://cnx.org/content/m15235/latest/>
[29] "OER Licensing and Conditions of Use" <http://cnx.org/content/m15234/latest/>
[30] "What is Localization?" <http://cnx.org/content/m15222/latest/>
[31] "Students and OER" <http://cnx.org/content/m15224/latest/>
[32] "OER Glossary" <http://cnx.org/content/m15223/latest/>
[33] info@oercommons.org
[34] http://www.oercommons.org/feedback

To see the ever-growing list of the new content providers and contributors to OER Commons, visit the Content Providers[35] page often. You can be one too!

7 "Quotable Quote"

Knowledge is the only kind of wealth that multiples when you give it away.[36]

8 About This Module

The "How Tos" of OER Commons is a set of learning modules evolving out of the development of OER Commons (http://www.oercommons.org[37]), a teaching and learning network for free-to-use educational materials from around the world, created and licensed by the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME).

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For more information, visit http://www.iskme.org[38] and http://elearningnetworks.com[39] .

[35] http://www.oercommons.org/oer/providers
[36] Schwartz, P. (1996). *The Art of the Long View.* New York: Doubleday.
[37] http://www.oercommons.org/
[38] http://www.iskme.org/
[39] http://elearningnetworks.com/