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COMMENTARY

Coming in the Back Door: Leveraging Open Textbooks To Promote Scholarly Communications on Campus

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KICKING DOWN THE DOOR (AND FAILING)

In 2007 I was assigned the responsibility for creating a scholarly communications initiative at Temple. Though lacking deep knowledge of the issues, I committed to a serious effort to raise awareness, build collective support, and contribute change to scholarly publishing practices at my institution. As a first step, I attended the ARL/ACRL Institute on Scholarly Communication,[1] where I improved my understanding of the different components of a scholarly communications initiative, and learned strategies for engaging faculty on a variety of levels. However, there was a problem: I was ready, but no one else was. Efforts to engage our faculty in campus-wide change received scant attention and virtually no support. A vast lack of awareness presented a huge barrier; many faculty members I encountered had no understanding of the issues. The rising cost of STEM journals was simply of no consequence to their work. As our dean liked to relate, one health sciences faculty member asked, "What crisis? The library provides access to almost any full-text article I need for my research."

It was easy to identify greater awareness as the solution to kick-starting our initiative, but creating that awareness was difficult. My dean and I reached out to faculty on several fronts: we launched a faculty scholarly communications committee; our librarians who served as liaisons to academic departments were asked to work with faculty to conduct a scholarly communications assessment to determine levels of awareness about issues such as open access publishing; and workshops on author rights and copyright were developed to reach faculty who might be concerned about their own dealings with academic publishers. While these efforts advanced the cause, they did so to only a minor extent.

Despite these efforts to connect with faculty on scholarly communications issues, after two years it was clear in my meetings with department chairs that we had made little progress. For example, one faculty member agreed wholeheartedly with the importance of open access, but he had little concern for how many members of the public had open access to his own research. What really mattered to him were the hundred or so top academics in his disciplinary specialty, and his ability to reach them in the field's top scholarly—and closed—journal. Perhaps most frustrating in these first years was that no faculty champion emerged. Certainly, we had faculty who were concerned about the scholarly communication crisis, and some were even open to publishing in open access journals. From out of that minority, however, no leader emerged. Without a strong-minded and influential faculty member to throw weight behind our initiative, little traction was being gained. Clearly, we had a long way to go.

Then something important happened. In 2009 at the American Library Association Midwinter conference I attended the SPARC Forum.[2] The forum featured three

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speakers on a topic new to me, open access textbooks. All three speakers, a student activist, a faculty member, and a bookstore association administrator, spoke passionately about the significant impact of out-of-control textbook prices on college students. With typical print textbooks averaging well over $100, and much more in the sciences, students could expect to spend several hundred dollars each semester on textbooks.

THE PROBLEM (AND OPPORTUNITY) OF TEXTBOOKS

The dilemma, as I interpreted it, was similar to that of the scholarly publishing crisis. Faculty author the textbooks, then turn over the rights to publishers, who in turn sell the content back to the faculty members' students at premium prices. Unlike scholarly journals, where faculty authors mostly earn prestige and career advancement opportunities, textbook publishing holds the potential of royalties. However, as I learned in the session, the vast majority of textbooks actually earn their authors little over time. The speakers also related troubling textbook industry practices, such as frequently issuing new editions with almost no new content or adding in useless features (such as CDs), that raise prices but not value. As with scholarly journals, the solution being touted at the forum was creating open access alternatives.

On my first reference desk shift that semester virtually every question was the same. "Can you tell me if the library has my textbook?" I tried to help each student, though the Temple libraries rarely purchase required textbooks or textbooks of any kind. At that time there were few alternatives to direct students to, as textbook rentals and digital textbooks were only emerging concepts. It quickly became clear to me that our students would take almost any action to avoid the high textbook prices in the bookstore. For example, one day I encountered a student seeking a science textbook. Miraculously, the library had a copy, but it was several editions old and surely contained out-of-date content. That was no problem, the student assured me; it was better to have an old version than to buy the costly new one. What sort of education system are we creating when a science major would prefer to learn with an outdated text? This deplorable situation was only slightly better than other students I encountered later who told me they shared a single text with other students or, even worse, simply decided to get by without the book. This was not right.

Following the SPARC Forum, two things occurred to me. First, while the textbook dilemma had no direct impact on the library budget, it seemed that we should be doing more to tackle this growing crisis for our students, a crisis that needed faculty intervention. Second, the textbook crisis held the potential to serve as the issue to create the awareness needed to get more faculty and graduate students focused on the scholarly communications crisis. I thought of it as a back door approach. If journal pricing, author rights, and open access ignited no spark of concern in our academic community, perhaps the growing attention on the textbook crisis could be the necessary catalyst to create the awareness we had thus far failed to generate. I imagined that our students, owing to their personal stake in textbook crisis, would likely endorse any effort by the library to encourage alternatives to expensive traditional textbooks, and that their interest might provide a new source of campus support for open access initiatives. My dean thought that concept had some possibility so we decided to move forward.

CREATING THE ALTERNATE TEXTBOOK PROJECT

As I explored current practices, it became obvious that the vast majority of academic libraries, like my own, were doing nothing about the textbook crisis. The majority simply acquired no textbooks. An extremely small number of academic libraries allocated funds to buy a single copy of every textbook. A few more allocated funds to purchase a few copies of the textbooks of their top 10 or 20 most heavily-enrolled courses. No one I talked to was exploring the open textbook option, and that made perfect sense. Academic libraries and textbooks, like water and oil, did not mix. Textbooks were outside our domain. Unlike scholarly journals, we had little to do with them. And while purchasing textbooks in limited numbers may have helped a few students in each course, it ultimately supported a broken publishing practice. Why are we not, I asked, applying the same passion for scholarly communications and open access to the world of textbooks?

Then I began conversations on my own campus. As the library's representative to Temple's Teaching, Learning and Technology Roundtable,[3] I brought the textbook issue to the table and sought faculty reaction to a proposal to create more awareness about the textbook crisis. There was immediate support. The textbook pricing problem was something to which our faculty could relate; they knew

how much the books cost and they had first-hand exposure to the problems created for our students. I discovered that one of our more tech-savvy faculty members had stopped using a traditional textbook just that previous semester. He had spent nearly a year compiling learning materials from a wide range of sources—everything from the library's databases, to chapters from open textbooks, to his own writings and open multimedia resources. This provided the perfect model for what came to be known as the alternate textbook.

Around this time I also learned about the Curricular Resource Strategy (CRS), a term coined by Mark Milliron,[4] a leading expert and consultant in higher education. Milliron's premise is that print textbooks are an outmoded model for delivering learning content. He confirmed my belief that the time was ripe for faculty to structure their own instructional content from all the learning objects available to them. To test my ideas, I wrote two columns about CRS[5] and a longer essay about the textbook crisis for *Inside Higher Education*,[6] all of which received an enthusiastic response. I then developed a more formal proposal for an "Alternate Textbook Project" that would be led and funded by the library to support faculty experimentation with alternatives to traditional textbooks. It received the support of my dean, the provost, and the TLTR. I was given the green light to make it happen and the library dean approved funding for the project.

The Alternate Textbook Project sought four primary outcomes:

- Save students money by eliminating expensive textbooks
- Improve student learning with tailored curricular resources
- Support faculty experimentation with open educational resources
- Seed the roots of an institutional culture that supports open sharing of scholarship

The first call for proposals, after vetting from TLTR colleagues, was issued in February 2010. The premise was simple: faculty members would receive a $1,000 grant to eliminate their existing traditional textbook and replace it with a nontraditional alternate textbook. The TLTR decided to offer few restrictions, rules or guidelines in favor of stimulating faculty creativity. This afforded faculty significant leeway in choosing alternative methods, from developing their own content to compiling selected learning objects into an online compendium to adopting an existing open textbook. (Rentals and e-textbooks offer cost-savings but were excluded from this project). Faculty response was generally favorable, with the exception of one faculty member who expressed concern about the impact on royalties for faculty authors. Overall, the response was satisfactory for an initial outing. Eleven faculty members submitted proposals to create alternate textbooks, and the reviewing committee decided that all deserved funding. This limited number of accepted proposals met our available funding and the awardees came from multiple disciplines. As anticipated, those who wrote proposals identified a variety of creative approaches to developing an alternate textbook. In addition to funding, the library also provided support and expertise to help the faculty identify appropriate learning content.

Faculty implemented their alternate textbooks in the fall 2011 semester. Over the summer the library sponsored a meeting where the faculty could meet each other, share their project ideas and progress, and obtain assistance, if needed, with their alternate textbooks. During the fall semester, I maintained correspondence with the first cohort of alternative textbook grant recipients, and sent them occasional links to articles about open educational resources. In November 2011, faculty were reminded about the requirement to prepare an evaluative report on their alternate textbook project, and received a set of guidelines for conducting the evaluation. As part of the evaluation, faculty were urged to survey their students about the project to ascertain what worked well and what needed to improve. Prior to the spring 2012 semester, the library once again sponsored a meeting for the faculty to compare their experiences, share their findings, and provide ideas and suggestions for the second round of the project (already funded by the library).

ALTERNATE TEXTBOOK PROJECT: OUTCOMES

In January 2012, the participating faculty submitted their final evaluations. Among the significant findings:

- Students responded favorably to the elimination of traditional textbooks in all the courses; one faculty member shared that a student approached him after the first class, at which the alternate textbook

project was described, shook his hand, and thanked him profusely for not requiring the traditional, costly economics textbook.

- Learning materials used in these projects included government documents, selected book chapters, multimedia learning objects, digital primary research documents from the library's special collections, and generous links to content in the library's electronic journal and e-book collections.
- While the alternate textbooks required more time to develop compared to the ordering of print textbooks, all the faculty believed that the time invested was well worth it both in terms of cost-savings to students and improved learning.
- Multiple faculty indicated that students spent more time with the learning content owing to the ease of access, facilitated by use of the institution's course management system to organize and deliver the learning content; the general observation was that making the learning content free encouraged its use, and no student needed to forego an expensive textbook or rely on an old edition.
- Faculty, once freed from a traditional textbook, felt more at ease adding content on-the-fly to their alternate textbooks, keeping them up-to-date throughout the semester.
- One faculty member reported feeling less guilt about requiring the students to purchase textbooks, but also pointed out that he felt less pressure to rush through the course material in order to cover the bulk of the textbook—which always made him feel less guilty than covering only a portion of the textbook. The impact of moving at a slower pace, he believed, contributed to improved learning.
- In nearly every course some students indicated they preferred print, traditional textbooks because they consolidated the learning material into a single source that was easy to use. Some students were less enamored having to find the material needed for each class session within the course site, and there was less satisfaction with having to print materials when desired. However, students indicated that the cost-savings of the alternate textbook outweighed all the advantages of print textbooks.

The Alternate Textbook Project was considered a success, but like any first-time project there were identifiable opportunities for improvement, such as more attention on accessibility and leveraging existing open textbooks. The considerable cost savings to students, estimated in the thousands of dollars, was a tangible positive outcome. According to the faculty participants, there was a noticeable improvement in student learning in most of the courses. By its nature, the project got the faculty to explore new ways to identify, organize and deliver learning materials that eliminated the need for traditional textbooks. However, open educational resources were used to a lesser extent than hoped. While the project promoted the importance of open educational resources among the faculty participants, there was no significant increase in the level of awareness across the institution. Perhaps the salient change was that a small group of faculty, and others in their departments, gained a heightened sense that they could take control over their own content, and enhance their students' learning without the support of traditional publishers. Ideally, an ongoing, sustainable Alternate Textbook Project will gain the attention of additional faculty, who will develop a greater appreciation for open, rather than closed, commercial publishing systems.

Our awareness efforts were helped by Nick Santis, a reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, who contacted me about the Alternate Textbook Project. He asked if he could speak with some of the faculty who participated. Since we were already planning to meet for the post-evaluation debriefing session, I invited Santis to join us by conference call. The resulting conversation led to a small post[7] in the *Chronicle*'s Wired Campus blog. My institution's Communications Department also carried an article[8] about the Project in our weekly campus newsletter. Together, these articles ignited some interest among our faculty, and I heard from a few who expressed their desire to participate in the next round of grants. The impact reached beyond my own campus. I received approximately 20 inquiries from universities across the country, requesting more information about the project. At least one other academic library, at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst,[9] has already implemented a similar textbook project. The Alternate Textbook Project website[10] offers the details to any interested party seeking to replicate the project at their institution.

While the Alternate Textbook Project is unlikely to launch an overnight revolution in either textbook publishing or scholarly communications, it does demonstrate that

small projects aimed at creating change can make an impact. Within the broader scholarly communications movement, time, persistence and the wider adoption of ideas and initiatives like this one will add to overall awareness and transformation of scholarly practices. As more faculty take responsibility for the destiny of their own content and commit to sharing it on open platforms, either for their own courses or for broader communication of their research, the end goal of a global, open scholarly publishing environment looks increasingly obtainable. Whether the academic librarian community gets there through the back, front or even a side door, our commitment to creating open access to the world's knowledge will make a difference. The first step is to open a door, and as campus leaders, cross the threshold towards our preferred future for scholarly communications.

IN-TEXT LINKS

[1] http://www.arl.org/sc/institute/index.shtml
[2] http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/320
[3] https://sites.google.com/site/templetltr/
[4] http://markmilliron.com/
[5] http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6712127.html
[6] http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/06/11/bell
[7] http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/temple-project-ditches-textbooks-for-homemade-digital-alternatives/35247
[8] http://news.temple.edu/news/temple-faculty-experiment-alt-textbooks
[9] http://www.library.umass.edu/about-the-libraries/news/press-releases-2011/taking-a-bite-out-of-textbook-costs
[10] http://sites.temple.edu/alttextbook

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