

OERS & a Language of Urgency

by Jaci Wilkinson

Critical pedagogy draws attention to the ways in which knowledge, power, desire and experience are produced under specific conditions of learning, and in doing so rejects the notion that teaching is just a method or is removed from matters of values, norms and power – or, for that matter, the struggle over agency itself and the future it suggests for young people. Rather than asserting its own influence in order to wield authority over passive subjects, critical pedagogy is situated within a project that views education as central to creating students who are socially responsible and civically engaged citizens. Giroux, 495

Last fall, I attended an introductory seminar for faculty on open educational resources (OER) in higher education. The seminar was facilitated by a librarian and an online instructional designer but unexpectedly included managers from the on-campus bookstore. What unfolded was not one presentation on OERs but two separate presentations: one an informational introduction to OERs and the other a promotional pitch on proprietary software the bookstore is investigating to aggregate textbooks, online resources, and OERs organized by subject and course topics. I hope to demonstrate what this seminar did not: the remarkable differences in priorities between library-created OERs and proprietary software. This seminar exemplified a disturbing trend in the conversations on course materials in higher education.

OERs, often supported by libraries and institutional repositories, demonetize course materials through empowering instructors to create and share materials freely. University bookstores claim similar priorities while in fact serving as a shopfront for the problem's source. One system treats information as cultural heritage and the other as a consumer product. One system is rooted in libraries – institutions at least partially rooted in democratic efforts to eliminate barriers to information and secure its

Jaci Wilkinson is an Assistant Professor and the Web Services Librarian at the University of Montana, Missoula. In addition to leading web services, she leads usability testing, chairs the Web Committee, does information literacy instruction and curriculum planning for the instruction team, and participates in outreach and communications initiatives. Her research spans user experience, metaliteracy, and content strategy, and instructional technology.

Keywords: open access, OERs, bookstores, textbook publishers, critical theory, advocacy

perpetual access. The other system is controlled by contracts and in service to bottom-lines. One system is devoted to creation, adaptability, and challenging notions of who can have a voice in the classroom, and the other is about consumption and reinforcing authority and hegemony. Henry Giroux asks in his article “When Schools Become Dead Zones of the Imagination: A Critical Pedagogy Manifesto”:

...who has control over the conditions for producing knowledge, such as: Are the curricula being promoted by teachers, textbook companies, corporate interests or other forces? (495)

Add to this list proprietary software that advocates for new and “disruptive” methods (disruptive in an economic, not critical, sense) of course material distribution. In an environment rife with theoretical debates on knowledge and power in higher education, why hasn’t critical theory and engaged pedagogy been used to describe and promote OERs? This paper, using critical theory, will demonstrate the urgency of OERs potential to make higher education more democratic, and suggests the ways libraries can be crucial support systems in that endeavour.

bell hooks, in her seminal text *Teaching to Transgress*, describes the fundamentally racist, misogynist, and authoritarian structure of classrooms in higher education. We, as educators, too often allow unconscious bias and a deeply intrinsic, unspoken belief in education as a banking system to mould an educational experience that we cannot celebrate because it does not validate or celebrate us, or our students, as individuals; as whole beings seeking wellness and freedom of body and spirit. The texts we use echo this oppressive system. Instructors represent monolithic, unimpeachable sources of truth as do the textbooks they use. Textbook truth is compiled and edited by publishers using the words of a small group of mainly white, male, Ivy-League-pedigreed experts. And all the while the student is silent. The student has a voice only to regurgitate the memorized information they have collected from the professor and the textbook.

If we, as educators, ask our students to purchase a book, its content should be transformative. The information contained in a book should be so dangerous and so unsettling that students will want to keep that book forever. They will want to pick it up off a shelf in ten years, read it, and have it reawaken or challenge their life again, because the transformation of information into knowledge is an essential cornerstone of information literacy and meant to be a lifelong process (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2001). But this critical relationship to knowledge is often not supported by higher education, and is certainly of little concern to the university bookstores who influence policies and agendas of course material acquisition. The phenomenon of rental and used books perfectly demonstrates the university bookstore’s treatment of knowledge as capital. University bookstores are shop fronts to the Big Five textbook publishers (Dubay). Rental and used textbooks disenfranchise students of perpetual access to knowledge with financial incentives that tend to snatch texts

away at semester's end. Critical pedagogy "rejects the notion of students as passive containers who simply imbibe dead knowledge. Instead, it embraces forms of teaching that offer students the challenge to transform knowledge, rather than simply 'processing received knowledges'" (Mohanty, 192). But for bookstores, at the end of a semester a textbook, by their logic, ceases to have meaning for an individual student. This relationship of student with classroom knowledge is further troubling in its implications that the knowledge taught in a class ceases to have meaning or utility at the semester's end.

Proprietary software is one innovation seeking to claim space in the future of higher education, specifically to help students save money and help institutions retain students. But this software allows university bookstores to work with publishers in a new, but no less predatory, way. If a faculty member chooses a text from this software, that fee can be assessed to enrolled students through the university's financial services and the material is made available to students through a course management system for the length the class runs. The purpose of university bookstores as a physical space weakens. Yet software like Sidewalk uses "disruptive" self-important language like:

We believe content in higher ed needs to be democratized. And it inevitably will be. Faster with Sidewalk than without. And when that day arrives, content will cost less. When it costs less, more students will have access to it. When more students have access to it, their likelihood of success will increase, and the payoff to humanity will be huge. ("About Us")

Sidewalk aggregates OERs, internet resources, and other non-traditional resources with traditional textbooks; it supposedly "disrupts" a model by offering all these materials side-by-side, in one place. Sidewalk's "disruption" implies a new path that exposes and solves the inequities of traditional modes. But this is not disruption. Sidewalk creates false equality in its aggregation of all types of course materials. In the process nothing is created, everything is presented and consumed equally, and publishers still prey upon students. There is nothing democratic or disruptive. In fact, software that directly charges students through course enrollment instead of through the purchase of course material corners students who can only afford education through creative avoidance of fees; photocopying library books, borrowing friends' copies, for example. Publisher profit has been maximized and access has been minimized.

The logical fallacy of Sidewalk's "disruptive" nature is a frequently utilized conservative tool in politics and business: the primacy of personal success and responsibility. That it is the responsibility for individuals (including corporations; now considered "individuals") to disrupt and fix problems created by social services because of an inherent inadequacy in systems which are not tasked with amassing capital. Liberal ideology, conversely believes that, "Empowerment starts with education and extends to

infrastructure, communications, scientific research, and so on. (This) is the basis of democracy: empathy, the caring about one's fellow citizens that requires social as well as personal responsibility." (Lakoff, 186). In recent years public institutions, including libraries and public universities, have been urged to think and act more like businesses. Unfortunately, there has been little recognition across various institutions and stakeholders of how harmful and counter-intuitive that rhetoric is. In the case of Sidewalk and other course material software, their most ironic secret is that innovation and growth depends on the creation of more OER. Because what would a business like Sidewalk do without non-commercial, open access-dependent OERs? Just like public infrastructure is taken for granted by the businesses that use them most heavily, Sidewalk exposes its unsustainable dependence on OERs; without them Sidewalk is just another textbook search engine and yet it does nothing to support institutional structures of OER creation. Such vendors fail to understand that instead of disrupting they depend on systems and services that are created for a public good without a profit.

The OER model of course materials has the potential to be a significant participant in emancipating higher education from burdensome, anti-democratic elements present in a majority of classrooms. OERs exchange silent students and expensive – and 65% of the time, absent (Grasgreen) – textbooks for dynamic, free, open access material. OERs have the potential to become collaborative projects between instructors and students. Not only can instructors free students from the predatory, anti-democratic practices of the textbook publishing industry; they can even collaborate with students to create the alternative. Because although OERs free students from the costs of traditional textbooks, their use alone does not lead to anyone's educational empowerment. Student expression is the vehicle of this transformation. bell hooks explains "Engaged pedagogy necessarily values student expression". But, it "does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered." (hooks, 21) Instructors must seize the opportunity OERs present to use engaged pedagogy and involve students in the creation of course material; this is a way higher education can systematically create space where classrooms involve empowerment for instructor and student. "Such a pedagogy listens to students, gives them a voice and role in their own learning, and recognizes that teachers not only educate students, but also learn from them." (Giroux, 496)

And in the middle, facilitating these important interactions, are libraries. Librarians and libraries have the skills and mission to fully realize the potential of student-faculty developed OERs. The skills that librarians already possess equip them to organize OERs, curate them, and consider the unique intellectual property issues that may arise. Besides the practical reasons to involve librarians in the development of OERs, the pedagogical foundation that library instruction provides prepares effective student involvement in the creation of OERs. When students can use a variety of information to synthesize and create new research, they are better equipped than peers to contribute to instructional material in their discipline. The

Information Literacy Framework, explicitly directs librarians to teach students how to consider authority as constructed and contextual. Student-instructor developed OERs are the ultimate way to demonstrate how authority can be a means to disseminate power, not withhold it.

Unfortunately, the equal partnership needed between librarians and teaching faculty is almost unheard of. Deprofessionalization in librarianship has meant that libraries, especially academic libraries, are chronically understaffed, and librarians are not extended the same privileges and status as other faculty. Rory Litwin writes in his article “The Library Paraprofessional Movement and the Deprofessionalization of Librarianship,”

The deprofessionalization of librarianship and the transfer of the job functions of librarians to paraprofessionals serve as an opportunity for library administrators to take a greater share of control over library practice and to advance a business framework of metrical efficiency to the fore, displacing the ethical framework that derives from the professional orientation of librarians. (44)

The pervasive commercialization of knowledge further contributes to librarian deprofessionalization:

If the semi-professions are in a weaker position in terms of maintaining their autonomy against forces of deprofessionalization, librarianship has a special problem owing to its ideological opposition to the very notion of a monopoly of knowledge. (54)

The ethical priorities represented by OERs could be directly tied to demonstrating the importance of librarianship as a profession. Notice, I say could, not are.

OERs offer assistance in higher education’s crucially important struggle, yet I see no excitement, no light, in the faces of faculty when my librarian colleagues spread this good news. The only solution I see to this seeming disinterest is this: academic librarians need to reframe the discussion of OERs using language of freedom, engaged pedagogy, and resistance towards the anti-democratic forces at work in higher education. Chandra Mohanty writes,

Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systematic politicized practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledges is one way to lay claim to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational

institutions radically. And this, in turn, requires taking the questions of experience seriously. (Mohanty, 185)

Actively promoting OERs is exactly the type of “politicized practices” of which Mohanty speaks that assist in our resistance of normative discourses and representations; that of a commodified higher education system. The knowledge and authority that OERs reclaim from textbook publishers could flow immediately into the hands of instructors and students. If higher education fails to rethink its concept of course materials, proprietary software companies will further cement the undemocratic future of higher education curriculum.

Works Cited

- Dubay, Carly. “The Biggest Educational Publishers.” *BookScouter Blog*. -06-28T18:08:11+00:00 2016. Web. Apr 25, 2017 <<https://bookscouter.com/blog/2016/06/the-biggest-textbook-publishers/>>.
- “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.” American Library Association. 9 February 2015. Web. 29 December 2017. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
- Giroux, Henry. *When Schools Become Dead Zones of the Imagination: a critical pedagogy manifesto*. TruthOut. 13 August 2013.
- Grasgreen, Allie. “Textbook prices still crippling students, report says.” <https://www.insidehighered.com/>. Jan 28 2014. Web. Apr 25, 2017 <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/28/textbook-prices-still-crippling-students-report-says>>.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994.
- Lakoff, George. “The Brain, The Mind, and the Threat to Public Universities.” *Representations*, vol. 116, no. 1, 2011, pp. 185–188., www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2011.116.1.185.
- Litwin, Rory. “The Library Paraprofessional Movement and the Deprofessionalization of Librarianship.” *Progressive Librarian*, no. 33, Summer2009, pp. 43-60. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lxh&AN=58689546&site=ehost-live.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. “On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 14, 1989, pp. 179–208., www.jstor.org/stable/1354297.
- Sidewalk | “ABOUT US”. Web. Apr 25, 2017 <<http://www.gosidewalk.com/about/>>.