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Using open education isn't just a 'nice to have' when students are starving (opinion)

Submitted by Jonathan A. Poritz on February 27, 2019 - 3:00am

Total student debt in the United States stands at approximately $1.5 trillion -- yes, *trillion*, with a T. It increased by approximately $37 billion in the third quarter of 2018 [1]: that's a quarterly increase of about the endowment of Harvard University [2] or, annualized, by more than the GDP of three-quarters of the nations on Earth.

Public institutions of higher education in a majority of U.S. states are funded more -- often much more -- by tuition than by state support [3], calling into question the adjective *public* in that traditional terminology.

Nationally, more than a third of university students, and more than half of those at community colleges, have experienced housing insecurity in the last year and food insecurity in the last month, while 9 percent of university students and 12 percent of community college students were homeless at some point in the last year [4].

It's not so much that as a society we are eating our seed corn with this treatment of the next generation, it is more that we have set the global climate on fire, skewered our children on pointy sticks and are roasting them like marshmallows.

This is the context in which Kenneth (Casey) Green, in a recent post on his *Digital Tweed* blog called "Reframing the Conversation about

OER [5]," is willing to "stipulate" that "reducing the cost of course materials, specifically textbooks, is a good thing."

It doesn't make sense to stipulate this fact and then to move on as if it no longer needs to be mentioned. Given the actual context in which our students are struggling to get ahead, I believe Green's modest "good thing" should outweigh many other considerations.

I would happily compensate for a lower-quality textbook by teaching more excellently if it meant that my students didn't have to choose between buying required course materials and eating for the next month.

In fact, studies have found [6] that students need to eat (not surprisingly), and so high textbook costs mean that students:

- enroll in fewer courses -- and consequently take longer to graduate,
- choose courses based on textbook price rather than for academic reasons, and
- don't buy required textbooks -- and consequently often do more poorly and more frequently fail or withdraw.

Addressing these huge problems by removing high textbook costs would be a great accomplishment, and a discussion about OER without that in frame would just be silly.

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The second of Green's "three stipulations," that "day-one access to course materials is also a very good thing," points to the additional affordances which OER provide to students and faculty members. He again deeply understates the significance of a feature he has duly noted -- this immediate access -- and leaves out an enormously consequential parallel issue: those affordances.

Green notes that "a recent multicourse study at the University of Georgia comparing students who used commercial vs. OER texts suggests that day-one access may have some modest impact on

academic performance (slightly more students with slightly higher grades) and may also slightly reduce DFW numbers."

It's not entirely clear why the observed impact would be due entirely to "day-one access" -- maybe instead the OER materials are simply of better quality than their commercial rivals? -- but certainly modest academic gains in the context of the grim economic realities noted earlier are something to celebrate in a more than lukewarm fashion.

But Green oddly misses the main takeaway from this study [7]: it found a one-third reduction in DFW rates among minority and Pell-eligible students when courses switched from commercial textbooks to OER.

So not only are OER responsible for at least a modest academic improvement for all students while making a significant difference to one of the central issues of higher education in our time -- skyrocketing costs and student debt -- they also make a significant difference in the achievement gap between demographic groups. This achievement gap is another central issue on today's higher ed landscape, another one which Green ignores, and one which has proven resistant to many attempts at correction. Yet OER can make a large difference here, as well.

Once again, if I could slightly improve my students' academic performance while making a significant dent in the demographic achievement gap, at the cost of using a lower-quality textbook (although it's a rather bizarre metric that assigns such a text a "lower quality"), that is a deal I would happily make.

What's equally interesting here is again what is left out: all of the other affordances of OER. There is now a burgeoning literature and thriving, supportive community of practice around the new topic of open pedagogy, essentially new pedagogical practices which have grown up around OER and within the culture of respect, openness and sharing which thrives there. Some of the great exponents of this

new pedagogy include:

- Maha Bali -- see her _What Is Open Pedagogy Anyway?_ [8] and _Curation of Posts on Open Pedagogy #YearOfOpen_ [9],
- Robin De Rosa and Rajiv Jhangiani -- see their _Open Pedagogy Notebook_ [10],
- Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel -- see their _An Urgency of Teachers: The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy_ [11], and
- David Wiley -- see his _What Is Open Pedagogy?_ [12],

to name just a few.

This movement is the most exciting thing to happen to higher ed in my lifetime. It brings together the humanity, respect for students (and instructors!) and impetus to make a positive change in students' lives from thinkers like bell hooks, Paulo Freire and John Dewey with the technological know-how and thirst for openness, access and justice of Seymour Papert, Richard M. Stallman and Aaron Swartz.

There is no point in my parodying the eloquence of the expositors of open pedagogy cited above -- please go read them right now, if you haven't yet. But one thing I can do is add a small point I haven't see those authors emphasize, in the spirit (following Green) of exploring what motivates faculty. One thing that faculty members love (perhaps particularly at primarily research institutions, where they may be worried about something with enormous impact on pedagogy but which will require a large investment of their time) is their academic freedom.

I have never understood how faculty who fight passionately for their academic freedom, so that they would never permit their chair to tell them how to teach a class or what books to use, can accept the rigidity of commercial textbooks under all-rights-reserved copyright. A quite good statistics book I used to assign has a horrible section on "personal probability" which I would beg students not to read … but I couldn't simply remove it, because copyright. My own statistics OER [13] simply doesn't have that section, but if someone else who wants

to use it likes that material, they can download the OER from my website (for free!), add a section on "personal probability" (OER affordances!), and have the book they want. This is allowed because my OER is released with <u>a Creative Commons license</u> [14], a beautiful piece of legal machinery that rewires copyright in the service of sharing and scholarly/educational purposes.

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Green's third stipulation, "A free beer is not the same as a free puppy," is taken from a famous reworking of an explanatory analogy used in the early days of the free software (I prefer FLOSS = free/libre/open-source software) movement: the early theorist of this older open movement Richard Stallman said he was describing software which was "Free as in free speech, not free as in a free beer" … although in fact this software was usually free in both ways. Those hostile to this movement quipped that this kind of software, so threatening to their business model, was in fact "free like a free puppy," leaving listeners with images of puppies making a mess in their houses, needing walks even when it's cold and rainy outside, and so on -- who wants that?

The odd thing is that FLOSS won this war: the majority of servers on the planet run free software. Android is based on free software. Much of the basic infrastructure of the internet relies upon FLOSS. More importantly for this discussion, FLOSS is of higher quality; it is more reliable, more customizable, more friendly to the purposes of education. Nonfree software is a dumpster fire of control, rent extraction and privacy violation. The widely used term "surveillance capitalism" is largely enabled by nonfree software but can be blocked by FLOSS.

I would like therefore to propose a new metaphor for the kind of freedom in FLOSS -- and in OER! Rather than "free like a free puppy," OER and FLOSS are "free like a free dragon's egg." Yes, owning a dragon requires constant vigilance and upkeep so that it doesn't

burn down your castle … but wouldn't it be great to have a pet dragon that loves you?

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It remains to discuss the larger part of Green's essay, but the part I find least convincing, based on my experience as a professor: his contention that there is an issue with the quality of OER. As mentioned above, there is plenty of evidence that OER are of very high quality, by any reasonable metric. Over the more than quarter of a century I've taught classes out of commercial textbooks, their flaws have been abundantly clear to me. The very best books always have at least a few typos, poor examples, confusing terminology, missing diagrams and incoherent explanations. Of course, they always are missing that amazing special contribution that only I can give.

I've also acted as a (paid) reviewer of commercial textbooks and seen how they have excellent layout and design, but serious pedagogical discussions around the material they present is usually entirely absent from the external review process which Green so lauds.

Finally, I want to point out that while we might hope we get a high-quality book for several hundred dollars, there are structural reasons to believe that almost no selection pressure exists in favor of "high quality" for expensive commercial textbooks. This is because the feedback mechanism given great respect by people who like capitalism -- the one that says consumers vote with their feet for the best products at the best price, so producers must compete with each other for those consumer dollars by offering more quality at a lower cost -- is broken in the textbook markets. As an instructor, I am sent free copies of every textbook in which I even express interest for a class -- sometimes, even before I express that interest! But my students pay the price for the book: they are the actual consumers, but they have had their ability to vote with their feet taken from

them by my choice of the required class textbook.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the publishers attempt to influence my textbook selection in a host of ways, including giving me slide decks to use in class, worked solutions of homework problems, free professional development, even tote bags and beer glasses. This market failure is in no way theoretical: it is responsible for the fact that textbook costs have risen at three times the rate of inflation for the last few decades. It would be perfectly consistent for this broken market to produce deeply flawed books that nevertheless come with enough bells and whistles so as to induce faculty to require them.

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Let me propose four stipulations to replace Casey Green's three:

1. The cost of higher education imposed on today's students is an almost unimaginable cruelty, and avoiding contributing to this cruelty by using OER is a way faculty can show they have some empathy and understanding of the reality of higher ed today.
2. Affordances of OER are known to include both making significant progress in lessening demographic achievement gaps that bedevil higher ed and contributing to open pedagogy, an exciting new movement in education.
3. OER (and FLOSS) are free like a free dragon's egg: yes, there is a lot of hard, scary work in the future, but it will be amazing!
4. There is little actual reason to believe that commercial textbooks are of higher quality than OER -- in fact, there is good evidence that they are not, at least by all reasonable metrics of quality -- and to believe this is to have merely blind faith in a form of free-market fundamentalism that doesn't even apply in the failed market of textbooks.

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