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Writing Commons: A Model for the Creation, Usability, and Evaluation of OERs



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Abstract: As Open Educational Resources (OER) increasingly receive attention from academics, educational foundations, and government agencies, exemplars will emerge that lower student textbook costs by moving away from commercial publishers through self-publishing or curating web-based resources. Joe Moxley's *Writing Commons* serves as a scaled OER model in its careful consideration of the processes involved in producing accessible resources that meet user needs. *Writing Commons* hosts hundreds of peer-reviewed resources on writing instruction for use as a course text or supplement by students and faculty in a variety of disciplines. Moxley's work on the site reflects the challenges and rewards of putting the entire publishing process of educational resources in the hands of faculty.

Moxley, Joseph M. *Writing Commons: The Home for Writers*. Web. 15 Dec. 2015. <<http://writingcommons.org/>>.

Noticing the only changes in the new edition of the textbook for my business communications course were unmerited differences in chapter arrangement and illustrations—complaints often heard by faculty and students alike—I began to question whether the updated edition really warranted the \$200 price tag. I took the opportunity to redesign my business communications course around Open Educational Resources (OER). The decision to design a course around OER raises questions and challenges assumptions about the role textbooks and resources play in curriculum development at several levels. At the time, I did not know the phrase OER or that I was participating in a new movement; I just knew that resources on composing professional communication documents had to be available for less (or free). My inaugural foray into OER involved a free online text supplemented with webtexts from Joe Moxley's [Writing Commons](#).

OER is becoming much more mainstream as signified by the [U.S. Department of Education](#) hiring its first open education adviser and proposing a rule for grant-funded educational materials to be openly licensed in the wake of increasing interest in the cost of higher education. While I was just slightly ahead of the trend in redesigning my course with OER, Moxley was a true pioneer in OER. Had Moxley not received the copyright back from Pearson and decided to self-publish his *College Writing Online* textbook, many instructors, including myself, might not have had the ability to point their students to high-quality, peer-reviewed, open resources on composition and communication (Open Textbook Publishing). His site, now *Writing Commons*, serves as a model for creating, using, and evaluating the role of OER in the areas of composition and communication.

Creating Open Educational Resources

Since the return of the copyright to Moxley in 2008, *Writing Commons* has housed hundreds of webtexts on information literacy, research, writing processes, collaboration, genres, new media, and style. Millions of visitors use the [site](#) each year. Dozens of volunteers and staff advise, review, edit, and maintain the resources. The site recently began hosting a magazine that features exemplary undergraduate writing, *My Campus*. The growth of *Writing Commons* reflects the rising popularity of OER largely due to the affordances of the web and the rising cost of proprietary resources.

As *Writing Commons*'s creator Joe Moxley notes, there is certainly an appreciation for publishers and their representatives despite criticism from faculty and media. Moxley reminds us that publishers and authors have “[a]

bird's-eye view of academic trends, textbook editors have keen insights into disciplinary trends. Furthermore, when publishers sell textbooks to departments, they often back up that sale with faculty training, sample syllabi and quizzes, and other valuable student and faculty resources" (Open Textbook Publishing). The supplemental resources provided by publishers continue to grow into more robust tools, particularly in the area of assessments that can do almost everything except personalized grading in a course (and sometimes even that). The publishers and their representatives are great allies to many faculty, especially new and contingent instructors.

Although publishing companies provide a helpful service and are filling a gap, they have assumed a responsibility that had not been previously held by corporations. On the role of one particular publishing company in the public education sector, Michael Apple, professor of education policy at University of Wisconsin-Madison said, "[the publishing company] has been the most creative and the most aggressive at [taking over] all those things we used to take as part of the public sector's responsibility" (qtd. in Simon). Similarly, in higher education specifically, some feel the creation and distribution of resources should be the responsibility of faculty. Moxley's site and his advocating of OER return that responsibility to faculty.

The amount of labor involved in creating educational resources appears demanding as it stands, but before the ubiquity of the World Wide Web, this type of faculty-driven work and collaboration would have been nearly impossible without the resources of large publishing companies. The technological component is an essential part of definitions of Open Educational Resources. Since 2002, [UNESCO](#) has defined Open Educational Resources as "technology-enabled, open provision of educational resources for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes.' They are typically made freely available over the Web or the Internet." Sites like *Writing Commons* and the academics participating in its creation of resources model this definition in that such sites are only possible with technology and make use of the capabilities of the web for sharing and adoption.

As indicated, an important part of what *Writing Commons* does is put the entire publishing process back into the hands of faculty and model how best to do that by including more than Moxley in the creation of resources. Even though Moxley leads the project, he takes a collaborative approach to recognize the diverse ways to approach teaching and learning writing: "We aspire to celebrate and research context-based writing processes, genres, and methodologies. One way we hope to recognize diverse approaches to teaching writing is by publishing webtexts by faculty and writers in different countries/cultures" (*Writing Commons* October Update). Faculty also play a role in adding a variety of perspectives by encouraging and submitting exemplary student work in *Writing Commons's* new initiative, [My Campus](#).

While we often worry about the effect of textbooks on students, Libby Miles and others have reminded us for over a decade that "critical users of textbooks need to watch not only the ways in which their students' subjectivity is constructed by the pages of the text, but also how they as teachers have their relations with students further codified" (30). When faculty create or curate OER, the relationship is a bit clearer than if an outside company played a major role. Even if the faculty member is not participating in the creation of an OER hub as Moxley has done with *Writing Commons* or producing open webtexts as the many authors do on his site, using OER offers faculty the power to curate their own textbook or even make minor changes (sometimes even completely remix) with attribution. *Writing Commons* has [Creative Commons licenses](#) that allow only minor changes and ShareAlike licenses that allow for remixing and building upon the material.

Moxley even encourages educators to begin their own self-publishing on the Internet despite an unsettled landscape around open-access publishing in tenure and promotion environments. He notes, "When it comes to academic publishing, academics and their sponsoring institutions have adopted a form of learned helplessness" but that now "we have additional options that greatly diminish our dependence on publishers" (Open Textbook Publishing). He describes the benefits of creating OER using online platforms as not only empowering for authors but also as a way for "writers to build communities around their projects, to coauthor and extend topics, to turbocharge the creative process, to invite others into the revision and editing process" ([Why Writing Commons?](#)). This participatory approach makes full use of the affordances offered by the web that would be difficult to replicate as easily offline. Creating open resources has an educational, professional, and personal impact, and Moxley's example of *Writing Commons*—though at a much larger scale—illustrates this.

Using Open Educational Resources

By putting the creation of educational resources back into the hands of faculty, some important considerations of user-experience are required, especially with the use of the web interface. The user experience of *Writing Commons* is generally positive, and looking closer at its use of the web interface can give us insight into usability

considerations of OER. The site design is responsive to mobile devices, and while the site does not specifically address accessibility concerns other than that it “values accessibility,” the pages are accessible by students with hearing or vision impairments through its use of alt-texts for images, closed captioning (auto-generated) for videos, and text compatibility with a screenreader. However, there are a few navigational issues that arise with the volume of webtexts on the site and the variety of users.

To guide users in navigating the site, on the front page of *Writing Commons* is a prominent link to [How to Use Writing Commons](#). The page describes the seven main sections of the site and the potential for the site to be used in a variety of courses. The instructions on using the site suggest, “The two best ways to navigate through *Writing Commons* are using the top menu navigation, called Open Text, or the left-hand navigation menu system.” These two methods lead to the same menu structure, but the sheer number of webtexts makes the categorization of these seven sections of the site a bit tedious to navigate. Perhaps including primary and secondary navigation menus of the webtexts and emphasizing the search feature—perhaps with filters for each of the seven sections—could improve site navigation.

As addressed earlier, the affordances of the web make OER possible. Thus, using the full features of that environment should be a consideration. For example, *Writing Commons* could eventually make more use of the web interface by incorporating native interactive aspects –multimedia components designed to respond to input or manipulation by the user on the webpage—beyond the videos that many webtexts already include, which do add value. While robust assessments that many publishing companies offer may not fit sites like *Writing Commons*, including quick self-checks of some variety would make use of the affordances of the web and digital media.

While there are potential improvements for the user navigation of the site and its use of the web interface, *Writing Commons* is at par with and even superior in some respects to e-texts by major publishers. Having worked with all of the major publishers’ tools as an instructional designer for online and blended courses, none have been easier to access or more stable than *Writing Commons*—largely because there are no access code or login issues. Students are able to use *Writing Commons* webtexts instantly, one of the most lauded benefits of OER.

Evaluating Open Educational Resources

A hurdle to the increased adoption of open educational resources has been the question of credibility and quality. Educators have come to depend on the careful reviewing and editing that publishing companies have embedded in the development of resources. Publishing companies also have a better idea of how well their resources are being used. “[T]here is no feedback loop” in OER, as Gerard Kortemeyer points out. OER developers like Moxley are beginning to model evaluation practices that ensure the effectiveness and quality of the open resources. Recent research shows improving faculty perception of OER as well as evidence from student learning that the quality of OER is as good as or better than commercial textbooks (Fischer et al.).

As one report on the business practices of the largest textbook publishing company noted, “officials often commit to buying . . . because it’s familiar, even when there’s little proof its products and services are effective” (Simon). Recognizing the burden of unfamiliarity and the need to prove credibility and quality in open educational resources, it is easy to understand why *Writing Commons* often describes itself this way: “the open-education home for writers, is a peer-reviewed, award-winning, academic resource” (About). It’s unlikely that this type of phrasing would appear on paid textbooks, but because of the nascent realm of open educational resources, such statements reassure not only faculty but also students of a quality that is often implied with publisher resources.

One way that Moxley ensures a quality product comparable (or better) than traditional textbooks includes involving multiple perspectives through a peer review process. He states that by “adopting a peer-review model and inviting academics worldwide to coauthor web texts with me, I hoped to extend the scope of the project so that it could serve as a viable alternative to expensive textbooks for all college-level courses that require writing” (Open Textbook Publishing). Involving academics as creators of webtexts, [editorial staff](#), and members of the [review board](#) are ways to maintain internal checks for quality on the site. Interested readers and users of the site can even [contribute](#) content; there are often calls for articles to meet specific site needs.

Another unique aspect of *Writing Commons* that many open educational resources are only now beginning to develop is the external “feedback loop” that Kortemeyer cited as missing from OER. Just as textbook publishers track use of their material, OER developers are starting to make use of the feedback loop to continually improve their resources. For *Writing Commons*, Moxley is able not only to receive feedback from individual users of the site by tracking usage but also from the adopters of the open text by writing MOOCs at Duke University, Ohio State, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Saylor.org’s English Composition I (Adoptions). Moxley also requests feedback from individuals, programs, or writing centers that use the resource. Further, *Writing Commons* has an

[advisory board](#) of faculty from across the nation. This feedback from a wide array of academics allows the site to continually improve and remain current in the field without pressures found at corporations.

Conclusion

Since its founding in 2008, the number of webtexts and visitors to Moxley's *Writing Commons* has proliferated. Content in all of the site's main sections—titled Information Literacy, Research, Writing Processes, Collaboration, Genres, New Media, and Style — could be used in a variety of writing courses, but students and instructors involved in traditional essay composition—as epitomized in first-year writing courses—will find the most valuable resources on the site as most of the main section's webtexts are framed around that genre. While the subcategories under the Genres heading include Public Speaking, Academic Writing, Business Writing, STEM/Technical Writing, and Creative Writing, it is still the Academic Writing section that stands out as the strongest in quality and quantity. The other subcategories do not have the depth to stand alone as resources in a course devoted to those types of writing. As mentioned concerning my own business communications course, *Writing Commons* was used frequently as a supplement, but a more robust OER textbook on the topic was the main resource. At the time of this writing, the site did have a call for articles in several of the more specialized writing categories.

Writing Commons provides the academy not only a helpful resource to consult for writing instruction but also an example of how OER can work well in the creation, user experience, and evaluation of open material. The scale that the site has worked may not be necessary for all OER, but faculty may find other niches to use OER to help students succeed academically just as Joe Moxley did. Necessarily, much of the review essay has compared *Writing Commons* with traditional publishing companies. As Jonathan Zimmerman, an education historian at New York University, said in the article referenced earlier concerning a large publishing company, “The policies that [the large publishing company] is benefiting from may be wrongheaded in a million ways, but it strikes me as deeply unfair to blame [the company] for them” (qtd. in Simon). Indeed, publishing companies have been filling a gap that the academy should reclaim—starting at the level of administration in supporting open publication and continuing down to each instructor in participating and advocating for open resources that benefit student learning.

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