



Open Pedagogy Benefits and Challenges: Student Perceptions of Writing Open Case Studies

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In recent years there have been several studies reviewing the benefits and challenges of open pedagogy projects for student engagement and learning. This study adds to that literature by reporting on a survey of students who wrote case studies in three courses in forestry and conservation studies, most of whom agreed to publish publicly and with a Creative Commons license. Our results indicate that many students felt more motivated and engaged in the open pedagogy assignments compared to traditional assignments. Many also reported putting more effort into their assignment to ensure its accuracy and usefulness to others. In addition to improved understanding of copyright and citation practices, students learned how to translate knowledge for a broader audience and demonstrated an increased awareness of scholarly integrity. Still, a number of students reported increased stress with this assignment. We conclude with some recommendations to support students in such projects while reducing stress.

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In recent years there has been increased interest in open educational practices (OEP): Koseoglu and Bozkurt (2018) note an increase in English-language publications on OEP since 2011, when an OPAL (Open Educational Resources and Open Educational Practices in Higher Education and Adult Learning Institutions) report emphasized the need to focus more on OEP in addition to open educational resources (Andrade et al., 2011).

There are numerous definitions and descriptions of OEP. Cronin and MacLaren (2018) approach OEP as an umbrella concept that includes: practices that support open education resources (OER), open scholarship, including open research and open data, and open pedagogy (OP). For Cronin and MacLaren (2018), OP is focused on practices directly related to “teaching and learning, as compared with broader aspects of scholarship” (p. 135).

There is not, however, a simple answer to what kinds of teaching and learning practices constitute OP. Tietjen and Asino (2021) note that “a review of the literature quickly reveals that there is no agreed-upon definition of what the term OP means; indeed, quite a broad spectrum of proposed definitions exists” (p. 186). They provide a list of five intersecting elements shared by many views of OP: (1) it is “poly-vocal” and “thrives on a diverse spectrum of voices”; (2) it is “participatory pedagogy” in that it involves students as contributors to broader communities; (3) it involves the use of open licenses to allow reuse, revision, and remixing of content; (4) it “encourages participation from those outside traditional academic contexts”; and (5) it “fosters a culture of collaboration” through public sharing and the affordances of open licenses (pp. 197–198).

This study focuses on an open pedagogy project that shares many of the elements of OP described by Tietjen and Asino (2021). We surveyed students in three courses in forestry and conservation studies who were invited to create case studies that are publicly available on an institutional website and that (in many cases) have an open license. The study aims to learn about students’ perception of the value and challenges of creating OER and whether they think this type of assignment contributes to their learning in ways that other assignments might not.

Our overarching research questions for the study are:

- How do students perceive the benefits and drawbacks for their learning of OP assignments that invite them to produce OER?
- What transferable skills do students perceive they gain when creating OER in a course assignment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some discussions of open pedagogy point to potential benefits for student engagement and learning, as well as how such practices may support larger social, ethical, and social justice benefits. For example, Bali (2017) emphasizes both pedagogical and social justice dimensions to OP: “A belief in the potential of openness and sharing to improve learning,” and “a social justice orientation – caring about equity, with openness as one way to achieve this.”

Wiley and Hilton (2018) discuss how OP projects could enhance student learning and call for empirical research that could provide evidence on whether they do so. Noting the many different definitions of OP, they develop instead a new phrase, “OER-enabled pedagogy,” defined as “the set of teaching and learning practices that are only possible or practical in the context of the 5R permissions which are characteristic of OER” (p. 135), namely reuse, revise, remix, redistribute, retain. Wiley and Hilton juxtapose “disposable assignments”—which are often disposed of after a class ends—to “renewable assignments,” in which students create artifacts that have value beyond the course, often made public with an open license. According to Wiley and Hilton, renewable assignments support learning by taking what others have made and remaking them, learning in the process.

Considering social justice aspects of OP, Bali, Cronin, and Jhangiani (2020) note that openness, by itself, does not always support equity. Building on a framework by Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter (2018), they discuss the impacts of various OEP and OP activities on social justice. These impacts can be negative, neutral, ameliorative (“addressing surface injustice”), or

transformative (“addressing systemic/structural roots of injustice”) (p. 3). For example, contributions by students to public scholarship can have negative social justice impacts if they are “coerced into leaving [a] digital footprint,” particularly if they run more of a risk by doing so than others. Alternatively, such student contributions can be ameliorative if the authors’ voices or the content are not widely available in scholarship.

So far, most empirical research on the impacts of OP focuses on those related to student engagement and learning—pedagogical impacts, rather than social justice impacts. We discuss here examples of research that focuses on student perceptions of OP assignments, as does our study.

Hilton et al. (2019) surveyed students in multiple courses in the U.S. who had participated in any kind of OP activity (such as writing quiz questions for courses, revising open textbooks, or blogging). They report that the vast majority of students said the OP assignments supported the same or greater achievement of a set of learning outcomes (including mastery of course content, critical thinking, working in groups, and more). When asked to say what learning outcomes they felt were supported by the particular OP assignment in their course, most students reported deeper learning, followed by increased interest and engagement in the work.

Hollister (2020) engaged students in a graduate course in Library and Information Studies in the U.S. in creating an open textbook on libraries and librarianship in countries outside of North America. All student respondents to a survey said they saw the value of this OP assignment, with student reflections focusing on deeper learning and on the importance of contributing to something that will be of value to others. Still, several students noted that doing this project caused some anxiety, which was partly related to writing about libraries in other countries; one student wondered if they had the right to tell stories that belong to others.

Baran and AlZoubi (2020) collected data from students in two graduate courses and one undergraduate course in the U.S. who participated in various kinds of OP activities, including creating chapters for an open textbook and creating an open online course. In end-of-course reflections and interviews, some students reported increased knowledge of copyright and open licenses, and some reflected on the importance of open access works for increasing access to knowledge. In addition, several students commented on the value of OP for increasing their agency, by choosing their own topics and contributing to knowledge that could benefit others.

Werth and Williams (2021) studied student perceptions in a first-year seminar at a small, private institution in the U.S. who contributed to a publicly-available ebook to be used for future iterations of the course. The researchers note that about 41% of respondents reported feeling more motivated by the assignment (around 39% neutral), 45% said it had a positive impact on overall engagement in the course (40% neutral), and only about 15% said they were concerned with the work being publicly available. Follow up interviews revealed that students felt motivated by creating work that benefits others, by agency in choosing their own topics, and by the potential for public recognition.

The present study contributes to the growing literature on student perceptions of the value of open pedagogy, focusing on a Canadian context, and both supports many of the results above as well as provides some further insights.

METHODOLOGY

CONTEXT

The case study assignments in this study are part of a broader open case studies project at a large, public university in Canada in which students, faculty, and staff from different disciplines write, edit, and learn with case studies that are publicly available and openly licensed. The project was designed largely by students, expressly for the purpose of supporting and promoting non-disposable assignments and practices that provide opportunities for students to be producers of public knowledge.

This study reports on students’ perceptions of the integration of open case studies as part of their course work in two third-year undergraduate courses and a fifth-year graduate course

in forestry and conservation studies during the 2018/19 academic year.¹ The case study, scaffolded as four staged assignments, was designed to provide an opportunity for students to apply their content knowledge and assess a specific case of local natural resource management. Students had the option to share their case study publicly (with or without an open license) on the institutional Wiki platform or privately to the course instructor. The overall assignment represented 15–20% of the final grade in each course.

The undergraduate students worked in groups while graduate students completed the assignment individually. Librarians provided support around literature reviews, research, and citation management, while teaching and learning centre staff offered a brief overview of open education, copyright, orientation to the institutional Wiki platform, and tailored learning technology supports. At each staged submission, the course instructor provided formative feedback, emphasized the importance of academic integrity, and reminded students of their responsibility as members of a scholarly community.

SURVEY

Students were invited to complete an anonymous survey (see Appendix A) to share their perceptions of creating case studies as OER. The research design and survey were approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the institution (certificate number H18-01544) and informed consent to participate was achieved through presenting information about the study in classes and gathered electronically. The survey was accessible online for two weeks after the assignment deadline.

The survey consisted of various multiple choice questions, inquiring about student choices around sharing their work publicly and openly, their sense of motivation and stress in doing the assignments, as well as their perception of skills gained. There were also open-ended questions to invite elaboration and further comments. The survey design was informed by student responses from a 2017 pilot study, which led us to focus on motivation and stress in the current survey, and allowed us to generate a set of factors that may influence students' decisions on whether to make their work public and/or give it an open license.

Participation was incentivized with an optional one percent bonus mark towards students' overall course grade, should they choose to share their name on a subsequent, separate survey (so that responses to the main survey could not be tied to individual students). The overall survey response rate was 60.8%, or 126 students, with 112/190 undergraduate and 14/19 graduate respondents across the three courses. One undergraduate respondent appeared to submit their responses twice, thus one of the two duplicate entries was excluded from analysis.

CODING PROCESS

We used conventional content analysis as a qualitative approach to analyze the text data. Content analysis “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text... [and] interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding” (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1278). To generate codes, each researcher independently analyzed open text entries from 20 respondents and came together to reflect on codes, refine meanings, and ensure comparable interpretation of codes. The researchers reviewed all codes and added or revised codes so that data were adequately captured and represented. The researchers then re-analyzed all the data and reviewed one another's coding to establish agreement on final codes (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 308).

RESULTS

PUBLIC SHARING AND OPEN LICENSES

Students were given the option whether to make their case studies publicly accessible on the institutional Wiki platform, and if they chose to do so, whether to give their case studies an open license. Out of 126 student respondents, 92 (73%) chose to do so (89 undergraduate,

¹ Work on this project was halted, then later proceeded slowly, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

three graduate), while 34 (27%) said they opted not to post their case studies publicly (23 undergraduate, 11 graduate).²

Those who chose not to share their case studies publicly (N = 34) were asked to select all applicable contributing factors for their decision (Table 1). Concern over work quality was the most frequently cited reason for their decision. Some of those students also chose factors related to vulnerability or digital reputation, suggesting that the unease about the work quality may be related to their concerns for sharing incorrect information and/or others' perception of them.

REASON	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
I felt that my work may not be good enough to share publicly.	17	50%
I did not feel like I have the permission to speak for certain stakeholders.	14	41%
I feared that others might misjudge me based on one piece of work.	12	35%
I felt vulnerable sharing my (professional) work publicly.	9	26%
I was concerned about my digital identity and reputation.	8	24%
Other	12	35%

Table 1 Contributing Factors to Choosing Not to Share Publicly.

Note: Respondents were instructed to select all that apply from the options in the table.

Of those who listed other reasons, time constraints prevented several students from sharing their work publicly at the time of the survey, despite their interest in doing so. One student noted that they submitted their work privately to the professor even though they ultimately wanted to publish the case study openly, because they did not have adequate time to double check all their references and were concerned about the potential repercussion should they fail to uphold scholarly integrity standards. Several students also demonstrated sensitivity to their responsibility in obtaining appropriate permission for reuse of existing resources, as exemplified by a graduate student actively seeking and awaiting permission from an outside organization before publishing their work publicly. In addition to the structured support of a scaffolded assignment, some students wanted more specific feedback on their final product to feel confident in sharing their work publicly.

Students who reported that they did share their work publicly were asked if they also agreed to give it a Creative Commons (CC) license to facilitate reuse. Of the 92 respondents to this question, 77 (84%) said they did so, while 15 (16%) said they did not. While we did not ask whether students felt pressured to license their work in a specific way (see Hilton et al., 2019), our finding suggests that students were genuinely interested in and motivated to participate as public scholars. For example, students identified potential benefits to others:

It gives access to conservation knowledge regarding specific case studies, which can help others learn or work on their own projects if they have any.

While much of the public may have access to the publications that we researched, these Wiki pages provide [synthesized] information across multiple sources that form a cohesive paper.

Those who chose not to apply a CC license to their public open case studies (N = 15) were asked to check all that applied out of a list of possible reasons. Seven said they were concerned about their digital identity and reputation, seven said they did not want to be misrepresented when others reused their work, and six reported thinking their work was not good enough for reuse.

BENEFITS

Students who shared their work publicly on the institutional Wiki platform (N = 92) were asked how knowing their work would be accessible to the public influenced their approach to it (See Table 2).

² While survey respondents included both undergraduate and graduate students, there were not enough of the latter on which to base robust conclusions of differences between the two groups. All of the results below include both undergraduate and graduate student responses.

STATEMENT	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
I put in more effort in my research to ensure accurate information is presented and to provide credible references	48	52%
I felt more engaged and interested in doing this project than I would have if it were just going to be seen by my instructor	43	47%
I made more thoughtful decisions regarding what information to include and/or exclude to reflect an unbiased, neutral, and/or more objective perspective	35	38%
I paid more attention to the clarity and coherence of my writing to ensure that a lay person can learn from my work	33	36%
I imposed a higher self-expectation and focused more on the overall quality of my work	28	30%
Other	7	8%

Table 2 How Their Work Being Publicly Accessible Influenced Students' Approach.

Note: Respondents were instructed to select all that apply from the options in the table.

The public nature of the case study prompted most students to pay closer attention to standards of scholarly integrity and their responsibilities as knowledge producers. About half of the respondents to this question reported paying careful attention to the credibility of their references as well as the accuracy of the information presented. For example, as one student explained,

This experience made me more aware of the pressure to be as correct and truthful as possible because of the potential repercussions from the subjects of my case study should I misinterpret or misrepresent the groups of my case study.

Nearly a third of students who answered this question stated that they set higher expectations for themselves and paid more attention to the quality of their work. This is also reflected in a survey question about whether completing an assignment that is made public is more motivating than one that is not. Seventy-eight students (62% of the 126 respondents) said yes, 26 said no, and 22 said they were unsure. Of those who said yes, 70 provided open-ended comments explaining why; 22 of these (31%) said such an assignment is more motivating because it is publicly visible, and 15 (21%) talked about putting in more effort to ensure their work is as good as possible because it is public. Others focused on being motivated by how the information could be helpful for others or could be beneficial for their future career or professional lives.

When I know that the project would be publicly viewed and used, I push myself harder to complete it in quality since it may be helpful to others. I do not want others to feel it is a waste of time to read my work. I feel very satisfied when the project is done, and I found [I] learned more.

While professionalism shouldn't be biased based on the audience, there seemed to be more motivation for producing an excellent piece of work, knowing that it will be accessible to all my future employers, supporters, critics, etc.

The non-disposable nature of this assignment was also a key motivator for students (Wiley & Hilton, 2018). Sixteen students included comments in open-ended questions relating to how the project was motivating because it had value beyond the assignment and the course.

It's nice to know I'm not creating something ultimately destined for a paper shredder.

At the end of the project, I have something to show for it that I can return to and that, hopefully, others can use as reference. In other projects, I forget my work and it seems useless and unimportant.

One student appreciated the increased freedom and choice the assignment offered, echoing the role of student agency in promoting engagement and motivation (Baran and AlZoubi, 2020; Werth and Williams, 2021):

Creating a Wiki page made me feel more passionate about this assignment [because] I'm designing the page, making the logical flow clear enough to be presented to the public. There are fewer restrictions but more space for a personal approach.

CHALLENGES

Several students spoke about challenges around time management. Some students spent a considerable amount of time in reviewing their work for compliance with copyright and finding appropriate images for reuse, while others “lost lots of time to understanding how to use the Wiki [platform].”

These challenges also appeared to contribute to heightened anxiety for many. When asked whether they experienced a higher level of stress when completing this assignment compared to traditional assignments, 82 students (65% of all respondents) said yes, 25 (20%) said no, and nine said they were unsure. Those who said yes also provided open-ended comments explaining why; 37 (45%) cited concerns about accuracy and citation integrity as a contributor to their perception of stress, and 24 (29%) shared that the visibility and permanence of their work elevated their stress levels.

Ensuring clarity of information was... important to me, as well as ensuring sources were accurately represented and correctly cited in my writing.

It is daunting to think that if I had made a mistake, someone would have learned the wrong information.

[It is stressful because] people will see it and could judge me for it for the rest of my life.

Others also touched on added stress from a potential increase in feedback and critique, especially when the public audience may not fully understand or appreciate the case study in the context in which it was created.

You need to be prepared to be criticized, have all your facts checked, and in general there is just more pressure. Once something is online, it cannot be taken off, so the pressure to make something [that you are] very content with and want people to read is there.

If you are aware of the real repercussions from misrepresentation or misinterpretation, then making your work publicly available to be read without the context of knowing the student, as the professor does, then there is an added stress to the submission of the project.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Students who opted to share their work publicly on the institutional Wiki platform (N = 92) were also asked to say whether they thought they had gained additional knowledge or skills from completing the assignment (Table 3). The predetermined selections were based on the instructor’s intended learning outcomes and students were invited to elaborate on how this assignment influenced their own learning.

SKILLS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Gathering and integrating credible sources in my writing	55	60%
Searching for and using resources available under Creative Commons licenses	53	58%
Translating my disciplinary knowledge to educate the general public	48	52%
Standardizing references	44	48%
Communicating my thoughts and position clearly in my writing	39	42%
Other	3	3%

Table 3 Additional Skills Gained from Creating a Publicly Accessible Case Study.

Note: Respondents were instructed to select all that apply from the options in the table.

Students noted that the open case studies assignment provided an opportunity for them to put their understanding of copyright and scholarly integrity into practice, to hone their ability to find and synthesize credible sources, and to write in ways that demonstrate clarity and credibility.

It caused me to be extremely careful with my wording and citations in my project. I feel that this extra attention to detail caused me to create a better quality work.

Gathering information from multiple sources and synthesizing and presenting it for an unfamiliar audience pushed me to assess the relevance, importance, and source of information before using it in the assignment.

More than half of the respondents to this question pointed to gaining skills in translating knowledge to a wider audience, which required them to have a firm grasp on the course content.

I was able to form ideas through learning done in class that I was able to cater to a large audience. I understood that our course material was not digestible for all so through the assignment, I was able to create a document that was accessible to the public by means of some background information and context.

Through this assignment, one student realized that their work has the power to “give a voice to marginalised communities,” similar to the example of ameliorative social justice impact in Bali, Cronin, and Jhangiani (2020) by contributing perspectives that have not otherwise been widely shared.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the majority of students chose to share their work publicly and to give it an open license. This may be attributed to how the instructor introduced the OP assignment and clarified student expectations. In addition to sharing the purpose and rationale for inviting students to create OER as part of the course, the instructor openly acknowledged the potential real or perceived risks that students might experience, and provided examples of real-life benefits that former students gained (e.g., page views, contacted by researchers to collaborate on a project). Still, some students chose not to share publicly, and similar to Hollister (2020), quite a few said they worried they did not have permission to speak for certain stakeholders. This may be because the case studies are about forestry and conservation topics in communities the students are not members of.

Regarding our first research question, students perceived several benefits from this OP assignment, including putting in more effort to produce higher-quality work and increased attention to the clarity of their writing. Students indicated an increased sense of responsibility as knowledge producers, through careful attention to the accuracy of their work and credibility of their references. As in Hilton et al. (2019), Hollister (2020), and Werth & Williams (2021), many students also reported increased engagement and motivation in this assignment, partly due to its public nature and potential to benefit others. As in Hollister (2020), numerous students also reported that they found this assignment stressful, including due to the broad visibility of the work and concerns about their own digital identity and reputation. More students in our study expressed concern about the public nature of their work than in Werth & Williams (2021).

Our second research question asked about transferable skills. Like Baran & AlZoubi (2020), numerous students reported increased awareness of copyright and open licenses. We also found that students reported on skills we haven't yet seen in the literature. More than half of student respondents said they improved their ability to translate their disciplinary knowledge to the general public. Students also reported increased awareness of the importance of scholarly integrity through an emphasis on ensuring proper citation of others' work.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

From this study, we suggest several recommendations for OP projects in which students create OER.

First, instructors can generate interest and buy-in from students by sharing, as the instructor for these courses did, their intention for inviting students to create OER, the benefits and risks involved in being a public scholar, how the artifacts may be used, and the career benefits reported by some past students as a result of previous OP assignments. The significant number of students reporting being more motivated in this assignment, as well as their focus on scholarly integrity, may be partly due to the course instructor directly emphasizing the value of non-disposable assignments and the importance of scholarly integrity.

We also recommend that instructors scaffold OP assignments to ensure ample time and opportunities for students to incorporate formative feedback. As noted above, several students found the assignment stressful because they felt that they did not have enough time to complete it to the level of quality they wanted.

In addition, it is important to provide timely and ongoing education and support around scholarly integrity, copyright, technology, and relevant skill development. Having experts come into the class to discuss copyright, citation practices, open licenses, and technology being used likely helped contribute to students paying significant attention to these topics and may have reduced some stress. However, as discussed above, several students still struggled with the technology, and ensuring adequate time to learn and practice, as well as having someone to go to for questions and troubleshooting, are important.

Finally, numerous students expressed that they felt stress around the visibility and permanence of their work, including the digital footprint they may be leaving behind by sharing work openly. We believe it is essential to ensure that students have the option to choose *not* to share their work publicly or with an open license. Instructors should make it clear to students that doing so will not affect their grade in any way. For the assignments in this study, students could choose to submit their work to the instructor only, or to post publicly without giving their work an open license.

An important limitation in the present study is that these three forestry and conservation studies classes were in a large research university, and it is possible the results reported here cannot be generalized into other disciplinary or institutional contexts. This study also did not have enough graduate students to fully explore potential differences between them and undergraduates and their decision to share their work publicly. Student demographics and their willingness to participate in OP is an area that warrants further research. In addition, we did not focus on social justice aspects of OP in this study, even though several students explicitly mentioned such aspects in their responses. Designing assignments that support ameliorative or transformative social justice impacts through OEP or OP (Bali, Cronin, & Jhangiani, 2020), and investigating student perceptions of those or other impacts, would be a valuable research focus for future studies.

Finally, the OP assignment in this study focused narrowly on the *creation* of case studies. Revision of OER is not as often assessed as creation; further research exploring the potential pedagogical impact and benefits of having students revise existing case studies created by former students could offer insights into whether students value contributing as one-time contributors or as active members of a knowledge community. Future studies on identifying effective approaches to encourage and sustain student participation as ongoing contributors to the knowledge commons would be useful in supporting the collective effort in promoting open education.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix A.** Survey: Student Perceptions of Creating Open Case Studies 2018–2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.15.1.518.s1>

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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