



Case Study on a Shift to Open Educational Resources in an Academic Department

RESEARCH ARTICLE

KARINA JACKSON 

ROYCE KIMMONS 

HEATHER LEARY 

RICHARD WEST 

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*



ABSTRACT

Open educational resources (OER) have the potential to significantly impact the landscape of higher education. However, many users of OER find it difficult to adopt programmatically due to the barriers of awareness, quality assurance, institutional culture, and sustainability. This case study of the successful adoption of OER in an education department serves as a look into the conditions and practices that allowed for the promotion, continued use, and significant production of open educational resources. Six faculty members in the department were interviewed about their experiences with OER. The results indicate that the climate, technology, and opportunity costs surrounding tenure and promotion were key factors in the faculty's experience with acting on their inclinations toward openness.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Karina Jackson

Brigham Young University, USA

karina_jackson@byu.edu

KEYWORDS:

open educational resources; openness; educational innovation; systemic change; diffusion of innovations; higher education; open textbooks

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jackson, K., Kimmons, R., Leary, H., & West, R. (2026). Case Study on a Shift to Open Educational Resources in an Academic Department. *Open Praxis*, 18(1), pp. 13–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.18.1.1017>

Open educational resources (OER) are materials shared either via a Creative Commons license or in the public domain, meaning that users have permission to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute said resource (Creative Commons, n.d.; UNESCO, 2019; Wiley et al., 2014). The term OER typically includes textbooks, courseware, and interactive learning models, but it is also inclusive of many different materials. Blessinger and Bliss (2016) described *open education* as a new era, specifically in how OER emphasizes access to learning content for all learners rather than only those with the means to pay for and the ability to dedicate time to formal education.

OER provides flexibility for learners but a challenge to traditional systems, which have historically limited access to knowledge. This approach to open sharing of expertise and materials essentially eliminates the scarcity mindset that contributes to restricted access to knowledge via paywalls (Kimmons & Irvine, 2023). Proponents of OER claim that “open access to high quality digital educational materials” (Wiley et al., 2008, p. 3) can have significant benefits for both formal learners and educators in traditional institutions, as well as for those in informal learning contexts. One intended benefit of OER is easy access to tried-and-true content from a wider network of professionals and experts within a content area and across disciplines. Another advantage is the reduced cost for students by switching from commercial textbooks and materials to resources that are free to access (Brandle et al., 2019). The choice to use OER to reduce costs also demonstrates the instructors’ concern for students through customized content and textbook cost reduction (Levy & Tila, 2022).

However despite these benefits, there are also challenges, as many educators may be deterred from OER because of the time required to search through the myriad of available materials to find relevant items, especially when the desired OER are text-based rather than multimedia resources (Thoms & Poole, 2021). Some students and educators may also be skeptical that a free resource can be equivalent in quality to a traditional commercial text (Brandle et al., 2019). Although the cost-reduction benefit may be seen by students, the financial and temporal costs to adapt or create quality OER shifts to the instructor or institution (Rodés et al., 2019).

Many higher education institutions are interested in openness (de Jong et al., 2019), and although individual faculty members and administrators may be convinced of the benefits of OER, it seems that an understanding about the benefits of OER is not sufficient to prompt the adoption of open practices (Irvine et al., 2021; Martin & Kimmons, 2020; Mason & Kimmons, 2018). Individuals and organizations struggle to incorporate these practices, lack the ability to make the transition, and/or feel unable to sustain it (de Jong et al., 2019). This may be partly due to the lack of consistency about the goals of open education (Belikov & Bodily, 2016; Wiley, n.d.). The definition of the term *open* itself does not have a universal definition or language amongst its proponents (Kimmons, 2016; Mishra, 2017a; Otto, 2019; Pomerantz & Peek, 2016; Weller, 2014; Wiley, n.d.). These challenges may also be due in part to the ideological shift of open education being quite different from existing models, and therefore this approach requires new skills, mindsets, and literacies (Kimmons, 2014; Schuwer & Jannsen, 2018).

In this article, we explored the adoption of OER in a department that created a department-wide initiative for creating and using OER, particularly the development of open textbooks. Over the course of several years, the department transitioned to almost exclusive use of OER in the instruction of required undergraduate and graduate courses. The adoption of OER in the academic department began with a few early adopters of open practices. These faculty members began creating and sharing texts and conducting research on OER. This understanding of the purpose and practicalities of OER disseminated through the department due to their engagement in the conversation around openness. In 2018, an OER platform was created by a faculty member in the department (Jensen et al., 2024). The site has served as a primary repository for the department’s open materials, as well as providing support for open initiatives elsewhere on the university campus and at other institutions. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of OER and the faculty contributions to OER publications. Courses on OER are also now included as options for students to learn more about open practices in education. This case is a promising example of how institutions can benefit from the momentum created by a few early adopters and steadily create a culture of openness.

Patterns of adopting OER at various institutions seem to generally follow the diffusion of innovations theory put forth by Rogers (1962). The five characteristics described by Rogers (1962) as factors in innovation diffusion are: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and communicability. A study by Menzli et al. (2022) indicated that relative advantage and communicability have a positive impact on faculty adoption of OER, while complexity and compatibility have a negative impact on OER adoption, and trialability was shown to have no impact on OER adoption rates.

There are many existing articles that describe the particular obstacles instructors face when adopting innovations such as OER or other emerging technologies. In a general sense, faculty are often less likely to embrace changes to pedagogical practices because of insufficient training, time, and incentives (Brownell & Tanner, 2012). Additionally, Hannan (2005) identified that innovation in teaching and learning was also likely to be impeded by a “lack of recognition and interest by colleagues and people in authority” and more likely to take place when “the institution had a policy establishing parity between research and teaching and learning, including for purposes of promotion, and the policy was reflected in practice” (p. 976). Finally, in a recent study about employee attitudes towards artificial intelligence, relative advantage, observability, compatibility, and threat were found to be most important in creating positive attitudes towards adoption over time, with the important caveat that these effects varied greatly by employee characteristics and prior attitudes (Xu et al., 2023). These general factors impacting the diffusion of innovations in education and technology appear to hold true for the adoption of open practices and technologies as well.

An editorial piece by D’Antoni (2009) synthesized the challenges for adoption of OER specifically into six main issues: awareness raising and promotion, communities and networking, capacity development, sustainability, quality assurance, and copyright. Chae and Jenkins (2015) highlighted six similar roadblocks faced in adoption of OER: (a) lack of time, (b) institutional skepticism, (c) lack of technology and skills with technology, copyright, and licensing, (d) feelings of uncertainty regarding the quality of the materials and its perception by others, (e) difficulty in reviewing the materials, and (f) differences in course specifications, such as scope and level of the course. A study by Kimmons (2016) pointed to related barriers that were categorized as macro (legislative support and quality), local (time, technology, training, buy-in, and support), and personal (financial loss and apathy). Perceptions of quality, accessibility and usability, and time were cited by Kimmons and Irvine (2023) as barriers to OER adoption. Thus, although different studies create different category labels for these obstacles, there are many struggles that frequently appear in the literature: awareness, quality assurance, culture, and sustainability.

AWARENESS

One barrier to OER adoption is that faculty lack awareness of the existence of OER relevant to their courses, as well as existing policies at their institutions. Although some universities have policies of openness, “educators [are] often insufficiently aware of them” (Schuwer & Janssen, 2018, p. 161) and therefore, there is a “clear need to promote awareness of OER initiatives” (Zaid & Alabi, 2021, p. 195). This also extends to faculty needing to be made aware of any existing repositories that may contain the resources they are looking for (Belikov & Bodily, 2016). Knowing about such repositories can be a first step in using OER, but sustainable open practices depend on educators knowing how their own contributions can benefit others and how to give back within the OER system (Kimmons & Irvine, 2023). The awareness of how to engage in this virtuous cycle of giving and receiving OER can create the conditions for sustainable generosity (Kimmons & Irvine, 2023) that promote the aims of openly sharing expertise.

In addition to a personal understanding of OER, faculty have expressed a need for increased institutional understanding. In one study, faculty who had independently adopted OER explained that, due to a lack of understanding and awareness among colleagues and department administration, they experienced a tension where these OER adopters had to occasionally “defend their choices” of using open textbooks (Watson et al., 2017, p. 296). This is likely due in part to inaccurate understandings or unclear ideas of how OER are used (Martin & Kimmons, 2020). Beyond knowing what the institutional parameters are for implementing

and contributing to OER, individuals are often discouraged by legal concerns and require a knowledge of resources to turn to for advice concerning copyright (Otto, 2019; Otto, 2022). Awareness is clearly more than just being told that OER exist but also helping instructors understand the limits of copyright and fair use and assisting them in navigating the practical details of how to successfully begin a shift to more open practices.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Another concern faculty have with OER is ease of access to trustworthy, quality OER. Although repositories of OER exist, instructors are either unaware of these or unsure how to find the quality materials needed for their course within the repository (Schuwer & Janssen, 2018). The search to find suitable OER is therefore very time consuming (Otto, 2022) and can discourage potential users because the responsibility for quality assurance lies with them rather than being outsourced to a commercial publisher (Kaatrakoski et al., 2016). Additionally, there is ingering concern that learners may lose out on support provided by traditional vendors and materials (D'Antoni, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, it is not only the quantity of readily available and easily discoverable resources, “but also the perceived relevance and quality of OER” (Baas et al., 2019, p. 2) including the production value of the materials (Dastur, 2017; Mishra, 2017b). This obstacle indicates an additional concern of the time it would take an instructor to sift through the content available to find or revise existing OER to use in a particular course.

CULTURE

The culture within an institution of supporting individual instructors in implementing changes also has a significant impact on successful adoption of OER. Mishra (2017a) stated that “building a culture of using OER” (p. 377) would do more within an institution to promote openness than focusing on potential cost savings. If colleagues and administrators are supportive and knowledgeable about OER, faculty could feel that institutional barriers are less difficult to navigate. As an example of a perceived cultural barrier to adopting OER, studies indicate that faculty feel that they lack the time to find and/or create OER due to their many other responsibilities (Baas et al., 2019; Belikov & Bodily, 2016; Schuwer & Janssen, 2018), and the faculty perceive a “lack of integration with current workflows or processes” (Murphy, 2013, p. 214). A study of OER use at community colleges reported that 62% of faculty participants indicated that administrative support was a high-ranking need for ongoing OER implementation, with 49% of their open-ended responses providing more detail that “sustained funding or release time for faculty was needed for OER adoption, modification, creation, and updates” (Lantrip & Ray, 2021, p. 905). Such concerns, especially among tenure-track instructors, that OER creation is less valued by the university than producing traditional research is a significant cultural barrier that impedes the adoption of OER (Kimmons & Irvine, 2023; Martin & Kimmons, 2020; Schuwer & Janssen, 2018). Therefore, most higher education institutions would benefit from a shift in values and expectations if they hope to sustainably adopt OER in their programs.

SUSTAINABILITY

A final challenge in adopting OER is the need for policies and initiatives to be firmly in place to support faculty in using OER beyond the initial invitation (D'Antoni, 2009). These policies and initiatives primarily come in two forms: expertise and funding. While faculty are subject matter experts and can evaluate the specific content for accuracy, they are likely to benefit from auxiliary support that is in place to help them navigate technology, pedagogy, and copyright (Schuwer & Janssen, 2018). The second aspect of sustainability comes through internal grants and funding infrastructures (Friesen, 2009; Otto, 2022; Schuwer & Janssen, 2018; Zaid & Alabi, 2021). Not only does an OER-related grant signal to faculty that the institution values this use of time to create and share openly, but it allows them to continue innovating and encouraging others to contribute to the process over time. Without the support from grants, the time and labor faculty dedicate to the evaluation and creation of OER become invisible and unacknowledged financially (Rodés et al., 2019). It stands to reason that sustainability requires the establishing of structures and practices that allow for maintenance and training of future collaborators and creators.

While these studies describe several of the main challenges in faculty adopting OER, research in this area is still thin. In addition, studies typically have focused on challenges and impediments, and less often on successful scenarios when OER has been more readily adopted, and what the reasons are for this success (although [Ponte et al., 2021](#), does provide a similar case study of adoption to the one we present in this paper). In this paper we provide a more positive case study of a department that quickly transitioned nearly all of its required teaching materials from commercial to OER. Besides simply adopting OER, this department began producing many open textbooks, along with an OER creation/publishing tool. In this article we report findings from interviews of faculty in this department to present a case of how OER adoption diffused through the faculty and became embedded in its culture.

METHODS

To explore the practices that led to successful adoption in this context, we used a qualitative case study design ([Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). The goal of this case study was to give a particular account of the experiences of OER adoption in the department focused on describing the conditions that led to its success, as well as the obstacles encountered, in a way that provides insight to readers on the process of transitioning to OER as a department ([Yazan, 2015](#)). Although case studies are characterized as being isolated phenomena, by adding to the existing literature reporting on the implementation of OER across a program, this individual case can add to the conversation by bolstering patterns that can be seen across cases ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#)).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Two specific questions are at the heart of this case study that should reveal the conditions that allowed for OER to successfully take root in the department and the practices that supported this shift.

1. How did individual faculty members describe their experiences with openness in the department?
2. What were the specific conditions and practices in the department that allowed faculty to successfully transition to OER?

DATA COLLECTION

Interviews were an important aspect of this case study as they allowed for a closer look at the experiences and motivations at the individual level within the larger case of the departmental shift. First, interviews with current faculty provided depth to the understanding of how the successes and challenges described in the literature were experienced in this setting as the individual adopters began using OER. The six faculty participants were asked five questions in this semi-structured interview. The first question prompted faculty to share their narratives of experience with OER. The following questions asked participants to describe their experiences with adopting and creating OER in terms of the resources they relied on, challenges they faced, and impacts they observed. The final question asked them to imagine the next steps for OER adoption in the department. These interviews lasted up to 60 minutes, depending on the faculty's role and experience with shifting to openness.

Additionally, a semi-structured focus group with three of the interviewed faculty members from the department as well as a college administrator were used to help triangulate the findings and add richness to the description of the transition to openness at the department level. Grouping of faculty for the focus groups was made based on their responses in the individual interviews to promote discussion. Three of the questions elicited a discussion from the faculty about the timeline, obstacles, successes, and continued work on incorporating and creating OER. The fourth question referred to a comment from the individual interviews where the participant stated that it would be difficult to recreate a similar OER adoption experience outside of this department. Participants were asked to reflect on why this may or may not be true and what the conditions were that made this case unique and difficult to replicate. The focus group was 70 minutes long.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that the collection of this qualitative data was with the "exempt" category for research on human subjects.

Sampling

As is typical in a case study, this investigation used sampling criteria of interviewing and conducting focus groups from within the bounded system of an academic department at a private university in the western United States (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All six participants belonged to the same department, a graduate program in learning and instructional design. The faculty have experience with educational technologies, and in general are advocates of open education with some of the participants studying this as part of their research agenda. The participants were all full-time faculty with tenure at either the associate or professor rank. Purposive sampling of the six participants in interviews provided a range of perspectives from within the case of how adoption of OER came about and the highs and lows of the experience.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data from the interviews and focus groups was analyzed holistically to provide a thorough description of the adoption of OER in the department. In addition to this descriptive analysis of the events and decision-making aspects of this case, a thematic analysis of the interviews gives further understanding of the lived experiences of those impacted by the OER adoption.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using multiple levels of grouping the data: descriptive codes, categorization, and themes (Saldaña, 2021). First, the transcripts were coded using descriptive codes to identify the subtopics, although some in vivo codes were chosen to facilitate finding particular passages to represent the categories effectively. The 280 descriptive codes were then grouped into 14 categories that showed connections between the different data points. Finally, the categories were analyzed for major themes related to the original research questions that emerged within the categories. Three themes emerged from the category analysis. All identifying information was redacted from the transcripts, and participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

RIGOR

The use of multiple methods of obtaining qualitative data (interviews and focus groups) allows for triangulation of the findings in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To establish internal validity of the findings, member checks with interview participants were done to ensure that the experiences are accurately presented. Interview participants were provided with a summary of the findings and any quoted or interpreted ideas they shared to allow them to check for accuracy and provide potential additional insight (Williams & Kimmons, 2022). The faculty members who have not adopted OER but have instead opted for low-cost or zero cost alternatives, serve as extreme cases (Kimmons, 2022) and offer a richer understanding of the complex obstacles related to OER adoption (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Faculty participating in the focus groups likewise were provided with the insights and given a chance to comment on the fidelity of any interpretations.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The first author is a student in the graduate program targeted in this paper and has benefited from the departmental use and creation of OER. The other authors of this study are authors of books on the platform and encourage open education professionally. All three of the authors consider themselves to be interpretivists in their epistemology, in that they believe there is value in understanding how people interpret and understand their experiences, and that their interpretations of the same experience may vary. In that sense, the interviews in this paper, and the analysis, represent an interpretation of the experience of adopting and creating open educational resources. We believe this interpretation accurately represents the viewpoints of those interviewed, but additional interpretations are also possible.

RESULTS

The guiding research question for this study was “What were the specific conditions and practices in the department that allowed faculty to successfully transition to OER?” Findings coalesced around three major themes: climate, technology, and costs. Each of these themes encapsulated subtheme patterns in the experiences of the faculty in the academic department as they moved toward openness.

A theme expressed by all participants was that OER aligned with the values of the individual faculty member, the department, the college, and the university. The subthemes in this category included peer support and perceived alignment with the university's mission statement. The interviews and focus group revealed that the awareness of OER in the department was initially due to a former faculty member ("Samuel") who was an innovator in OER. As described by Arnold, a current faculty member, this individual "seeded a lot of thinking towards the importance of openness in all of the faculty." In the words of Brooke, "Without those introductions from supporters of [OER], I think it would have been a longer journey to getting to where I am now in how I see it and use it." This ideological shift occurred years before faculty began actively participating in producing and using OER due to the constraints of technology and time. However, the awareness and advocacy for openness in the department grew as the faculty experimented with OER platforms and as new faculty with open mindsets joined the department. Although the climate of openness was established, it took longer for the practices or culture to follow until they were able to start overcoming the stronger barriers (e.g., technology) that inhibited them from acting on their philosophy of openness.

At the time of this study, the department had widespread use and buy-in into open practices. Brooke stated, "There are many people [in the department] that believe that OER are a good thing ... that we should put our time and resources into creating these for our department, for our students ... that it's not just a benefit for us, but it benefits others as well." Even though not all faculty saw themselves as part of the OER movement, Chris stated, "The spirit of OER, I think, is alive and well in what I'm doing, in some sense." Chris explained that while he did not use or produce open materials, the motivations of lowering costs for students and easing access were accomplished using of the course reserve system provided by the university's library to curate readings of articles relevant to the coursework. This further supported the observation that the climate of the department had shared values and aims, even when the exact approach to the solution was different.

Although the movement toward openness within the department arose from individual adopters rather than a formal initiative from administration, the faculty attributed its sustainability in part to support from the department. This support was seen in the department funding provided for the open publishing platform, in grants, and in the ability to hire students to contribute to open publications. Institutional support was seen indirectly through the descriptions of feeling supported in allocating their time and resources toward the pursuit of openness without barriers stemming from the organization. The participants in the focus group described this as there being a "positive space" created by the department in which faculty feel free to devote time and energy toward open publishing. Although that description did not extend to the college, which was described as more neutral toward openness, and even less so to the university, which may limit open efforts through a heavy emphasis on traditional scholarship.

TECHNOLOGY

One of the major barriers experienced by faculty in the department was that the technology available when they first became aware and interested in openness (in 2018) was not conducive to efficient creation and sharing of OER (for an in-depth discussion of one of the first open textbooks created in the department, see Author, 2018). Many of them described their struggles with platforms, which added to the time it took to produce their work and feeling unsatisfied with the product. As these faculty members were part of a department of educational technology, their struggle with using the technology available at that time would indicate that other users would likely have had similar discouraging experiences. Although there are forms of sharing OER that require very little technical know-how, faculty indicated a desire for their open textbooks to appear "formalized" or "streamlined," to indicate its quality. They also wanted a trustworthy repository to improve the visibility and access to their resources.

All participants pointed to the advent of a new OER hosting platform, supported by their department and created by a colleague, as the tipping point in their engagement in OER. In the words of David:

If I had had to keep [the existing technology], I don't think I would have bothered. I think the fact that [the new platform] is easy to use, made me realize I'm not going to have to fight the technology. All I've got to worry about is the content. And that made me really interested in doing it.

Features such as the ability to embed multimedia and license individual chapters with various open licenses were cited as useful for faculty. They also described the ease of navigation and helpful user guide as allowing them to quickly begin creating and sharing content through the new platform. Although the time cost of OER continued to be felt by the faculty, they described the experience of creating OER as more manageable because the platform reduced time, and they could easily communicate with their on-site platform manager. More than one participant described the creation of this platform as the catalyst that allowed them to begin acting on their desire to lower costs for students and share their work openly.

Creating a new hosting platform that was department supported was possible in large part because of the technical and design expertise of the faculty members. This may not be feasible for many other departments, but the other elements of this narrative were equally valuable in overcoming the obstacle of technology. David talked about how the platform emerged from a conversation about obstacles in technologies to support OER creation, and one of his peers in the department responding to that conversation by creating a platform that offered solutions to those obstacles. This resource then evolved as the two continued to communicate to troubleshoot the new resource and as they mutually encouraged one another and championed OER in the department. This support allowed multiple faculty members to begin sharing OER and created momentum towards a cultural shift. As explained by Frank, the ability to turn to peers for support was a positive resource in adopting OER. This pattern of establishing a community around OER, identifying a person to serve as a technology resource, and making open work highly visible to encourage other participants can benefit others regardless of their comfort with technology.

COSTS

In discussing their experience with openness, faculty described several costs that they incurred by creating OER. The sub-themes that emerged from the data were that the costs felt by the faculty were largely related to financial and opportunity costs, time, championing the work, and balancing OER with tenure and promotion. Arnold emphasized the financial and opportunity costs by stating that, "open does not mean free." He explained further that "there are real costs being paid by someone," in this case the department funding the platform. There were also opportunity costs felt by the faculty who opted for the "volunteer service" of creating and maintaining OER rather than pursuing other potential career-advancing options. On the topic of time, faculty spoke of spending semester breaks and weekends working on OER projects to have them completed in time for use. Brooke explained, "If I don't have the time off for sabbatical to do it, it's going to take me probably three or four times as long to get it finished." While some participants were quick to point out that the time was well-spent in their view, they indicated that compensation, reduced course loads, or recognition for their work could help reduce the feelings of burnout from the time, creativity, and energy they put into the OER they create.

In individual interviews, the participants alluded to the challenges of managing several chapter authors and their own multiple roles in the process of creating OER. However, the demands of "championing the work" were also discussed in greater detail in the focus group. David indicated some concern that such initiatives and efforts "do not continue unless they have a champion." This raised the question of stability—if burnout impacts the champion or the responsibilities of the champion no longer afford the space for OER work. While these concerns were not immediate, it was clear that this was a very real issue for the faculty members as they look toward the future and try to put measures into place to secure the path forward for OER and protect themselves from burnout or the loss of a champion player in the department.

The timing of advancing in rank and status at the university for some of the early adopters also posed a barrier for the department's move toward openness. Coinciding with the design of the department-supported OER platform and the start of creating OER textbooks was the faculty members achieving tenure and the department and college clarifying the expectations for

traditional scholarship publications. In the focus group, Ethan explained that “it’s not that the college necessarily gives a lot of credit for writing open, but it’s that we knew we had enough work done in other areas that we could extend the energy [on OER].” With clearly defined expectations for the requirements of the college, and some key players reaching their tenure goals, the space was created within the teaching role of the professors to devote time toward open work to benefit their students.

The balance between the more institutionally valued work in traditional research and peer reviewed publications continues to be relevant to the faculty’s ability to allocate time to OER. In individual interviews, Ethan mentioned the concern of OER work not being “seen and treated as scholarly work” and not counting toward tenure and promotion. Although the overall climate of the institution was perceived to be positive, faculty mentioned they felt the open work they produced was undervalued in the promotion process because OER are not seen as “very rigorous,” and internal reviewers “would not view these kinds of efforts as scholarly efforts. They view them as citizenship.” The participants themselves were divided on this point, with some believing that OER work should count as scholarship and others insisting that it fits better within the categories of teaching or citizenship.

The faculty also were unsure of how to describe and highlight their OER in a way that the institution would see the value in the work as being equivalent to producing a textbook with a traditional publisher. They expressed particular concern with this because, after having published textbook chapters in the traditional way, they did not view the quality or rigor of a traditional publisher to be any more valuable or intense than their practices with their open content. Ultimately, the perceived values of the college and university culture did not extend to concrete practices that made space for pursuing OER during this critical stage of demonstrating academic achievement and contributions. Even after meeting the standards of the university, faculty still described open efforts as being “despite the university’s wishes” rather than being expressly supported by the larger institution.

DISCUSSION

This case study explored the diffusion of OER as an innovation within a single academic department, with champions of OER initiating a shift by creating awareness and providing support as other adopters joined in. However, the point of greater interest in the diffusion of OER within this department revolves around the barriers of technology and tenure leading to a lengthier adoption time. There appeared to have been a dramatic uptake in the innovation as soon as the platform eased the pain point of adoption for users, a platform that was made possible after rank and status concerns were relieved. In the words of David, there was “serendipity in terms of everyone having projects they wanted to do about the same time and a common goal that we really wanted to provide a zero-cost environment for our students.” This coincidence was explained by the diffusion of the supporting innovation of the platform for OER publishing and the clarification of expectations for faculty by the college. This insight can help other institutions consider if there is a secondary obstacle that needs to be resolved for OER to take root, such as through finding a repository system that fits the needs, by providing improved access to technology or copyright experts, or clarifying and aligning tenure and promotion expectations to be favorable to openness.

One other unique characteristic in this case study was that there were no policies or incentives in place at the college or department level regarding openness as described in other literature (Chae & Jenkins, 2015; Essmiller et al., 2020; Otto, 2019). There was no formal stance, and little to no grant money, that required or prompted faculty to pursue openness, and the limited money available was all channeled to students, not to the faculty themselves. Ethan described his perspective on this lack of incentives as the institution “rely[ing] entirely upon the intrinsic motivators of faculty to make this happen” rather than providing course buyouts or stipends. In other words, the participation in openness moves forward in this environment because the conditions were such that the faculty were able to act on their own philanthropic ideals and pedagogical preferences. Such internal incentives included the cost savings analysis mentioned by many as well as “an ongoing relationship between [their] students and [their] content” described by Ethan. Rather than engaging in openness because of external pressure, policy, or incentive, the faculty engaged in their OER pursuits because they felt an alignment with

their roles as educators and with the university's service-oriented mission statement, but this alignment was manifested more as an ideal relationship rather than a practical support. Visions between the faculty and institution were closely aligned, but practices were not.

Indeed, Rogers (1962) diffusion of innovations theory can explain many of the themes from this study. First, faculty clearly began at the *knowledge* stage of innovation, having learned the values, principles, and research related to OER from Samuel, their former colleague and OER advocate. They were then *persuaded* to create and adopt OER primarily by considering the compatibility of the practice with their university's service orientation, as well as with the tenure expectations. While they acknowledged that the university did not necessarily encourage OER scholarship, the university culture was not discouraging of the practice either, and especially after being awarded tenure and promotion, they felt free to explore OER practices. A major feature in their adoption was the simplicity of the new OER creation platform created by their colleague, as compared with the perceived complexity of previous platforms. Finally, once a couple faculty created OER on this platform, others were able to observe, first-hand, how easy it was to create and the benefits for teaching and scholarship. The new platform also made trialability easy as anyone could create a free account and practice making OER. These features, described through a diffusion of innovations framework, enabled faster adoption than otherwise has happened with OER initiatives.

In the focus group, the faculty described that formalized structural support from the department and college in the form of a plan for maintenance of the OER platform and proportioned funding would be beneficial for sustaining openness long-term. They also expressed hope that in addition to the rigor, impact, and prestige of research publications, contributions to open works could be a criterion for tenure and promotion in the future. The faculty also frequently mentioned their desire for reduced course loads or stipends to support their work. So, while in this instance, the initial adoption of OER did not benefit from specific incentives or assistance, there is a sense that the continued sustainability of the work would be dependent on the institutional support suggested in the literature (D'Antoni, 2009; Whitchurch & Jensen, 2023). Such support could come in the form of policies allocating specific time for OER (Belikov & Bodily, 2016), inclusion of OER in tenure and promotion (Kimmons & Irvine, 2023; Martin & Kimmons, 2020; Yang & Li, 2015), and support for the "local expert" (Chae & Jenkins, 2015, p. 31).

LIMITATIONS

The nature of a case study does not lend itself to providing claims of generalizable patterns or processes, and as such, this study only provides a description of one example of OER adoption in which other programs may find similarities or transferable practices. Due to the constraints of the study, only one coder went through descriptive coding and categorization. However, the themes and the subtheme categories were discussed as a team and member checked to confirm analysis. Additionally, the department highlighted in this study is likely atypical to many other cases because of its fundamental concern with educational technology and the faculty members' access to hiring instructional design students to help create content. As several of the faculty members who were early adopters of OER are inclined toward the technology innovations in the field of education, the ease with which they adjusted to any technological demands of the change could lead to minimized perceptions of that particular barrier noted frequently in the literature. Another potential limitation is the bias of the authors, as all participate in the creation and use of OER in their roles.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

This case study of the adoption of OER as seen in an academic department highlighted three major themes in the experience of faculty: the climate of the department, the impact of technology, and the costs felt by individuals. The faculty described the climate of the department as being largely encouraging toward OER as being a significant factor in their sustained enthusiasm and ability to act on their desires to pursue OER work. However, the climate of the college and university were described as being more superficially supportive of the work because no practices, policies, or funding contributed toward this perceived approval of OER. In this case, the climate at the college and university level were therefore

better described as neutral toward openness. The timeline of the department adoption of OER showed that the existing platforms were not conducive to the faculty feeling positive about the OER they could create with tools that felt more like barriers to creation. The development and launch of an internal platform allowed the faculty to design a platform that responded to their needs and facilitated an explosion of OER publications and continued maintenance and improvement of their content. Finally, the time costs to faculty creating OER were most keenly felt as faculty felt the tension between their requirements for tenure and promotion and their desire to work with OER. Because OER work was not seen as valued work in their contributions to the field as defined by the tenure and promotion process, faculty have had to find space in their discretionary time to work on OER. The need to advocate for the value of the creation, maintenance, and continuous improvement of OER projects and the OER platform without compensation through reduced course loads, stipends, or professional recognition led to faculty feeling a strain from being pulled in two directions.

This research illustrates several insights for those hoping to embrace open practices in their own institutions of higher education, including implications for both faculty and institutions, which are intertwined. First, faculty may need an intrinsic mindset that openness is a valuable part of their work and that the benefits for students outweigh the cost of time and effort on their part. Indeed, Ma (2021) argued that faculty are the key, and to unlock the potential of OER's benefits for students, faculty need to be more motivated to create OER. Second, the platforms used for creating and hosting open content need to be easy to access and use, institutions need to support their faculty's technical needs, and the technology must respond to the needs of the users, thus lowering technical barriers. Third, the leadership of an OER champion as well as a technology expert would increase the likelihood of successful adoption of OER throughout a department. Finally, the institution can support open efforts by recognizing open scholarship as strong components of promotion and tenure dossiers, which will allow faculty to engage in OER development more easily.

Looking forward, platforms that truly facilitate faculty's ability to create OER and practice the 5 Rs of openness need support in order to continue providing a space for sustainable OER practices. Research should continue to look at the lived experiences of faculty in academic departments as they adopt OER, especially in departments outside of education pedagogy and technology, and particularly looking at how they can teach and use OER, in addition to just adopt it (Ma, 2021). Part of that may involve re-envisioning what the possibilities may be for an open textbook vs. traditional books (Harrison, et al., 2022). Additional insight could come from looking at departments where they have not yet reached a critical mass of faculty awareness and desire to contribute to OER. Future efforts by the institution to formally recognize open contributions of faculty as valued in rank and status portfolios as external incentives for openness in higher education and will ultimately be necessary for educational futures that are more open and sustainably generous (Kimmons & Irvine, 2023).

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

This study is linked to the following SDG(s): Quality education (SDG 4) and reduced inequalities (SDG 5).

ETHICS AND CONSENT

University IRB approval was received prior to this study.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Karina Jackson: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing. Royce Kimmons: conceptualization, methodology, writing—review and editing. Heather Leary: methodology, writing—review and editing. Richard West: methodology, writing—review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Karina Jackson  orcid.org/0000-0002-9175-2667

Brigham Young University, USA

Royce Kimmons  orcid.org/0000-0001-7744-2315

Brigham Young University, USA

Heather Leary  orcid.org/0000-0002-2487-578X

Brigham Young University, USA

Richard West  orcid.org/0000-0002-1417-0823

Brigham Young University, USA

REFERENCES

- Baas, M., Admiraal, W., & van den Berg, E.** (2019). Teachers' adoption of open educational resources in higher education. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2019(1), 1–11. <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2965333/view>
- Belikov, O. M., & Bodily, R.** (2016). Incentives and barriers to OER adoption: A qualitative analysis of faculty perceptions. *Open Praxis*, 8(3), 235–246. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.8.3.308>
- Blessinger, P., & Bliss, T. J.** (2016). Introduction to open education: Towards a human rights theory. In P. Blessinger & T. J. Bliss (Eds.), *Open education: International perspectives in higher education* (pp. 11–29). Open Book Publisher. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0103>
- Brandle, S., Katz, S., Hays, A., Beth, A., Cooney, C., DiSanto, J., Miles, L., & Morrison, A.** (2019). But what do the students think: Results of the CUNY cross-campus zero-textbook cost student survey. *International Council for Open and Distance Education*, 11(1), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.11.1.932>
- Brownell, S. E., & Tanner, K. D.** (2012). Barriers to faculty pedagogical change: Lack of training, time, incentives, and...tensions with professional identity? *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 11(4), 339–346. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.12-09-0163>
- Chae, B., & Jenkins, M.** (2015). *A qualitative investigation of faculty open educational resource usage in the Washington Community and Technical College System: Models for support and implementation*. Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges, 1–38. <https://www.oerknowledgecloud.org/record964>
- Creative Commons.** (n.d.) *Open education*. Creative Commons. <https://creativecommons.org/about/education-oer/>
- D'Antoni, S.** (2009). Open educational resources: Reviewing initiatives and issues. *Open Learning*, 24(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510802625443>
- Dastur, F.** (2017). How to open an academic department. In R. S. Jhangiani & R. Biswas-Diener (Eds.), *Open: The philosophy and practices that are revolutionizing education and science* (pp. 163–178). Ubiquity Press. <https://doi.org/10.5334/bbc.m>
- de Jong, M., Munnik, M. E., & Will, N. U.** (2019). Innovation opportunities for academic libraries to support teaching through open education: A case study at TU Delft, The Netherlands. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 25(2–4), 392–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2019.1621185>
- Essmiller, K., Thompson, P., & Alvarado-Albertorio, F.** (2020). Performance improvement technology for building a sustainable OER initiative in an academic library. *TechTrends: Linking Research and Practice to Improve Learning*, 64(2), 265–274. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-019-00467-2>
- Flyvbjerg, B.** (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Friesen, N.** (2009). Open educational resources: New possibilities for change and sustainability. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 10(5), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i5.664>
- Hannan, A.** (2005). Innovating in higher education: Contexts for change in learning technology. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(6), 975–985. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2005.00568.x>

- Harrison, M., Paskevicius, M., Devries, I., & Morgan, T.** (2022). Crowdsourcing the (Un) Textbook: Rethinking and Future Thinking the Role of the Textbook in Open Pedagogy. *The Open/Technology in Education, Society, and Scholarship Association Journal*, 2(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.18357/otessaj.2022.2.1.30>
- Irvine, J., Kimmons, R., & Rogers, J.** (2021, July 12). *Recognizing and overcoming obstacles: What it will take to realize the potential of OER*. Educause review. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2021/7/recognizing-and-overcoming-obstacles-what-it-will-take-to-realize-the-potential-of-oer>
- Jensen, M., Nissen, R. N., Muñoz Moreno, I., Bondah, F. E., Smalley, P. P., Pilcher, T. E., Jackson, K. M., Alba, A., & Kimmons, R.** (2024). Platform development as an iterative process: An OER design case of EdTech Books. *International Journal of Designs for Learning*, 15(3), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.14434/ijdl.v15i3.36275>
- Kaatrakoski, H., Littlejohn, A., & Hood, N.** (2016). Learning challenges in higher education: An analysis of contradictions within open educational practice. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 74(4), 599–615. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0067-z>
- Kimmons, R.** (2014). Developing open education literacies with practicing K–12 teachers. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 15(6), 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v15i6.1964>
- Kimmons, R.** (2016). Expansive openness in teacher practice. *Teachers College Record*, 118(9), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811611800901>
- Kimmons, R.** (2022). Sampling: How should I choose a sample for my study? In R. Kimmons (Ed.), *Education research*. EdTech Books. https://edtechbooks.org/education_research/sampling
- Kimmons, R., & Irvine, J.** (2023). Future directions in OER. In D. Otto, G. Scharnberg, M. Kerres & O. Zawacki-Richter (Eds.), *Distributed learning ecosystems*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-38703-7_10
- Lantrip, J., & Ray, J.** (2021). Faculty perceptions and usage of OER at Oregon community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 45(12), 896–910. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1838967>
- Levy, D., & Tila, D.** (2022). An overlooked benefit of OER: Showing students we care. *Online Submission*, 3(3), 199–204.
- Ma, H.** (2021). Empowering digital learning with open textbooks. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 69(1), 393–396. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-020-09916-9>
- Martin, T., & Kimmons, R.** (2020). Faculty members' lived experiences with choosing open educational resources. *Open Praxis*, 12(1), 131–144. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.12.1.987>
- Mason, S. L., & Kimmons, R.** (2018). Effects of open textbook adoption on teacher's open practices. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 19(3), 128–150. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v19i3.3517>
- Menzli, L. J., Smirani, L. K., Boulahia, J. A., & Hadjouni, M.** (2022). Investigation of open educational resources adoption in higher education using Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory. *Heliyon*, 8(7), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09885>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J.** (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Mishra, S.** (2017a). Open educational resources: Removing barriers from within. *Distance Education*, 38(3), 369–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1369350>
- Mishra, S.** (2017b). Promoting use and contribution of open educational resources. *Journal of Learning for Development* 4(3), 379–381. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v4i3.257>
- Murphy, A.** (2013). Open educational practices in higher education: Institutional adoption and challenges. *Distance Education*, 34(2), 201–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2013.793641>
- Otto, D.** (2019). Adoption and diffusion of open educational resources (OER) in education: A meta-analysis of 25 OER-projects. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 20(5), 122–140. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i5.4472>
- Otto, D.** (2022). How to promote the use of open educational resources in higher education. A parley with OER experienced teachers. *Open Praxis*, 13(4), 354–364. <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.13.4.264>
- Pomerantz, J., & Peek, R.** (2016). Fifty shades of open. *First Monday*, 21(5). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i5.6360>
- Ponte, F., Lennox, A., & Hurley, J.** (2021). The evolution of the open textbook initiative. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 70(2), 194–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2021.1883819>
- Rodés, V., Gewerc-Barujel, A., & Llamas-Nista, M.** (2019). University teachers and open educational resources: Case studies from Latin America. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 20(1), 165–183. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i1.3853>
- Rogers, E. M.** (1962). *Diffusion of innovations*. The Free Press.
- Saldaña, J.** (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.

- Schuwert, R., & Janssen, B.** (2018). Adoption of sharing and reuse of open resources by educators in higher education institutions in the Netherlands: A qualitative research of practices, motives, and conditions. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 19(3), 151–171. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v19i3.3390>
- Thoms, J. J., & Poole, F.** (2021). Second language teachers and the open education movement in the United States: A national survey. In C. S. Blyth & J. J. Thoms (Eds.), *Open education and second language learning and teaching: The rise of a new knowledge ecology* (pp. 109–129). <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1231862.9>
- UNESCO.** (2019). *Certified copy of the recommendation on open educational resources (OER)*. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-open-educational-resources-oer>
- Watson, C. E., Domizi, D. P., & Clouser, S. A.** (2017). Student and faculty perceptions of OpenStax in high enrollment courses. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(5), 287–304. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i5.2462>
- Weller, M.** (2014). What sort of open? In *The battle for open: How openness won and why it doesn't feel like victory* (pp. 27–44). Ubiquity Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv3t5r3r.5>
- Whitchurch, M., & Jensen, C.** (2023). Contributors to the successful implementation of OER program components. *International Journal of Open Educational Resources*, 1(5), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.18278/ijoe.5.1.2>
- Wiley, D.** (n.d.). Defining the “open” in open content and open educational resources. Improving learning. <https://opencontent.org/definition>
- Wiley, D., Bliss, T. J., & McEwen, M.** (2014). Open educational resources: A review of the literature. In J. Spector, M. Merrill, J. Elen & M. Bishop (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-3185-5_63
- Wiley, D., Caswell, T., Henson, S., & Jensen, M.** (2008). Open educational resources: Engaging universal education. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 9(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v9i1.469>
- Williams, D. D., & Kimmons, R.** (2022). Qualitative rigor: How do I conduct qualitative research in a rigorous manner? In R. Kimmons (Ed.), *Education research*. EdTech Books. https://edtechbooks.org/education_research/qualitative_rigor
- Xu, S., Kee, K. F., Li, W., Yamamoto, M., & Riggs, R. E.** (2023). Examining the diffusion of innovations from a dynamic, differential-effects perspective: A longitudinal study on AI adoption among employees. *Communication Research*, 51(7), 843–866. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502231191832>
- Yang, Z. Y., & Li, Y.** (2015). University faculty awareness and attitudes toward open access publishing and the institutional repository: A case study. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*, 3(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.7710/2162-3309.1210>
- Yazan, B.** (2015). Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 134–152. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2102>
- Zaid, Y. A., & Alabi, A. O.** (2021). Sustaining open educational resources (OER) initiatives in Nigerian universities. *Open Learning*, 36(2), 181–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2020.1713738>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jackson, K., Kimmons, R., Leary, H., & West, R. (2026). Case Study on a Shift to Open Educational Resources in an Academic Department. *Open Praxis*, 18(1), pp. 13–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.18.1.1017>

Submitted: 16 September 2025

Accepted: 19 November 2025

Published: 24 February 2026

COPYRIGHT:

© 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Praxis is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by International Council for Open and Distance Education.