The BC Open Textbook Project

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Editors' Commentary

What would happen if government recognized the potential impact—on students and society as a whole—of open textbooks? Over the four years since it was launched the BC Open Textbook Project has greatly surpassed its goals, on a shoestring budget. In this chapter, author Mary Burgess describes how a small team of committed professionals has managed to build a repository of more than 150 open textbooks and foster the adoption of open textbooks at every public institution in the province by raising awareness, maintaining an academic focus, building capacity within institutions and specific disciplines, connecting people with resources and expertise, and drawing on the knowledge of those who have trodden similar paths. The chapter concludes with a commentary on some of the challenges of quantifying success in this arena and on the role of policy in supporting the next phase of the project.

What is the project

It was October 2012 and about 300 international OER advocates, researchers and practitioners were gathered in the auditorium at UBC Robson Square in Vancouver. John Yap, the BC Minister of Advanced Education, took the podium and announced that the government of British Columbia would provide a $1 million dollar grant to BCcampus to manage a provincial Open Textbook program.

A year later, the Ministry announced a further $1 million dollars in funding to produce 20 books for areas in which, as a province, we have skills gaps or projected skills gaps; trades, tourism, technology, healthcare, and adult basic education.

Work on the project has brought both successes and challenges. BCcampus, a government funded agency working in support of BC's post-secondary sector in the areas of teaching, learning, educational technology and open education, is tasked with managing the project on behalf of the Ministry of Advanced Education. The primary goal of the project is to provide flexible and affordable access to higher education in BC by making available 40 openly-licensed text-books aligned with the most highly enrolled first and second year subject areas in BC public post-secondary institutions. This includes of course, both first and second year Psychology, given the popularity of the discipline with students. We are also striving to use openness as a platform for a shift to more student centred, outcomes based design of instruction that creates meaningful, applied and engaging learning experiences for students. We are focused on capitalizing on the teaching and learning benefits achieved through a culture of sharing.

At the time of writing this chapter, the project is now 3 years old, and we have learned a whole lot about what it takes to make a project of this scale happen.

How we got here

BCcampus has long been advocating for and actively working in the domain of OER. From 2003 to 2012, the organization administered the Online Program Development Fund (OPDF). This fund, provided by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education, enabled faculty and staff in BC institutions to create OER, which ranged from small multimedia elements to full online programs, all of which were licensed openly. Each year, institutions applied for funding and were required to collaborate with each other in order to secure their grant. Grants were decided on by a multi-institutional panel who looked at the proposals with a view to the entire BC system rather than simply what would benefit a single institution. This early work in OER licensing education and in building a culture of collaboration between institutions laid the groundwork for the Open Textbook Project. Like many, I have always seen collaboration and Openness as natural allies. Not only did the OPDF enable efficiency from the perspective that within a single funding system, institutions were able to use each others' resources rather than each one paying for their own, it also demonstrated the true power of Open. When we enable collaboration, we enable a better end result for students. Having many experts co-develop a learning resource and then allowing other experts to revise and improve it leads to resources that are tailored to enable learning against specific outcomes. There is a continuous improvement cycle when many people are allowed to be part of that process that just cannot be replicated when access is restricted.

When the Open Textbook Project was announced, we were very excited by the prospect of improving access to higher education by reducing costs for students. In addition, providing faculty the ability to control the resources they use by adapting them to their own contexts was seen as a major benefit to the learning process.

At the time of this writing, we have 163 textbooks, 703 courses into which our resources have been adopted, and have saved students more than two million dollars. How on earth did we get to this point?

Get out there

Getting input and talking with instructors, senior administrators and other institutional staff as well as students has been a key part of our work since the very beginning of the project. Ultimately we want to ensure this project is owned by the BC post-secondary system, not by BCcampus or by government despite the fact that we see ourselves as having a long term role in supporting this work. Encouraging that sense of ownership means getting out there and talking to people about their challenges, needs and vision. Three months after the project was announced, we held our first meeting of the BC Open Textbook Project Subcommittee. The committee was formed through a process of application, and those applications were vetted to ensure a desire to move open education forward in BC, representation of institution type (research focussed university, teaching focussed university, college and institute), region, and institutional role. We brought together faculty, students, instructional designers, librarians, senior administrators, and bookstore staff. The committee was intended to both inform the project and act as communication agents within their own institutions. Their input was integral to planning the project and to reflecting the system back to us as we put the pieces in place. They weighed in on everything from the best times in the academic year to do calls for proposals, to how much funding would be needed to incentivise faculty to participate. For example, we were advised to work closely with librarians as advocates. We took that very seriously and we now have a very active group of librarians in BC called BCOER who are collaborating with each other to support the adoption of open resources on their own campuses. The committee members acted as institutional contacts, advocates, and conduits to more communications.

Like our OER colleagues, BCcampus staff have given many presentations and workshops over the last 3 years. Being present within institutions to hear the questions and develop a deeper understanding about faculty barriers to adoption was extremely helpful for our processes. We did presentations to articulation committees (discipline panels), at faculty meetings, library meetings and anywhere else we could get an invitation. Early on, we asked if we could come. We are, thankfully, now at a point where we are asked to come. The questions we are asked at these sessions have also changed. When the project was in its

infancy, many of the questions were related to quality. Specifically, there was misinformation about the quality of OER and whether it was possible to get a high quality end result when a traditional textbook publishing model was not used. This concern influenced our work to ensure quality was a focus for us, and brought a more academic focus to the project that I will discuss later in the chapter. Now when we attend these events, it is much more likely that we will be asked to help someone find an open textbook that specifically meets their needs, or how to do an adaptation of an existing open textbook. This shift in attitude illustrates the change in the acceptance of Open practices as a legitimate way of teaching, not just a way to save students money.

We also delivered workshops both face to face and online in which participants were able to actively search for appropriate Open Textbooks. We delivered content about open licensing and its advantages for curriculum redesign and on how the process of adoption, adaptation and creation works. The workshops were open to faculty and instructors not just at the institution hosting us, but also others in the region who wanted to participate. This was done purposefully to ensure more system cross-collaboration, particularly within disciplines. It also had the benefit of making our thin resources spread further.

Finally, we presented to student groups. Getting students involved has been key, particularly at research institutions. In the early stages of the project we had interest from students, but not much activity. The concept was not only new to faculty, but to students as well. While the idea of saving money was obviously attractive to them, the intricacies of open licenses and other aspects of open practices were not yet familiar enough for students to truly begin advocacy work. As the project progressed, we were able to begin addressing this problem.

Student activity related to OER has now changed radically. Three years in, we now have a very active student movement in BC. Students are ensuring government knows how much they value the project by connecting with them directly. They are also doing their own advocacy work, including a twitter hashtag campaign #textbookbrokeBC which does a great job of highlighting the primary concern of students in the OER movement, the cost.

Learn from people who are doing what you're doing

We have also formed very strong relationships with individuals and projects in other jurisdictions who provided us with guidance in the early stages of our project. Connie Broughton, formerly with the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges came to BC to tell us about their project and help us think through ours. Una Daly of the Open Education Consortium came to help us develop and deliver our first Open Textbook Workshop. Una and Connie as well as Paul Stacey and Cable Green of Creative Commons, Daniel Williamson and David Harris of OpenStax CNX, Dave Ernst of the Open Textbook Library, Nicole Allen and Nick Shockey of SPARC, Una Daly of

the Open Education Consortium, Tricia Donovan of eCampus Alberta, Megan Beckett of Siyavula and David Wiley of Lumen Learning were all participants in the first Open Textbook Summit hosted by BCcampus in April 2013. This event, which began with a small group of passionate advocates with a will to collaborate has grown into an annual international event of nearly 200 participants in which faculty and instructors share their experiences and learn new ways of using open textbooks to advance learning. Once again we see that the strength of a collaboration, this time over international boundaries rather than just within a single province, is a vital part of this community and its ability to have an impact. There is a willingness among those in the Open community to work with each other which is unlike any other community I've been part of. There is a lack of ego and a desire to move forward which drives this culture of sharing. It is this fundamental paradigm that I think makes the movement unique in academia, and it is this uniqueness that gives me hope that the movement will continue to grow.

Adopt and adapt

We realized early on that it would be foolish to start creating books from scratch when there were so many others who had started before us on whose work we could build. We went through our list of 40 subjects and started looking at what was in the Commons that would meet our needs. Because of the work in other jurisdictions, like that of OpenStax CNX, College Open Textbooks and the Open Textbook Library, we were able to adopt many texts into our collection. We have continued to use this method of building out our collection as new titles are released by our partners. We realize many of the books will require adaptation to be fully usable by BC educators, but to give faculty a number of resources to choose from and potentially adapt seemed to us a better value proposition than simply finding one book for every subject area. This is particularly true given the different learning outcomes used in courses, even those that are taught on the same topics at the same institution. This reuse of resources has enabled us to stretch our project dollars to ensure that we had funding to pay when creations were necessary due to a lack of existing OER.

In the future we plan to do more of this type of resource use, but we will be more focussed on including ancillary resources to ensure faculty are able to build out full packages of the instructional resources they need using OER. When we have consulted with faculty, one of the barriers to adoption that they identify is that resources they use from traditional publishers often come with additional components such as PowerPoint presentations, teaching notes and exam banks. This is an area of our project in which Psychology faculty have lead. In Summer 2014, 17 Psychology faculty gathered together over a period of 2 days to produce a bank of nearly a thousand exam questions using a sprint model of development. These questions were then formatted by the BCcampus team in a way that

makes them easy to reuse by faculty. This collegial event not only produced an excellent resource, it built community within the discipline around openness.

Bring an academic focus

We wanted to ensure an academic focus to our project so we began work early on to enable that. Having seen the review process being used by the Open Text-book Library, we adapted a set of review criteria used by the Saylor Foundation and implemented technology to support the process. Faculty were paid a small honorarium to do the reviews, and we post their feedback online for others to see and use in their evaluation of the textbooks. Posting the reviews enables other educators to understand how a given textbook might meet the needs in their course. It also has the added side benefit of bringing the reviewers into our community. By using reviews as a relatively non-committal way to allow faculty to dip their toes in the Open Textbook well, they become much closer to being prospective adopters, adapters, creators and advocates.

To further enhance the academic focus of our project we also implemented a Faculty Fellows Program. We put out a call for applications and ultimately selected 3 individuals who could represent the teaching perspective and their disciplines. Our Fellows were from 3 different institutions and represented the disciplines of Psychology (Dr. Rajiv Jhangiani), Philosophy (Dr. Christina Hendricks), and Chemistry (Dr. Jesse Key). The role of these individuals is to provide advocacy, research and advice to the project. They do this both within their own institution with faculty colleagues, senior administrators, students and others who have a role to play in OER practice as well as at discipline specific conferences, other institutions and organizations. The ability to have faculty speaking to their colleagues rather than our project team having those conversations is extremely powerful. The example of someone with relevant, current classroom experience who is working in the Open can be the impetus an instructor needs to start exploring that for themselves. Our first 3 Faculty Fellows exceeded our expectations in terms of the impact they had on the project, and as you can see from the reports each did following the program, it seems they had a similarly positive experience. Specifically, much of the work focussed on advocacy via presentations both internal to their institutions as well as with other organizations. The research component they undertook has also provided us with an invaluable view into actual practice. Dr. Jhangiani, our Psychology Fellow and co-editor on this book, contributed to a research project undertaken in a partnership between the OER Research Hub's Dr. Rebecca Pitt, BCcampus and our Faculty Fellows. This research documents the attitudes and practices of British Columbia Faculty with respect to OER. In addition, Dr. Jhangiani conducted his own research with students in his Psychology class-room. Hearing directly from students about their experience and attitudes toward OER is extremely useful in developing strategies for implementations.

What happens in the background when we're
out there talking to people

As our OER colleagues will attest, the topic of quality has often dominated the discussion of Open Textbooks. When we have done presentations, the ways in which traditionally published textbooks are produced are often pointed to as the gold standard. In order to change this perception, we engaged a professional editing firm to work on our textbooks. While this was an extremely cost intensive aspect of our project, we felt that in order to counter these concerns and make the case that Open Textbooks can be of equal or better quality than those which are traditionally published.

We also expended a lot of resources cleaning up resources we had adapted (a process our staff fondly refer to as 'cleaning up crap'). We have combed through books replacing images that were not openly licensed, cleaning up tables and other formatting, adding tables of contents and fixing incorrectly done attributions. This work is not glamorous but it is extremely necessary if students are to get the maximum value out of the resources and if the resources are to be shared further. Releasing the books in this way ensures a strong foundation for any adaptations that will be done in future.

In addition to 'cleaning up crap,' we of course have to ensure a strong technical infrastructure. At BCcampus we have had a repository of resources with a web front-end for more than a decade. Most of those resources unfortunately get little use. There are many reasons for this, but one of them was most certainly the user experience, which was difficult to navigate and search. Because of this experience, we knew it would be important for the look and feel of our collection to be inviting and easy to navigate. Early on in our project we began to curate our collection by subject area and presented it via a clean, easy to use interface.

We implemented an ecosystem of technologies to support our project. This included Lime Survey for collecting review responses, Wordpress for the front end of our collection and Pressbooks, which is our authoring platform.

We recognized that we would need a platform on which we could adapt and create textbooks. We settled on an open source version of Pressbooks, a Word-Press plugin. We have since done modifications to the functionality of that tool to make the work of faculty easier. Pressbooks also enables us to provide html versions of our textbooks in a format that has the look and feel of a textbook so that students can use the platform directly.

High touch support

Several of our Open Textbook team have experience as instructional designers and course developers, which explains our desire to not only replace traditional resources with Open ones, but our equally passionate stance on using Open practices to enhance learning. This background lead us to understand that a

supportive approach would be key to helping the faculty we worked with make the shift to Open. During creation and adaptation projects, we provided project management, instructional design and technical support to faculty. We have two staff who are responsible for the project management role on our adaptation and creation projects. From the time we engage with an instructor, the project manager becomes their point of contact with BCcampus and is the person who guides them through the process. This support ranges from arranging contracts, developing specific deliverables and milestones, technical support, instruction on open licensing and often moral support. Faculty engaging in this process are often new to Openness. They are sometimes anxious about how their work will be received by colleagues. They are also often unfamiliar with the technical platforms being used and lacking critical knowledge about open licenses and publication. BCcampus staff approach these issues in a variety of ways, depending on the need. Sometimes it's a matter of connecting instructors with each other so they feel less alone, sometimes it is long phone calls to slowly step through technical training or the way in which open licences are assigned and how they work.

Through building these relationships, we have been able to help faculty through the process so that they don't feel so alone. We have also worked to ensure that institutions are aware of the work we are doing with their faculty so they may also provide support. We are now looking to build capacity in BC institutions so that teaching and learning centre staff, librarians and others are able to provide those supports that are so critical to enabling faculty to truly achieve the benefit of Openness. Several institutions in BC have recently formed OER working groups to develop their own pathways to supporting this work. At BCcampus, we are actively working toward ensuring instructional support staff in institutions are able to respond when faculty show a desire to work more openly. We want those staff to be able to answer questions about everything from licensing to what technologies to use (and how to use them). We also want them to be able to introduce the notion of not just OER, but Open Pedagogy and its value. We see Instructional Designers as crucial to this process given their role in the course development process and plan on working with them more closely in future.

We think it's working

We use a variety of factors to measure the success of our project. Some are very quantitative, for example how many adoptions, how many students impacted, amount of students savings.

Like others, we have struggled to find an accurate measure to inform our student savings numbers because of the complexities around rental programs and students who normally would not purchase a textbook. At this time, we use US$100 as our replacement value to average out what the actual costs might be along with the other factors influencing the reality of student purchasing activities.

Others success factors are more difficult to quantify but are measures we nonetheless value. We see our work as having value in terms of changing culture. Fundamentally I see Open Practices as a social justice movement. Institutional culture that truly values student access and learning is what we're shooting for. This means not only embracing OER, but also using the concept of Openness to its fullest potential. By taking advantage of the affordances of open licenses we have the ability to produce more relevant, engaging, contextualized learning experiences for students and that's where we should all be heading.

When we first started the project, we were operating in a world in which OER were largely unfamiliar to faculty in British Columbia. In the case of those who were aware, many were skeptical of the quality of resources, and indeed of the project itself. Three years later, much of that cynicism had disappeared. We rarely encounter hostile audiences these days, and when we do have someone in the audience who is dubious, it is often another audience member who provides a response before we do. As mentioned, many BC institutions are now forming OER working groups. These subtle shifts indicate success to us, and are in many ways more important than the numbers as they indicate an overall will in the system to support and value this work.

Do we need Policy?

Policy remains an interesting issue for us at BCcampus. Thus far, all of the work done by our organization has happened in the complete absence of formal policy. We have grant stipulations, but nothing more. To date, this has not been a barrier to us accomplishing our goals. However, at this stage of our project, when we are in a space of needing to build capacity out to our institutions so that ownership of the resources produced is with the BC system rather than with BCcampus, the question of policy is becoming more relevant. One of the targets we have for the next phases of our project is to assist institutions in developing their own policies that spell out how faculty will be supported in their OER use, the value of this work to the institution, and the expectations of quality in such an initiative. Some institutions are already beginning to work in this area, for example Simon Fraser University has made small-scale grants available to faculty who want to adopt an Open Textbook or other OER. At other institutions, OER working groups are being established. These examples are very positive, but we also need to move toward more formal mechanisms such as job descriptions that include work on open initiatives rather than having the work done off the side of people's desks.

Conclusion

As we move into the 3rd year of our project, we plan to continue to build capacity in our system and work toward more adoption of our resources and of Open

practices in general. We have already begun to facilitate workshops on open pedagogy and curriculum redesign. It is my hope that this continued evolution of the conversation about open will draw more educators in and will ultimately result in Open as the default. I am very optimistic about the future of Open. The sheer volume of work being done is a clear indicator that if we continue to push as we have been, we will achieve our goals. That said, as with any movement, as we become bigger, we begin to fracture into groups with what may appear to be competing goals. An example of this is the conversation about whether the focus on Open Textbooks is doing damage to the movement overall, or whether Open Textbooks are indeed the door through which we will reach many more faculty who want to embrace Open. While I am completely in favour of being self-critical so that our growth isn't stagnated by patting ourselves on the back, I also think it's important to recognize and be respectful of the efforts of those who started the movement and those who are actively making change happen. What we need is action, collaboration, reflection and scholarly work that leads us to better outcomes overall.