Graduate Student Perceptions of Open Educational Resources

OERCamp Global 2021

Kennedy Essmiller, Grant Currier, Lisa Wright, Natasha Tinsley, Sean Coolican, and Kathy Essmiller

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My name is Kathy Essmiller. I'm the coordinator of Open Educational Resources at Oklahoma State University. Fall 2021 the Comp I program at Oklahoma State University rolled out an open educational resource, *Who Teaches Writing,* that was written by several authors from a variety of institutions. Oklahoma State University is a very high research institution with an enrollment of around 25,000 students. Around 4,000 of those students are enrolled as graduate students. This Comp OER was principally instituted at the main campus in Stillwater, OK. The questions provided the graduate students in today's panel are informed by diffusion of innovations theory. The purpose of this conversation will be to discover these graduate students perceptions of OER after having worked on or with the Comp I OER.

Kennedy Essmiller is a graduate student at Oklahoma State University. She is in her third year of study toward a Masters in Fine Arts and Creative Writing. Grant Currier is a fourth year PhD student in Creative Writing and Literature. He has been teaching for several years at a few different universities and secondary schools. Lisa Wright is a PhD candidate in the English Department studying Creative Nonfiction. Natasha Tinsley is a graduate of Oklahoma State University and holds an MFA in fiction. She is currently an assistant professor at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, and co-authored one of the chapters in *Who Teaches Writing*. Sean Coolican is in his third year of PhD fiction at Oklahoma State. He has been teaching Comp I for several semesters.

The Text: Who Teaches Writing

The *Who Teaches Writing* draft of record is available here, and another slightly modified draft can be found here. At the end of the semester the book will be set at its final URL to run in a long beta. Tinsley describes the project as creating a resource to give a different take on different ways of writing based off the different ideas, views and interpretations from creative writing, composition, and other different ways that people interpret writing and how they would teach it based off of their individual backgrounds.

The following pages will represent a generalized transcript of graduate students' answers to the questions provided.

Kathy Essmiller: How did you find out about open Educational Resources? I would love to just do popcorn, just talk like we're sitting at the 'used to be' Stonewall.

Lisa Wright: It feels like it was so long ago. I think that just by being a first year A.D., I think Josh (director of the First Year Composition program) brought it to one of our meetings and said that this was going to be a new opportunity that was going to arise and he invited anyone who was interested. It actually was one of our beginning meetings as we prepared for the semester. He let us know that we were going to be working on an OER resource and I was like, I don't even know what OER is. He let us know there were also going to be meetings I could attend. I attended some of those meetings and I gained so much knowledge. Sometimes I felt really lost, I'm not going to lie, it was like why am I here what role am I serving. But then I realized I spent an entire semester learning about OER and the outreach of the program and how the resources could be helpful for students that are enrolled in courses. As a result of that I got to attend an OER conference which just blew my mind. There's a whole world out there.

Sean Corrigan: I heard Dr. Josh talking about it and through the emails saw one of the ADs, Mark, was talking about it as well. Word of mouth got around, especially about the first unit, the narrative unit, and how one of our professors, Sarah Beth, had a piece in there. Her piece included work by Ira Sukrungruang called "Chop Suey." It is a narrative which I had read before in a creative non-fiction class and I decided it was a great example for the narrative unit. I taught it to both my classes this semester and they loved it. They really thought it was great. I'm going to be honest, that is the only time I used the OER thing because not only was the story, the essay on there but Sarah Beth went in and talked a lot

about what to have in a narrative. That was the only time I used it although I would like to, going forward, especially teaching Comp II this semester coming up, I'd like to get some more ideas. The narrative chapter really worked.

Kennedy Essmiller: My story is a little bit different because I first heard about OER when my mother, Kathy, was doing her Masters degree and starting her PhD. It's been a conversation in my household for a long time, it feels like multiple years. It started specifically impacting me as an instructor at the beginning of my second semester of teaching, which was the second semester of the COVID19 pandemic. I was teaching Intro to Creative Writing, which was very exciting, but we had a poetry textbook that was $60 and I was only going to use around ten poets from it because we had fiction, nonfiction, and poetry so there is a lot to cover. Also, the poetry book was either out of print or somehow very hard to find so copies were very expensive. I was told (by my mom, Kathy Essmiller) not against my will but very explicitly 'you will not be requiring this textbook, we can find these poets in so many different places that are accessible through the Library or otherwise open.' So many of my students were grateful that they didn't have to spend $60 because that was a week's worth of groceries for them.

Grant Currier: I found out through Dr. Josh Daniel, the first year composition director. He was coming into that position and I was taking on an assistant director position as well. Our current OER project was right in its initial development stages. I proposed a project to develop a custom reader with Norton with whom we have an academic relationship with. While not strictly an OER it had a little bit of similarity that Josh and I were able to have some conversations about. it works kind of well as a transitional project into a more pure OER textbook that we have. As Kennedy was saying and Sean and Lisa were alluding to as well, the difficulties of these overpriced, price gouged textbooks, when these resources are readily available for us and our students. That's kind of my first introduction to OER almost two and a half years ago.

Kathy Essmiller: I loved the readings and the resource you pulled together, Grant, those were really great. Along with that, Lisa also created an assignment for use at the beginning of the semester. Do you want to take a second and share about that, Lisa, as people are considering what their first reaction was to OER?

Lisa Wright: As we were bringing in the OER text and introducing it to our department, something else we introduced was called a common reading. Our department has been focusing on retention rates and reducing DFW rates. One of the strategies we're using is to try to standardize and simplify things for week one; another is that we wanted to build confidence in our writers from the beginning. We also wanted to give our students an opportunity to have some feedback on their writing very early on in the semester. The common reading helps serve those purposes. An even bigger purpose of the common reading, which I'm very much interested in, is promoting conversations around equity, diversity, and anti-racism within the classroom. Over the summer I was tasked with actually finding a reading that would meet all of those goals. I chose Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb," her poem that she read at the inauguration in January, 2021. We introduced it to our instructors during the orientation. i made a video to introduce it and give them the background of the project. I also found some other writings that I thought would fit in that first week of Comp I, something that would be easy, fun, and maybe a little bit challenging just to

get students to go into that poem and maybe find some ways, some lines, that they actually related to. Perhaps even communicate directly with Amanda Gorman because she is very young, very inspiring, and she is a similar age to that of our students. One thing we wanted to do was just provide this resource so that it was available to them. It also had a link the students could follow to actually listen to the poem, and there was a transcript so the students could read it as well. We wanted our intructors to feel like they could bring this resource into their classes and use it in a way that they felt like would fit.

What was your first reaction to OER?

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Kathy Essmiller: What was your first reaction to OER?

Grant Currier: I was just fully on board. As a PhD student it's probably not best to be constantly rethinking your curriculum. I think it's healthy for the students, and to know what succeeds and what doesn't succeed. Lisa, just to let you know, that assignment you crafted succeeded. The students were fully engaged on teh multiple facets that you put into that. Thank you for your work. My first reaction was yeah, let's explore this. It offers so much benefit to both instructors and students. I think perhaps even more importantly that it is a bridge that connects instructors in students together. It should be entertained as a viable possibility in more departments, particularly in composition.

Lisa Wright: Can I jump in, Kathy? I wanted to add something. As far as my first reaction, I did have an instructor, I went to Coppin State University, which is an Historically Black University, as an undergrad. I had one instructor who just wanted to give us so much information that he would oftentimes print off things for us that weren't included. I don't think there was a book, there was just a lot of things that he had and he would print them out and give them to us. As I was thinking about OER I think he was one of the only instructors who did that. I'm a second generation college student and my mom saved up for me to go to college. She had the cash and she would pay for me to go semester by semester. She would also give me her card and i remember standing in line paying for all of these books that my mom was giving me cash to pay for. For me, OER, how much money could my mom have saved or could have been put more toward my tuition if OER had been available at that time. For me it just made me think about how much money my mom could have saved as she was funding and paying for me to go to college.

Sean Coolican: I'd like to add I'm just always worried about textbooks. They just always seem dry. It seems like they come out and then they are kind of dated after only a couple of years. We are talking about Amanda Gorman here, this is a poet famous this past year, we need stuff that we can keep adding that is relevant and recent. I don't textbooks, I don't say they scare students off, but students will see it and think they seem dry and stuffy. I like this alternative a whole lot more.

Kathy Essmiller: What led you to buy in or not buy in to using OER? How long after you heard about OER was it implemented by the English Department?

Grant Currier: The English Department here at Oklahoma State, it's been maybe a year since I've become more introduced to OER that it's now being implemented. I know Dr. Josh came in with this purpose, with the vision and the goal of curating and crafting this. For me, my experience with it is that it's been a very precise and deliberate transition.

Natasha Tinsley: I don't know if this actually answers the question, but one of the aspects I was thinking about, I helped write one of the chapters. The reason I wanted to do it was not just to create a resource for helping students but also to give me a better understanding of what it is I want students to learn. i think that was the aspect behind, as a creative writer, composition rhetoric, just that whole mindset based off who I am, how do I teach this, and how would it look in my classroom. I have that understanding that as teachers we do teach and we process information differently just based off of our degrees, based on our experiences, based off our classrooms. As I was writing this chapter I'm thinking about these students I come into contact with at the school that I'm at right now, how would this look in my actual classroom? That's one of the definite buy-ins that I have. I have that understanding, even though we are writing these chapters (and I don't disagree at all that textbooks can be very dry and very mundane) but you also still take them and when you teach them in your classroom you teach them in a way that ensures the students are getting the knowledge, the information you want them to learn based off the activities have have them do, based off the examples that you give them, based off the processing. I enjoyed the opportunity to break down this information and better learn it for myself to make

sure that I am properly getting it to my students and hopefully also showing people that the information should be processed in a way that is meaningful for them and that relates specifically to the backgrounds that they have.

Lisa Wright: I want to add to what Natasha said. Everything she said I absolutely agree with but something else that I wanted to add on is that, and I agree with what Sean and Grant are saying about these textbooks, but one thing that I think we're leaving out that's important for me is that a lot of these textbooks are written by and written about white authors. Something that Natasha and I thought about as we were going in and drafting our chapter is that we wanted to bring not only us to black women we wanted to bring ourselves into the conversation and discuss the different topics that we are going over when we're teaching our composition courses. We also wanted to bring in a Black author so that we can talk about a text that's written by a Black author and bring those voices into the classroom. Those voices are oftentimes left out of the syllabus. One of the things I'm really proud about with this book is that different voices and viewpoints are represented.

How long after you heard about OER was it implemented by the English Department?

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Kathy Essmiller: Do you think the decision for the English Department to use OER has been a good decision or a bad decision and why?

Kennedy Essmiller: I think it's been a good decision. I was able to teach from the commercial textbook a few semesters ago as well as the OER book this past semester and I found that the chapters in the open textbook were more engaging. The students were able to access it better and engage with it better than the commercial textbook. It was also easier to get them to read it because you download one pdf and give it to them. In the online version there are links that they can follow and interact with more readily than they could interact with the commercial textbook. It almost felt like it was tricking them, like we're reading these fun chapters that aren't put together in a text like a physical textbook that they have to purchase from the university bookstore. It's like oh, it's not a real textbook it's a fun textbook. Or it's not a textbook it's just chapters that we're having you read. I also really appreciated interactive activities that were created within one chapter. It was really fun because then it wasn't just reading, it was you read a section and then you do a little activity that makes you think about it, and then you read another section and then you do the little activity. I think I got more students to read these chapters than I was able to get them to read in the commercial textbook a few semesters ago.

What are the relative advantages or disadvantages of the English Dept using OER?

Kathy Essmiller: What are the relative advantages or disadvantages of the English Department using OER?

Kennedy Essmiller: I think something the creative writing and literature classes specifically might come up against is that different literature classes focus on different themes which means that no literature class is really going to have the same list of books. That's a whole complicated thing. And also, as creative writers, we do want the writers to be getting the royalties and the money for the books that we're going to want to teach. I think it's not necessarily a disadvantage but it is going to be a challenge that we come up against and that we have to engage in the coming years as we continue to develop OER within the English Department, not specifically for Comp but for all of the different branches of English.

Grant Currier: I think one possible disadvantage of an English Department using an OER is that it would be specific to that department but there's the possibility of constantly updating and changing out chapters. Instructors feel that they must always adapt or change to the new OER, particularly if there's not a specific downloadable option. If it's a total web-based OER then that sort of, well, learning what really works and keeping that and perhaps changing out something that didn't puts a particular unspoken pressure on instructors. If it's like that sort of fake move that publishers make, they just slap fifth edition on a new cover of a book and change out the editor's introduction and it's the same exact book--it has to be pretty intentional.

Kennedy Essmiller: I think a lot of what Grant is saying is very accurate. I think another

potential advantage of having to switch out is giving new instructors and new members of the department opportunities to collaborate and contribute to the textbook. Like, we have Lisa and Natasha's amazing chapter, down the line maybe in the next couple of semesters we might get some other voices that we didn't get to highlight thi time around that we get to highlight then by including the new chapters. I think that's something that could be really cool. We have the opportunities to continue to highlight voices that aren't going to be highlighted necessarily in the traditional textbooks. I definitely think there is going to be some upkeep involved, some interesting challenges, but I definitely am looking forward to seeing what kinds of other perspectives can be included. For anybody who hasn't read the textbook that we have, most of the titles are along the lines of "A Memoirist Teaches Short Non-Fiction" or something like that. It identifies the type of writer they are and then what they are going to be talking about. I think that's so cool, down the line as we continue to get to highlight new voices, what kinds of, who's going to be next? If we have a memoirist are we going to have a scriptwriter? Someone who's interested in television writing? I think that is so much more interesting, for students to be able to see voices and perspectives that resonate with them a little bit more.

Were you able to experiment with OER before it was adopted?

 Kathy Essmiller: Pulling one from the chat from Simon Ringsmuth. Have you felt empowered to connect with the OER authors and creators compared to connecting with traditional textbook authors?

Kennedy Essmiller: I already knew Lisa's work previous to this chapter, but Lisa continues to impress me with everything she writes always. It's fun to see names that I do recognize. There were a couple of names that I hadn't recognize who I didn't reach out to collaborate with, but I did pay attention to their names more. Like one of them, I can't remember his first name I want to say it's Ryan, but his last time is Slesinger. I loved the chapter that he wrote, and then I kept seeing his name pop up other places and so now he is a name that I keep track of in our emails and in all of the different resources that we have. I keep an eye on his name and if he's attached to something i am way more likely to say yeah, I'll look into that, than I would be wihtout having experience with this textbook.

What do others think of the English Department using OER?

Would you describe the results of the English Dept using OER as beneficial, not beneficial, or both?

Do these results have a direct or indirect on the English Department? On OER?

What are some of the anticipated and unanticipated results of the English Department's use of OER?

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In Practice

- Describe your lesson planning and preparation process?
- From where do you generally curate your teaching resources?
- How does cost of resources to students figure into your planning?
- How do you understand Open Educational Resources in comparison to traditional teaching resources?
- How do you feel about the quality of the teaching resources you use? How is that quality determined?
- How do you engage with digital resources?
- Describe how you think your students might engage with digital resources in comparison to print resources.

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Kennedy Essmiller: Regarding the digital resources vs. print resources. Students don't read necessarily, when you assign them reading to them. Having a digital resource means that I can have it pulled up on the board really easily and I can be scrolling through it and linking stuff to it. So when I ask them a question prompting discussion at the beginning of the class period, saying all right we're supposed to read this chapter what kinds of thoughts do you have on it, what kinds of opinions do you have on it? I've found that I can have a pretty solid chunk of it on the board and not only am I teaching them to go ahead and skim, I'm also teaching them saying hey, if you didn't read the chapter beforehand look, it's on the board right now. You can pick something out to share. I think it's easier to get them to read it when it's not print, when it's a digital resource they can pull up on their phone really easily.

Natasha Tinsley: I definitely have a lot of stuff on Canvas that they can look at and that they pull up. In my comp class they don't have a book, it's all either chapters that I put up there or information that I have found that support the skills that I want them to learn in class. When the digital resources came up one of the things I introduced them ot that I'll never know if they used it because I don't require them to is Speechify. Basically a site that will read the information to them. I have come across several students that are either dyslexic or have other support needs. I try to introduce them to things like that which will allow them to have information read to them. I also try to do different fonts. I have powerpoints where what I say is on the board and I'm also explaining it and then I'll ask them if they have any questions. I also try to do images so that idea of hitting those different learning preferences and those different educational needs as well as all the information, everything that I say, being written out and on Canvas for them so if you didn't hear it you

can go back and read it with the explanation and colors and highlights. I do think about cost. If I don't have to buy a book I try not to, because I try to give them as many either free resources or as many alternatives as possible.

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