

Considerations For Selecting Open Education and Open Access Readings

Stephanie Medley-Rath

February 24, 2016

SUGGESTED CITATION

When using resources from TRAILS, please include a clear and legible citation

Medley-Rath, Stephanie. 2016. "Considerations For Selecting Open Education and Open Access Readings". *TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology*, February. Washington DC: American Sociological Association.
<https://trails.asanet.org/article/view/considerations-for-selecting-open-education-and-open>.

Abstract

Textbook costs are increasing. Students opt to get through a course without the textbook to save money. Faculty recognizing this challenge might consider free alternatives to the conventional textbook to save students money and increase the likelihood of students having access to the textbook by using open access and open education resources. In this document, I identify and discuss several factors that instructors should consider before choosing open education or open access textbooks readings for their courses. I used open education and open access materials in Introduction to Sociology, but many of the factors to consider apply to courses beyond Introduction to Sociology.

Details

Subject Areas: Teaching and Learning in Sociology

Resource Types: Essay

Class Levels: Any Level

Class Sizes: Any

Usage Notes

This resource comes out of a three-semester project where I tested open access and open education resources in Introduction to Sociology compared to traditional, print textbooks. I formally surveyed students regarding the goals assessments listed above. Individual faculty should consult with their students formally or informally to gauge how students are accessing and using electronic readings in order to assess whether or not "free" readings can be a practical alternative to paid traditional textbooks.

Learning Goals and Assessments

LEARNING GOALS

Provide students with affordable textbook options while maintaining overall course learning objectives.

ASSESSMENTS

Compare final grades in the course using open access and open education resources to those using a conventional textbook to determine how learning may have been impacted.

Survey students regarding their ability to access electronic readings.

Survey students regarding their printing of electronic resources to assess cost savings.

Resource Files

DOCX

ESSAY: CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING OPEN EDUCATION AND OPEN ACCESS READINGS

AS USED BY: Stephanie Medley-Rath, PhD
Sociology, History, and Political Science
Indiana University Kokomo
Kokomo, IN 46904
smedleyr@iuk.edu

COURSE: Any

ABSTRACT

Textbook costs are increasing. Students opt to get through a course without the textbook to save money. Faculty recognizing this challenge might consider free alternatives to the conventional textbook to save students money and increase the likelihood of students having access to the textbook by using open access and open education resources. In this document, I identify and discuss several factors that instructors should consider before choosing open education or open access textbooks readings for their courses. I used open education and open access materials in Introduction to Sociology, but many of the factors to consider apply to courses beyond Introduction to Sociology.

RELATED TRAILS MATERIALS

- Medley-Rath, Stephanie. 2014. "Online Introduction to Sociology Syllabus." Assignment published in *TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology*. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. (<http://trails.asanet.org>)
- Medley-Rath, Stephanie. 2016. "Open Access and Open Education Resources Reading List for Introduction to Sociology." *TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology*. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. (<http://trails.asanet.org>)
- Miller, Michael V. 2015. "Accessing Emerging Online Content in Sociology via RSS." Assignment published in *TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology*. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. (<http://trails.asanet.org>)

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING OPEN EDUCATION AND OPEN ACCESS RESOURCES

1. What is the difference between open education and open access resources?

Open education resources "are teaching and learning materials that you may freely use and reuse, without charge. That means they have been authored or created by an individual or organization that chooses to retain few, if any, ownership rights" (OER Commons 2014; see also Commonwealth of Learning 2010). For example, anyone can edit content from Wikibooks and can freely redistribute that content. In contrast, open access resources refers to "any publishing policy in which the principle that 'the reader

does not pay' is implemented" (Pisanski 2013:55). Under open access, however, there is a means by which the producer intends to get paid for their work by some consumers. For example, I can send students to *The New York Times* website to read an article, but if I were to make copies of the same article and hand out copies to students (and did this across multiple semesters), there is an expectation that I gain permission from *The New York Times* and pay for the distribution of their content. In contrast, there is no expectation that I or anyone else pays Wikipedia for the use of their Wikibook in class whether I send students a link to it or print it out for distribution.

2. What is Internet access like for your students?

Using open education or open access readings in the classroom requires students to have consistent and reliable internet access. While most students have internet access on their college campus, if this is their only access, then they may have difficulties doing the assigned reading. Moreover, internet access alone may not be enough. Some students are using smart phones for all of their Internet needs, while others may have slow Internet connections. The National Broadband Map (<http://www.broadbandmap.gov/>) has searchable broadband service information for the United States. If students have greater internet access on campus compared to their home, then the instructor should more strongly consider a downloadable open education textbook such as what is available through Wikibooks.

3. What about printed open access and open education resources?

Some open education textbooks can be bought as printed copies or printed out by students. Websites and articles accessed online could also be printed out. If students print out their readings, cost savings may be negligible. If we take a hypothetical scenario where students are assigned 40 pages of reading each week at a cost of \$0.06 per page to print, then this equates to \$38.40 worth of printing per class per semester. The print textbook that I was using retailed for \$75. Amazon.com's buyback price for this text was \$28. If a student had bought that conventional textbook and sold it at the end of the semester, they would have been out less than \$10 compared to if they had printed out all online readings. Instructors should survey students to determine if they are printing out the readings to gauge potential cost-savings.

4. What are some of the limitations of reading electronically?

My students could rent an Android-based tablet through the college's bookstore in order to access their readings on and off campus. The instructor needs to be familiar with how students are accessing the reading (i.e., on a tablet, personal laptop, campus desktop, or a mobile phone). If students are using a tablet, this may still be a fairly new experience. Limitations of reading electronically include:

- Readers are more likely to scan for keywords in electronic readings as opposed to reading more deeply when using paper (Liu 2005).
- Students may be distracted by advertising, other websites, or links embedded in the assigned readings. Websites that are free from advertising are preferable, as

are readings that can be downloaded for offline reading to limit distracting content.

- Students may experience technical problems, which would then prevent them from doing the reading. Print textbooks do not have technical difficulties.
- Students need to be familiar with reading apps that can help them complete the readings and make notes like they might make on paper. I made the following app recommendations to students for Android devices:
 - ezPDF Reader: (\$1.97) This is a low-cost paid app that allows you to save your files as PDFs. You can then read, highlight, and annotate the files on your tablet.
 - Read Web Offline: (free) This is a free app that allows you to download web pages for offline reading.

5. How is quality ensured in OER?

Quality assurance was a judgment call on my part. After a couple of frustrating days searching for readings based on my course learning goals, I found Personal Blocklist Chrome Extension (<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/personal-blocklist-by-goo/nolijncfnkgaikbjbdaogikpmpbdcdef?hl=en>) from Google. This extension enabled me to block all search results from content farms (i.e., websites which produce content to game search engines in order to make money through advertising) such as infobarrel.com or about.com.

Open education textbooks do exist. These textbooks have the advantage of being both free, but also editable and can typically be downloaded as a pdf for offline usage. Being editable, however, also lets publishers of these types of textbooks of the hook for maintaining quality. They can and do argue that instructors can edit their books to reach the instructor's standards if the instructor is concerned about the textbook's quality, however, the peer review process is designed to maintained quality.

6. Where can I find mostly high quality content?

I used both open education resources and open access resources. In 2013, when I adopted this approach, there was not an open education resource textbook that came close to providing the kind of coverage I expect in an introduction to sociology textbook. The credentials of the several of the authors of the Open Stax *Introduction to Sociology* textbook were lacking (degrees outside of sociology, not currently teaching sociology, etc.) and difficult to even discover. Major publishers were suing Boundless because they were creating books using mostly Wikipedia content, but organizing their books to align with textbooks that were currently published by reputable companies (see Farrell 2013). Flat World (which was the highest quality of the group of potential open education textbooks) moved from a free model to a paid model shortly before I adopted this approach to textbooks (Lederman 2012).

I chose to use the *Wiki: Introduction to Sociology* as my main textbook and supplemented with a variety of additional open access resources:

- News: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Telegraph*, CNN, CBC, NPR
- Magazines: *The Atlantic*, *Scientific American*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Time*
- Websites Written by Sociologists: *The Society Pages* (including a selection of articles from *Contexts*), *Sociology in Focus*, *Family Inequality*, *Everyday Sociology Blog*
- Government Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, National Institute of Mental Health, National Poverty Center, The U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, U.S. Census, U.S. Department of Labor
- University Websites publish articles on the work of their faculty
- Publishers and Author Websites: Book excerpts can be found on many publishers or the author's website or published in a third-party source (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal*)
- Out-of-Copyright Books: Project Gutenberg
- Other Websites: *Freakonomics*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Racialicious*, *Brain Pickings*

7. What about copyright issues?

A discussion of what faculty can and cannot do with copyrighted material is beyond the scope of this piece. I suggest familiarizing oneself with the Creative Commons licensing structure if you plan to use or create open education resources (<http://creativecommons.org/>).

I worked with my college's librarian regarding my copyright questions. I learned that though I can download a .pdf of a scholarly journal that my institution subscribes to electronically, it is a copyright gray area as to whether I can post that .pdf to a closed online learning management system, such as Canvas. I can, however, assign the reading and provide a link to which students can use to access the article themselves.

A disadvantage of linking to articles is that some websites have paid subscriptions (e.g., *The New York Times*), which could potentially block student access. I attempted to direct students to these articles through my institution's library website to prevent them from being locked out due to a paywall.

Other websites provide free content that is also available through purchased books (e.g., *Everyday Sociology Blog* and author's websites). At some point using too much material for free when it is available for purchase raises ethical issues. My goal was that no more than 15 percent of course materials would come from any one website. If more material than this was used, then students should be purchasing the book or a subscription to gain access to the material.

8. What about students who need accommodations or classrooms full of students with a range of reading abilities?

At this time, it is unknown how open education and open access resources might improve or limit access to the classroom among students who need accommodations.

Because the readings are accessed through a computer, they hold promise to be more accessible in that they could be paired with software that reads to students with limited vision, for example, without the need to scan the readings first.

Further, using open education and open access resources enable an instructor to assign readings at a wider range of reading levels. Readings could be selected in such a way to become increasingly complex as the semester progresses (i.e., scaffolding). By drawing on textbooks, scholarly journals, and popular media, instructors can provide students with a range of materials at different reading levels.

9. Finally, how best should I use my limited time as an instructor?

After spending about 12 weeks selecting content for this type of course, I do not believe that new teachers, adjuncts, or those with heavy course loads should be charged with this task, due to the time commitment required of the task. Moreover, assigning a set of readings as I did requires the instructor “to be prepared to provide the potentially missing framework for the course” that is more readily available via conventional textbooks (Greenwood and Howard 2011:60). I created module guides for every module that highlighted key questions students should be able to answer after engaging with the reading, lecture, class activities, and so on along with highlighting key terms. If an instructor selects an open education textbook that is editable, then they need to factor in the time necessary to edit the textbook to work with their student body and learning objectives.

RESOURCES

- Creative Commons: <http://creativecommons.org/>
- The National Broadband Map <http://www.broadbandmap.gov/>
- ezPDF Reader:
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=udk.android.reader&hl=en>
- Read Web Offline:
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=vertigofreeware.readweb.offline&hl=en>
- Personal Blocklist Chrome Extension from Google:
<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/personal-blocklist-by-goo/nolijnfcfnkgaikbjbdaogikpmpbdcdef?hl=en>
- *Introduction to Sociology Wikibook*:
https://en.wikibooks.org/w/index.php?title=Introduction_to_Sociology&stable=1
- *Sociological Theory Wikibook*: https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Sociological_Theory

REFERENCES

- Commonwealth of Learning. 2010. “Copyright and Open Educational Resources.” Retrieved November 28, 2014 (http://www.col.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Copyright_and_Open_Educational_Resources.pdf).
- Farrell, Michael B. 2013. “Web Textbook Firm, Publishers End Copyright Suit.” *Boston*

- Globe*, Dec. 19. Retrieved January 7, 2016
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/12/19/online-textbook-startup-settles-lawsuit-with-publishing-giants/vS8MzUC9YUUBVzOOiv77xK/story.html>).
- Greenwood, Nancy A. and Jay R. Howard. 2011. *First Contact: Teaching and Learning in Introductory Sociology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Liu, Ziming. 2005. "Reading Behavior in the Digital Environment." *Journal of Documentation* 61(6): 700-12.
- Lederman, Doug. 2012. "Fleeing from 'Free.'" *Inside Higher Ed*, Nov. 5. Retrieved January 7, 2016 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/11/05/flat-worlds-shift-gears-and-what-it-means-open-textbook-publishing>).
- OER Commons. 2014. "What are Open Educational Resources (OER)?" Retrieved January 5, 2015 (<https://www.oercommons.org/about>).
- Pisanski, Tomaž. 2013. "Open Access—Who Pays?" *Newsletter of the European Mathematical Society*, June. Retrieved November 28, 2014 (<http://www.ems-ph.org/journals/newsletter/pdf/2013-06-88.pdf>).

THUMBNAIL IMAGE

- Province of British Columbia. 2012. Retrieved January 19, 2016
(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bcgovphotos/8095276477/>).