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The Role of Libraries and Librarians in Open Educational Resources (OER)

Muzafor Ali Ahmed
Librarian, Rajiv Gandhi Memorial College, Lengtisinga, Bongaigaon, Assam

A B S T R A C T
Open educational Resources (OER) are teaching, learning and research materials that reside in the public domain. In their landmark 2006 essay, Smith and Casserly articulate the profound potential of Open Educational Resources (OER) to democratize learning worldwide. They define OER as teaching, learning, and research materials that reside in the public domain or are openly licensed, allowing free use and modification. Central to their argument is the conviction that the world's knowledge should be treated as a public good, and that digital technologies—and particularly the Web-provide an unprecedented opportunity for global sharing and reuse.

The authors trace the early momentum of the OER movement, spotlighting initiatives such as MIT's pioneering Open Course Ware, and note how international bodies including UNESCO and others have embraced the concept, signaling a shift toward more open educational paradigms. They explore the promising models for OER expansion—ranging from comprehensive, peer-reviewed open courses to collaborative authoring platforms that function like communal "gardens" for educational content.

Yet, Smith and Casserly do not shy away from the obstacles. They examine issues such as intellectual property barriers, the digital divide and interoperability challenges, and the sustainability dilemma-questioning who will bear the cost of creating, maintaining, and updating OER. They conclude by urging that OER be woven into the fabric of educational institutions rather than seen as an optional extra, emphasizing the moral and practical imperative to share knowledge more equitably.

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Introduction

In an increasingly digital and interconnected world, access to quality education remains a pressing global concern. The rising cost of textbooks, unequal access to learning resources, and rigid copyright restrictions have long posed barriers to equitable education. In response to these challenges, **Open Educational Resources (OER)** have emerged as a transformative solution. Defined as freely accessible, openly licensed materials that support teaching, learning, and research, OER represents a paradigm shift in the way educational content is created, shared, and utilized.

The growth of the **open movement**-which includes open access, open data, and open-source software-has further amplified the importance of OER in fostering inclusive and collaborative education. At the heart of this movement lies the belief that knowledge should be a public good, available to all regardless of geographic, economic, or social status. OER enables educators to not only access high-quality materials at no cost but also to adapt and redistribute them, encouraging innovation and localization in education.

Within this evolving landscape, **libraries and librarians** play a crucial role. Traditionally seen as gatekeepers of information, librarians are now becoming active facilitators of open knowledge. Their

roles extend far beyond managing physical collections—they support faculty in discovering and evaluating OER, provide guidance on copyright and open licensing, assist in developing institutional repositories, and promote awareness of the benefits of open education. Librarians also ensure that open resources are discoverable, accessible, and appropriately curated, using their expertise in metadata, digital tools, and content management.

The shift towards OER is not merely a technological or financial change-it is a cultural and pedagogical transformation. Libraries are at the center of this shift, acting as catalysts for change within educational institutions. As more universities and schools adopt OER policies and practices, the demand for librarian-led support in navigating this new educational ecosystem continues to grow.

This essay explores the multifaceted role of libraries and librarians in supporting and advancing OER initiatives. It examines what OER is, why it matters, the significance of open licenses and repositories, and the practical steps of finding, adopting, and adapting open resources. Most importantly, it highlights how librarians serve as essential partners in creating a more open, equitable, and sustainable educational future.

1. What is OER?

Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching, learning, and research materials that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license, allowing free access, use, adaptation, and redistribution by others with limited or no restrictions. The UNESCO definition of OER emphasizes three key aspects: free access, legal permissions for reuse, and adaptability.

OER includes a wide variety of content types such as textbooks, course modules, syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, tests, audio, video, and software. The "5Rs Framework" introduced by **David Wiley** is often used to describe what makes a resource truly open:

- **Retain**: the right to make, own, and control copies of the content;
- **Reuse**: the right to use the content in a wide range of ways;
- **Revise**: the right to adapt, adjust, or modify the content;
- **Remix**: the right to combine the content with other materials to make something new;
- **Redistribute**: the right to share copies of the content with others.

2. Why OER?

The rise of OER is driven by multiple factors:

i) Affordability: Textbook costs have increased substantially over the past few decades, placing a financial burden on students and often creating barriers to learning. OER helps alleviate this burden by offering free alternatives.

ii) Accessibility and Equity: OER promotes inclusive education by making learning materials accessible to a broader audience regardless of geographic or socioeconomic barriers. This is especially impactful in low-income and developing countries.

iii) Flexibility and Customization: Educators can tailor OER to suit their pedagogical needs, linguistic preferences, or cultural contexts. Unlike traditional resources that are rigid and copyrighted, OER encourages customization.

iv) Promotes Lifelong Learning: By being openly available online, OER supports self-directed learning, professional development, and lifelong learning outside of formal education institutions.

v) Innovation in Teaching: OER facilitates experimentation and innovation. Educators can adopt non-traditional teaching strategies, such as flipped classrooms and blended learning, enabled by access to open materials.

3. The Open Movement

OER is part of a larger movement known as the **Open Movement**, which also includes open access (OA)

to scholarly research, open data, and open source software. The core philosophy behind this movement is that knowledge should be a public good, freely available to all.

This movement is not solely about cost savings—it also challenges the traditional models of publishing, education, and intellectual property. It seeks to democratize knowledge production and dissemination, encourage collaborative development, and increase transparency and sharing.

The open movement has gained traction globally. Institutions, governments, and organizations have launched policies and initiatives to promote OER, such as UNESCO's 2019 Recommendation on OER, which outlines strategic areas like capacity building, supportive policies, and sustainable funding.

4. Open Licenses

For a resource to be considered truly "open," it must be published under an **open license**, most commonly a **Creative Commons (CC) license**. These licenses provide a legal framework that enables authors to retain copyright while granting permission for others to use their work under specific conditions.

The six main Creative Commons licenses range in restrictiveness:

a) **CC BY** (Attribution) – Most open; allows reuse with credit.

b) **CC BY-SA** (Attribution-Share Alike) – Allows reuse and adaptation with credit and a requirement to license new creations under identical terms.

c) **CC BY-ND** (Attribution-No Derives) – Allows redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, as long as it is unchanged and credited.

d) **CC BY-NC** (Attribution-Non Commercial) – Allows reuse with credit but prohibits commercial use.

e) **CC BY-NC-SA** – Non-commercial and Share Alike restrictions.

f) **CC BY-NC-ND** – Most restrictive; allows downloading and sharing with credit, but no changes or commercial use.

Understanding these licenses is crucial for educators and librarians to ensure legal compliance and encourage ethical sharing.

5. Open Repositories

OER must be **discoverable** to be useful, and open repositories are central to this. These repositories serve as digital platforms where OER can be stored, accessed, and shared.

Some prominent OER repositories include:

- **OER Commons**: A vast library of open educational materials.
- **MERLOT**: A curated collection of free and open online teaching materials.
- **Open Stax**: Peer-reviewed, openly licensed textbooks.
- **Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB)**: For academic books in various disciplines.
- **Libre Texts**: Especially strong in STEM fields.

Libraries often either host their own institutional OER repositories or facilitate access to global ones. They also ensure the metadata is properly formatted, which enhances discoverability and reusability.

6. Find, Adopt, and Adapt

The successful integration of Open Educational Resources (OER) into teaching and learning is often framed as a dynamic, iterative process comprising three key stages: **Find, Adopt, and Adapt**. This model highlights the workflow educators and librarians typically follow when incorporating OER into academic programs. At each stage, librarians play a pivotal role, offering support, expertise, and resources to ensure the effective discovery, use, and modification of open content.

a) Find

The first and arguably most crucial step in the OER integration process is locating suitable materials. Given the decentralized nature of OER repositories and the sheer volume of available content, **finding high-quality, relevant, and openly licensed resources** can be challenging for faculty. This is where librarians become essential facilitators.

Librarians are trained in advanced search strategies and metadata usage, which enables them to assist educators in navigating multiple OER repositories such as **OER Commons**, **MERLOT**, **Open Stax**, and **Libre Texts**. They help filter results by subject, academic level, license type, and format to ensure resources meet course requirements. Additionally, librarians use and develop **OER evaluation rubrics**, which assess content quality, accessibility, accuracy, and cultural relevance.

Moreover, librarians provide guidance on how to interpret **Creative Commons licenses**, ensuring that educators understand what they can legally do with the materials they find. This legal literacy is critical to maintaining the integrity of open education and avoiding misuse of copyrighted materials.

b) Adopt

[iv]Once suitable materials are found, the next step is **adoption**. Educators may choose to use OER "as is" when the content aligns closely with course learning outcomes and instructional needs. In many cases, this involves replacing expensive commercial textbooks with open alternatives, which can drastically reduce student costs and improve access.

Librarians play a key role here by **curating lists of recommended OER**, supporting the integration of content into Learning Management Systems (LMS), and helping faculty evaluate the pedagogical suitability of open materials. In institutions where textbook affordability is a strategic priority, librarians often collaborate with teaching and learning centers or academic departments to promote the widespread adoption of OER.

Adoption is often the most accessible entry point into OER for faculty who are new to the concept, and librarian-led initiatives—such as workshops, OER guides, or grant-supported adoption programs—can significantly lower the barrier to entry.

c) Adapt

Perhaps the most transformative feature of OER is the **freedom to adapt and remix** materials to meet local or contextual needs. This is where the open licensing of OER truly demonstrates its power. Adaptation may involve **revising outdated statistics**, **adding local case studies**, **translating materials into different languages**, or **modifying the structure** of a resource to better match a course's learning objectives.

Librarians are instrumental in guiding educators through the adaptation process. Their support typically includes:

1. **Assistance with adaptation tools** such as **Press books** (an open-source book publishing platform) or **H5P** (for creating interactive content).
2. **Clarifying licensing implications**, especially when combining multiple OERs with different Creative Commons licenses. Understanding license compatibility is essential when remixing materials.
3. **Providing technical support** or connecting faculty with instructional designers and digital publishing staff.
4. **Facilitating institutional publishing platforms** where adapted OER can be published and shared with broader audiences.

Through adaptation, educators can create more **inclusive, accessible, and locally relevant** learning materials, which is particularly important for underrepresented communities and disciplines that lack representation in traditional textbooks.

7. Librarians as OER Curators

Librarians are uniquely positioned to support OER efforts due to their expertise in information organization, metadata, licensing, and digital preservation. Their roles in OER initiatives include:

a) Awareness and Advocacy

Librarians educate faculty, students, and administrators about the value and importance of OER. This involves conducting workshops, creating guides, and embedding OER discussions into curriculum design.

b) Technical and Legal Guidance

Understanding Creative Commons licenses, copyright, and fair use is complex. Librarians guide stakeholders through these legal frameworks to ensure responsible use and sharing of OER.

c) Collection Development

Just as with traditional resources, librarians curate OER collections aligned with institutional goals. They evaluate the quality, relevance, accessibility, and accuracy of materials.

d) Metadata and Discoverability

OER is only useful if it can be found. Librarians enhance discoverability by applying metadata standards, using controlled vocabularies, and tagging resources correctly.

e) Platform Management

In institutions that host their own OER repositories, librarians often manage the platform, ensuring technical upkeep, user support, and content integrity.

f) Capacity Building

Librarians offer training and support for faculty on creating and remixing OER. This includes helping them use authoring tools, apply licenses, and integrate materials into Learning Management Systems (LMS).

g) Policy Development

Librarians can influence institutional policy by contributing to OER strategies, grant writing for OER initiatives, and building sustainability plans.

- **Conclusion**

The OER landscape is dynamic, with immense potential to reshape education and knowledge sharing globally. While the creation and adoption of OER require a collaborative effort among educators, technologists, and institutions, libraries and librarians are at the heart of this transformation. Their multifaceted role in discovering, curating, adapting, and advocating for OER ensures that these resources reach their full potential in improving access to education.

As stewards of knowledge and access, librarians bridge the gap between educational innovation and practical implementation. Their contributions to the OER movement are not only essential for current educational practices but are also foundational for the future of open, equitable, and inclusive education.

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