

OER, Equity, and Implicit Creative Redlining

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Rajiv Jhangiani's blog \[https://edtechbooks.org/-TnN\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-TnN) on April 6, 2018.

The open education movement wants to be a force for equity. The argument is straightforward and powerful: Widen access to educational resources and those who disproportionately suffer at the hands of the exploitative business models of commercial publishers will disproportionately benefit, in both economic and educational terms. As someone who has personally benefited from generous and life-changing sponsorship of access to a high quality education, this argument is not simply theoretical for me. It is my lived experience. This is why I will never stop pushing for nor understate the importance of widening access to education. But if the open education movement holds the goal of equity as dearly as I believe we do, we need to ensure that we do not restrict our definition of equity to only those who will reuse the resources. For if we ignore the question of equity as it applied to educators who create, revise, and remix OER, we risk perpetrating harm with the best of intentions.

In my capacity as an administrator supporting open education at a public post-secondary institution with an open access mandate, I am vehement about the need to adequately support those of my colleagues who wish to engage in open educational practices. And by support, I mean through sufficient time, adequate funding, required training, and earned recognition. While this position may be construed as pragmatic or instrumental, for me it strikes at the heart of addressing equity. For if the movement relies on voluntary academic labour or severely under-compensated academic labour to create, peer-review, and contextualize OER, we are in effect perpetrating an implicit form of redlining*, one that reserves the capacity to create or adapt OER for those who already enjoy positions of privilege, such as the tenured or those who do not need the income. In such an eventuality, despite the best of intentions, the ideologies (including biases and prejudices) associated with those positions of privilege become reflected and over-represented in the available

OER. And while I often describe how powerful it can be to exercise the permission to revise OER by simply changing the names that appear within a text's examples so that they reflect the diversity of the classroom, that we have to do this at all is a subtle symptom of the types of exclusivity that can exist in OER—and something we need to work against.

Make no mistake—in highlighting this problem, I am not pitting the democratization of knowledge creation against equitable access to education. Rather, I am highlighting that access to knowledge creation ought to be equitable as well. As has been noted before, diversity is a fact but inclusion is a choice. So this is a call for open education projects, funders, and universities to become aware of the inadvertent implications of inadequately supporting OER creators and adaptors as well as to be attentive to who are given the opportunity and support to create and adapt OER. Supporting and nurturing stewards at a grassroots level and supporting the building of community across such stewards helps make open education both more sustainable and more equitable.

One of the things I love about the open education movement is that its values are those that educators largely already hold. This is why you find that even the decision of an academic department to standardize an assigned commercial textbook is usually driven by a desire to negotiate a lower cost for students and/or to avoid having students who need to re-take a course having to buy a second book. This also means that the seeds for a grassroots community have already been planted. And while the image of grass growing out through cracks in concrete may be used to signify resilience and drive, I would much rather ensure that we deliberately cultivate more fertile ground.

*For related concepts see [Chris Gilliard's writing on digital redlining](https://edtechbooks.org/-VqZ) [<https://edtechbooks.org/-VqZ>] and [Safiya Noble's writing on technological redlining](https://edtechbooks.org/-wjh) [<https://edtechbooks.org/-wjh>]

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