

The Access Compromise and the 5th R

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [David Wiley's blog](#) on March 5, 2014.

It's been [seven years](#) since I introduced the 4Rs framework for thinking about the bundle of permissions that define an open educational resource, or OER. The framework of permitted activities – reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute – has gained some traction in the field, and I'm happy that people have found it useful. The 4Rs play a critical role in my own thinking about OER, and my operational definition of OER now includes two main criteria: (1) free and unfettered access to the resource, and (2) whatever copyright permissions are necessary for users to engage in the 4R activities. But while the framework has served the field well – and has shaped my own thinking, too – I believe the time has come to expand it.

A year ago I wrote a piece on adaptive instructional systems, and how publishers are moving away from selling content to leasing access to services as a way of responding to the threat to their business models posed by open educational resources. I called it an “attack on personal property”:

When you own a copy, the publisher completely loses control over it. When you subscribe to content through a digital service (like an adaptive learning service), the publisher achieves complete and perfect control over you and your use of their content.

Over the last year my thinking about the attack on personal property has slowly expanded and generalized to include not just publishers, but our own campuses as well. Last month I wrote about “[disappearing ink](#),” a way of characterizing the way that post-secondary institutions are trying to increase the affordability of required textbooks by decreasing student access to them. Specifically, campuses have initiated a number of programs like textbook buyback, textbook rental, digital subscription programs, and DRM-laden ebook programs, each of which results in students completely losing access to their required textbooks at the end of term. The more I've pondered the disappearing ink strategy, the more it has bothered me. I can understand commercial publishers acting in a way that favors business over learning, but not our campuses.

The Access Compromise

Earlier this week I had the opportunity to speak to a group of librarians at the annual SPARC conference. As I prepared for that talk, and after a great conversation with Nicole Allen of SPARC, I began thinking about this broader problem

from the library perspective. I slowly came to see that libraries represent a compromise made centuries ago under a different set of circumstances.

There was a time before the invention of the printing press when books were unfathomably expensive – costing a full year’s wages or more for a single volume. In this historical context where ownership of books by normal people was utterly impossible – unimaginable, even – we compromised. We said, let’s gather books together in a single place and provide *access* to them. That access was limited to the privileged at first, but over time we have slowly but surely worked to democratize access to books through libraries.

Foregoing the idea of ownership and instead promoting the idea of access made sense in a world where books were incredibly scarce and new copies were too expensive for anyone but royalty to commission. However, in a world where books, journal articles, and other educational resources can be copied and distributed instantly and at essentially no cost, the “access compromise” doesn’t seem like such a bargain anymore.

Unfortunately, in the higher education textbook market we see this historical story playing in reverse. Books that were once affordable enough to be owned by students have climbed in price to a point where we find our own institutions trying to persuade students to make the access compromise. That should have been the trigger. It’s past time to turn the higher education textbook conversation away from access and back to personal ownership and individual control of learning content.

The 5th R

Which brings us back to OER. There is no possible short- or medium-term future in which commercial publishers do what is economically and technically necessary to make it possible for students to actually own their learning content. This means that any advances toward ownership will have to come from the field of open education.

Unfortunately, we the field of open education have completely bought into the access compromise. There’s not a single definition of OER I’m aware of – including my own – that speaks directly to issues of ownership. Yes, ownership is sort of implied in the “reuse” R, and is legally permitted by open licenses. But for all of their willingness to share *access* to open educational resources, how many OER publishers go out of their way to make it easy for you to grab a copy of their OER that you can own and control forever? How many OER publishers enable access but go out of their way to frustrate copying? How many more OER publishers seem to have never given a second thought to users wanting to own copies, seeing no need to offer anything beyond access?

This leads me to feel that the time has come to add a 5th R to my framework – “retain.” Hopefully this 5th R will elevate the ownership conversation in the open education community, allowing us to talk about it explicitly and begin the work necessary to support and enable it directly.

The 5Rs of Openness

- 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 (e.g., in a class, in a study group, on a website, in a video)
- Revise – the right to adapt, adjust, modify, or alter the content itself (e.g., translate the content into another language)
- Remix – the right to combine the original or revised content with other open content to create something new (e.g., incorporate the content into a mashup)
- Redistribute – the right to share copies of the original content, your revisions, or your remixes with others (e.g., give a copy of the content to a friend)



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