

# Open Textbooks? UGH.

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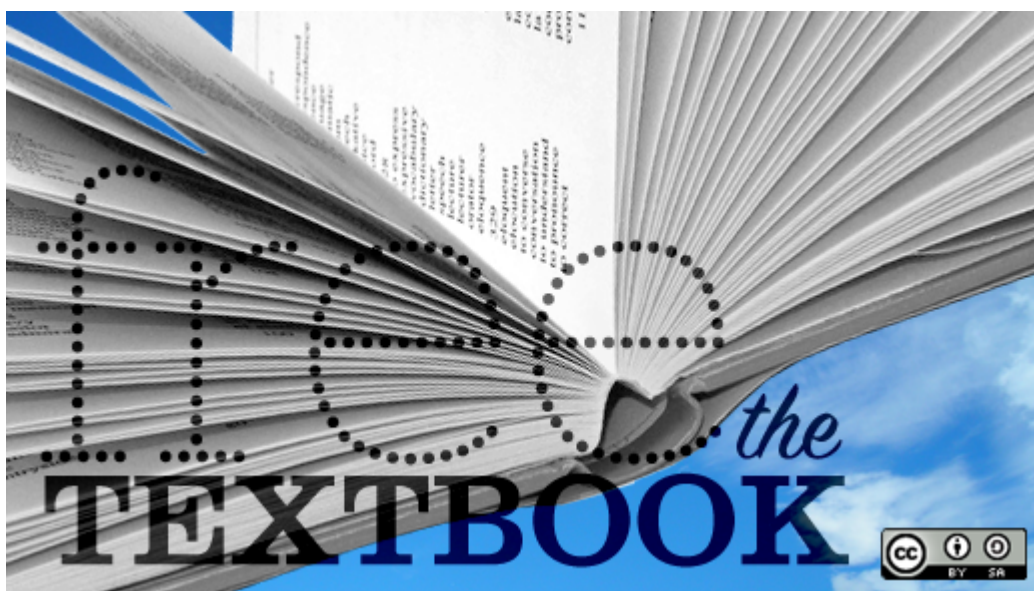
## Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Robin DeRosa's blog](#) on November 20, 2015.



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I am writing this from [OpenEd15](#) in Vancouver. And this is a call to my like-minded compatriots spread across our conference rooms here, but also to the tweeps and digitalactivists I've worked with online over the last two years. After three days of sessions focused on reducing textbook costs, creating all-OER degree programs, generating data analytics for OER, and producing open textbooks in just four days, I am ready for some good, old-school mutiny. It's a loving and grateful mutiny, since this conference energizes, inspires, and provokes me. But nonetheless, I'm ready to fling some ideas overboard and see this ship steer in a new direction.



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Don't get me wrong. I am here in Vancouver because I am deeply committed to reducing textbook costs. Wait. Scratch that. I don't actually care about textbook costs. I care about access, broadly conceived: access to ideas, access to pathways to contribute to knowledge, access to research so that we can collaborate and build. Fundamentally, I don't want to be part of a movement that is focused on replacing static, over-priced textbooks with static, free textbooks. Textbooks, if we don't re-theorize them, have generally (just) been repositories for the master's ideas. Students absorb textbook content and achieve "mastery." (Call it "competency," whatever.) Making textbooks more affordable is not high on my list of things to do. Here's what I want OpenEd to help me figure out how to do instead of lowering textbook costs:

1. Engage learners in contributing to their learning materials so that knowledge becomes a community endeavor rather than a commodity that needs to be made accessible. To that end, let's stop fetishizing the textbook, which is at best a low-bar pedagogical tool for transmitting information. OER is better than that.
2. Make open licenses the focus of our advocacy for learners, teachers, scholars, which means explaining how the open license enables us to do more with the ideas that we ourselves as learners, teachers, scholars are generating. It's not the open textbook, it's the open *license* that matters here.
3. Consider public funding models for open education (OER, open pedagogy, open access). "Philanthropy" is the wrong word for a model in which the public pays itself for what it needs and can generate on its own. And I am not buying that private, for-profit companies— while capable of being good community partners— are the only way we can build a public infrastructure for publishing and organizing and economically supporting open work.
4. Build a better mission statement for why we work in the open. I took a stab [here](#), but it was just one tiny specific start. I need help explaining this why. We need the why before we can develop the what (who cares about our open tools and apps and platforms? that's the easy stuff, so let's do it second). We need the *why* before we can assess whether or not we achieved success. Will working in the open serve a social justice vision? improve retention and enrollment? increase interdisciplinary collaboration and improve the quality of our scholarship? Yes? Why? How? And what will it look like if our vision succeeds?

I don't think that advocating for a pedagogical approach to OER makes me radical or an outlier. But my sense is that the movement is cohering around the "gateway" of open textbook adoption. But don't worry, I am told, once we hook 'em, we can slip in the pedagogy!

**No. No!**



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That hook is going to puncture our foundational beliefs about the power of open.

I am calling for a (radical?) pedagogy caucus, a core, self-identified group committed to placing pedagogy at the center of the OpenEd movement. I am going to stop apologizing for my sense that textbooks are the wrong way to pitch open.

Open doesn't need a pitch because open is not for sale.



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