



# Copyright Corner

## Copyright and OER Alternatives to Commercial Textbooks

In the first full week of Fall 2016 classes, the U of L Students Union (ULSU) took part in a province-wide campaign called [#textbookbrokeab](#). The aim was to raise university student awareness about OERs—[Open Educational Resources](#)—and to lobby for OER funding support from the provincial government. OERs are broadly part of the Open Access (OA) movement to remove financial, legal and technical barriers preventing scholarly literature from being freely available online for the public to access and read. As a follow-up to my [May/June 2016](#) column on OA, this column takes a look at copyright, one category of OERS—open textbooks—and tools to help you locate and evaluate open textbooks that could be appropriate for your courses.

The traditional arrangement between commercial publishers and academic authors of scholarly articles and books requires the author to transfer all of his or her copyrights or grant an exclusive licence to the publisher. Either way, the publisher ends up with sole control over the right to publish and sell copies of the work. In contrast, the author of an open textbook retains all copyrights, typically by publishing the book non-commercially under an open licence that allows the public to access and use it as long as proper attribution is provided. Other possible OA licensing terms may, for example, prohibit commercial uses or the creation of derivative works.<sup>1</sup>

ULSU's September [campaign](#) promoted OERs as highly desirable alternatives to their commercial counterparts due to the considerable cost savings for students, given that OERs are freely downloadable. Even if you adopt an open textbook for your course and arrange for it to be printed and sold in the Bookstore, the price will merely cover production costs. The cost difference between an open and a commercial textbook can thus be stark, as the sticker price of the latter can range from \$150 to \$250 or higher, depending on the discipline.<sup>2</sup>

It's easy to understand students' enthusiasm for OERs, but from a faculty perspective, the idea of adopting one may not be as compelling. If you haven't had an opportunity to explore them, perhaps you wonder about how easy or difficult it might be to identify suitable open textbooks for the courses you teach and about how the quality of student learning based on open textbooks compares to learning based on traditional commercial publications. If so, you may find some of the following tools and resources to be useful.

1 OA works are often covered by Creative Commons (CC) licensing. Of the six main types of CC licensing, the most restrictive—CC-BY-NC-ND—limits permitted uses to downloading and sharing a work (with attribution).

2 Holliday, I. (2016, March 27, 2016). Universities seek open-source solution to 'absurd' textbook prices. CTV News. Retrieved from <http://bc.ctvnews.ca/universities-seek-open-source-solution-to-absurd-textbook-prices-1.2834035>

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Coordinated by BCcampus, the [B.C. Open Textbook Project](#) is a leader in OER development and use in Canada. The Project website offers a [searchable collection](#) of over 160 OER textbooks in the humanities, art, new media, social sciences, health sciences, natural and applied sciences, and management, many of which have been evaluated by BC postsecondary faculty. Further resources on this website include a [directory of other OER collections](#), guides to [evaluating](#) and [adapting](#) OERs, and links to [other OER](#) initiatives in Canada including that of [eCampusAlberta](#) which uses OERs from BCcampus's OER textbook collection. There are at least a couple of open textbooks in BCcampus's curated collection that have been adopted or adapted for use in U of L courses.

But what about the effectiveness of open textbook-based student learning as compared to traditional learning resources such as commercial textbooks? J. Hilton's evaluation of studies that examined this very question provides useful guidance. Of the 16 studies involving more than 46,000 students in total, nine assessed OER-based learning outcomes and seven looked at student and instructor perceptions of OERs. Study design differences and shortcomings made it difficult in some cases to make definite determinations of OER effectiveness, but in general Hilton found the use of open textbooks "does not appear to decrease student learning" (p. 586). Hilton also found most students said OERs were comparable or superior to traditional resources, and in no studies did the majority of students or instructors perceive OERs to be associated with decreased learning.

Hilton's overall conclusion contains a question that seems relevant in our largely publicly-funded postsecondary context:

Because students and faculty members generally find that OER are comparable in quality to traditional learning resources, and that the use of OER does not appear to negatively influence student learning, one must question the value of traditional textbooks. If the average college student spends approximately \$1000 per year on textbooks and yet performs scholastically no better than the student who utilizes free OER, what exactly is being purchased with that \$1000? (p. 588)

Some of the copyright- and public interest-based reasons for choosing OA options for publishing your scholarly papers and books may also apply to OER options for course textbook adoption. If you would like help in determining whether suitable open textbooks are available for your courses, please contact the [subject librarian](#) for your area, or have a look at the links to OER tools in this column, above, and the Library's [OER guide](#).

As always, feel free to contact the Copyright Advisor office to follow up on topics covered in this column or to request assistance in sorting out any copyright questions you may encounter in your teaching, research or other U of L activities.

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