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Open Education Exploration Grant: Pennie Gray

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The Ames Library OER Exploration Grant Report
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I was fortunate to have an opportunity to conduct a preliminary review of Open Educational Resources (OERs) last summer as a student in the *Fundamentals of Online Teaching* (FoOT) course offered through University of Wisconsin-Madison and sponsored through IWU's CETAL and the Mellon Center. That initial review of OERs gave me an inkling of the types of resources that were available, free and online, but the FoOT course was fast-paced and robust, so I did not have time to delve into OERs as much as I might have liked. When I read about the grant offered through Ames Library encouraging faculty to dig deeper into OERs, it was just the nudge I needed to continue my exploration.

I began my search by using the links on the Ames Library website (e.g., BC Campus, Oasis, Mertlot) and quickly realized that there were so many resources—perhaps too many resources—to easily keep track of, so I set up a spreadsheet for myself to document and evaluate the OERs I found. In all, I found sixteen specific resources I may be able to use in my courses, all of which can be found on my spreadsheet [here](#). On the spreadsheet, I also created a tab to track the utility of the OER repository links from the Ames Library website in light of my own disciplinary fields.

To evaluate the OERs, I established a highly informal rating system using numbers 1 through 5, with 1 representing a resource I was doubtful would be helpful, and 5 representing a resource I simply must incorporate into my courses this fall. The middle numbers applied to resources that would be helpful for some students in some courses, but not for all students in all courses. After devising this system, I realized that I had no reason to document any resources with a rating of 1 or 2, so I only included those resources that had some clear usefulness to me or students. In addition to the rating system, I included a column for the links, a column for the intended courses, and a column to describe how I envisioned using the resource (i.e., where the resource would fit in the existing curriculum).

While I will not go through every resource I found because they are all available on the spreadsheet linked above, I will note that the most significant beneficiary of this exploration was my course EDU 320: *Foundations of Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Oral Communication*. This course is designed for junior and senior education majors and represents one of the first teaching methods courses taken by students who are pursuing teaching licensure. The course carries 1.5 units of credit in order to satisfy Illinois State Board of Education licensure requirements in literacy instruction, so the course meets for four hours each week and carries a heavier than usual workload. Not only does the course cover content regarding literacy development from infancy to high school, it also addresses children's literature (briefly), content area literacy, and, as the course title suggests, writing and speaking. To say it is a challenging course to teach is an understatement. I often have both elementary education majors in the course alongside secondary

education majors, so finding a way to teach the course so it is relevant and applicable to all students is the perennial challenge that address by offering students options in terms of assignments and, at times, by holding class sessions, one for elementary education majors and one for secondary education majors. All that is to say, the course forces me to think creatively and to be exceptionally responsive to students' needs, and this responsiveness mandates that I have many resources available to students. One size—or one resource—most definitely does not fit all in my courses.

One area of the EDU 320 course that is a perennial challenge is providing instruction on working with students who are English Language Learners (ELL) as this is not an area of expertise for me. Through my OER investigation, I was pleased to find an open textbook entitled *Sharing Our Knowledge: Best Practices for Supporting ELLs*. There are three chapters in particular that will be helpful in guiding students toward creating an equitable and responsive classroom, and I plan to use all three chapters in the course this coming fall. I do already own a number of texts that explore teaching ELL students, but having an open textbook with appropriate and well-researched content will be much more helpful than trying to glean specific content from the books I currently have sitting on my shelf.

Another especially helpful resource focused on visual literacy through Visual-Literacy.org At first, I thought this resource could be easily incorporated into my REA272: *Child and Adolescent Literature* course since we spend considerable time in that course analyzing images from children's picture books. However, this particular resource also included many helpful graphics such as a periodic table of information visualization methods that I intend to use with students in the EDU 320 course while also encouraging students to use the resource with their own students in the field. Indeed, almost every course I teach demands that I not only teach *about* effective instructional methods, but also that I *use* effective instructional methods so students can experience those methods themselves. This particular OER will give me ample opportunity to do just that while simultaneously bolstering my teaching of content area literacy.

A final resource I was delighted to find for both myself and my students was a book entitled *Anti-Racist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* by Asao Inoue. I have appreciated the work of Inoue in previous research ventures, but I had not considered sharing his research and perspectives with students. This text gives me just that opportunity. More specifically, Inoue includes chapters such as *The Function of Race in Writing Assessments* (Chapter 1), *The Elements of an Anti-Racist Writing Assessment Ecology* (Chapter 3), and *Designing Anti-Racist Assessment Ecologies* (Chapter 5). I especially liked one of the appendices in this book: a grading contract Inoue uses in one of his English classes. I have used contract grades in a few classes, and it has worked well. However, Inoue offers an excellent rationale for this practice in his appendix, and I hope to borrow some of his rationale for my own courses (I will cite him, of course). Likewise, I will use this approach to challenge my students' preconceived notions about assessment and grading and their relationship to learning so that they can consider how to approach assessment in their own classrooms of the future.

As I hope is clear, this investigation into OERs was quite helpful to me as I work on course revisions over the summer. I have found a considerable number of resources that will enhance my courses and that are completely free and accessible to students.

What is more important, though, is the fact that I am rethinking how I give students access to the content they will need for my courses. I have typically relied on a mixture of textbooks and other resources—films, podcasts, websites, Prezis, and PDFs of articles. However, I am trying to find a way to ensure that there are no “hidden fees” for my courses in the form of required purchased texts. I recently read through the slides from Mark Liffiton and Chris Sweet’s presentation *Exploring Open Resources for Learning* from 2017 and Chris Sweet’s summer, 2020 presentation *Introduction to OER and Open Pedagogy* and was struck by the statistics showing how many students either do not take a course or take a course without purchasing a textbook due to the cost of the texts. I was likewise struck by the IWU estimate of \$800 per year for course materials, not to mention the average student debt at IWU of \$35,000. These statistics have renewed my commitment to make my courses as inexpensive and as accessible as possible. In essence, I am encouraged to be a course curator, cobbling together resources that are responsive to student needs and best of all, free.

While I think the past year has taught us that we cannot predict what the future holds, I do think it’s safe to say that higher education is moving toward offering more equitable and accessible content and formats. I know I have certainly rethought my own curricula and delivery methods over the past year and have discovered that there is much more I can do to support students. However, moving from a reliance on hard copy textbooks to OERs is a seismic shift in higher education and one that will take time. Perhaps by the time our current students begin to make their way into the professoriate, this shift will feel more natural. Until then, onward.