# Guide to Creating Open Educational Resources:
# A Humanities Approach

Figure 1  Jefferson Community College

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Figure 2 My OERs ("JCC OER Textbooks")

## Why Use Open Educational Resources?

Adopting a book by a corporate publisher itself is a political move, since faculty basically sign onto the edited outlook not only of the book's writer, but also the entire structure used to edit the document. As James W. Loewen discusses in his 1990s account of teaching history and the high school social studies textbook market, there are multiple factors legislating against fresh voices in the texts. His book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*: *Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* recounts the ways states dictate how history texts get edited—often to the point where the information becomes meaningless, repetitive, and inaccurate.

Physically, OER texts vary but can be competitive with the glossy print of more expensive texts. Especially in education and social sciences texts, readers' eyes may tend to glaze over immediately. Control over typeface and paper shine is not high on the writers' lists of aspects they can control readily.

Moving from this corporate model to one where the instructor makes the decisions is a powerful change that alters how we teach, listen to students, and choose learning activities and readings.  Note: Most of the *Guide* focuses on texbooks rather than lab manuals or collections of case studies or notes.

## How to Use This Guide

This OER broadly focuses on tips, tricks, heuristics, and trade-offs as I attempt to encourage more faculty to engage in development of resources which work for them and their students.  The tone is informal.  Since the creation process is inherently chaotic, there is no step-by-step guide on offer.  Instead, I focus on the experience of creating OERs, demystifying some of the supposed boundaries and offering cues and guideposts.  You are welcome to contact me for help, clarification, or commiseration at jdickinson@sunyjefferson.edu, or by calling (315) 786-2221.  I want this document to be a useful starting point for your explorations of this exciting teaching challenge.

## Defining Open Educational Resources

Many people create OERs which are basically "all someone else's" material. This makes sense in many fields where exactness of content matters. (I know, I know, everyone can say that clarity and accuracy matter, but if we're honest, it can matter more in some fields. We wouldn't mess with the listing of, say, nursing equations where basic transcription errors could lead to someone's death.)  With differing approaches, there is a variable amount of room allowed in different fields of study. For instance, I chose not to add any grammar exercises to the *College Writing Handbook*, creating instead the chapters on college writing, critical thinking, and researching narrowed topics. Surprisingly, I now want to go back and add several grammar exercises, customizing links and enriching the straightforward content there.

Many fields change significantly even over a few years. The latest OER I am considering is for a Principles of Education course, sort of a mix between a foundations course and a principles course, as our college frames the course description. For me to delineate all the major aspects of education is just a bit too daunting, so I have waited for time—and my research skills—to catch up so that I can find likely models. However, there are models I'll adjust heavily no matter what shell I locate. Even reordering content can have a major impact on how it is taught.

So what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being an OER author? This is authoring to the extent to which you are creating material, just as it would be editing to the extent to which you alter and move it.

Here is the fun of this: OER adopters can add, turn on, reorder, and hide content. (No, it is not some 1960s countercultural mantra like Timothy Leary's "Tune in. Turn on. Drop out." More like "Log in. Turn on/off. Adapt it!")  Most writers find the editing process excruciating—if they attend to it at all.

Place yourself back in eighth grade. For me, this involves a certain amount of shame: 1984, after all, was the era of the plastic pants/deck shoes/plastic tie/mullet. I have the pictures. Seriously, though: Likely you had a big multidisciplinary writing project back then, something with a seriously long timeline and steps that were broken into hours. Everyone did the research (i.e., copying), ham-handedly wrote a half-cited piece, and the report and eventual presentation got turned in. Where in the process was editing? We remember the grading, but not doing any

editing. Everyone dreads those red marks on the page. I retain an unopened grad school essay from my Shakespeare's and His Adapters course and still have no desire to open it.

Students typically use this process: go from first draft to printer. Turn it in and hope it works. As faculty, we often forget the audiences to whom we are writing and default to the self. Either way, the editing process gets cut out.

So I'll call this a Humanities approach to OER. The Humanities as an area always deals with texts and textuality. Rather than fixating on authors of texts, OERs blend authoring with adapting. Readers become writers, just as teachers realize that texts are not almighty objects with fixed meanings to be wrung from them. Students can even be engaged in OER creation through in-class projects. The time scale and created object differ from books published by corporations.

## The Writing Process and OER: A Humanities Approach

As a professor of English, I'll add to the frustration, as that's in my job description! Editing isn't merely editing. It is revision and editing and proofreading, if we follow the syntax of the writing process. A fancy term from rhetoric for this is hypotaxis, a formal ordering of steps in a process, a conceptual top-down-to-the-roots ordering. Systematic. Thorough. However thoroughly we break down editing, it tends go from general to particular, with revision being those large-scale changes, editing working at sentence-level, and proofreading occurring at the word and character level, even.

Some writers love to revise. (Of course, it helps to have touch typing skills, but that's another crusade . . . !)  They relish the ability to move around chunks of text, whether they be a page or a chapter. Having the stuff on the page, it can be gauged for effect. Revision is a hugely underrated and highly creative action that often gets lopped out of writers' processes by their prewriting approach. That is, many writers are so linear that they just start at the beginning, end at the end, and take that whole "Tell them what you're going to do in the intro, do it in the body, and tell them what you did in the conclusion" approach. If this leads to a bit of stale writing, at least it does so predictably. Maybe these linear folks are engineers who have just solved the problem and only want to move on.

But writing is not discrete like that. For most people, the linear approach is an exercise in frustration. One reason for this negative emotional charge toward writing is that writing is not meaningful work. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell notes the three qualities of what he terms *meaningful work*: "Those three things—autonomy, complexity, and a connection between effort and reward—are, most people agree, the three qualities that work has to have if it is to be satisfying" (149). That last trait is the new information: We want there to be direct links between time and output. Writing **cannot** promise this, as everyone knows. I once dashed off a wonderful thirty-page paper on the history of ancient Roman writing instruction techniques. Once. That flow and facility doesn't occur often—or ever, for most writers. Knowing this, we create anyway.

Most of us just fake that, being glib and writing in endless complex sentences. We stay in the safety of vagueness or let sources take over. (Not to be subject-centric, but some entire disciplines encourage this passive writing, name-dropping of studies, or even unquoted quotes. Anecdotally, I can attest to the lack of rigor subject professors (those not teaching composition, say) may give to writing assignments that often only test whether students can report or recall information—not even with attendance to basic facts like whether one cites summaries or whether paraphrases reword and reorder, or only do one. Citing? Style? Those are afterthoughts. While I sympathize with the need to cover subject content and am respectfully aware that each discipline has its grammar for what gets recognized, there's still something to my point about this: Students don't get much focus on writing as a process.

And if students don't focus on writing as process, then they certainly only pay lip service to the notion that all writing is argument, that we are entering ongoing conversations through writing. Taking seriously the idea that words matter is something we see eroding. Witness only the obtuse, coarsening level of contemporary political dialogue. Conversation metaphors? If someone is a solipsist, then why would they consider others? By definition, they could not. . .

Community suffers when we over focus on the self. Change becomes difficult. One of the primary reasons to create an OER is to engage with others. The process involves working both within the institution and between institutions. In our case, in 2017, SUNY OER got us interacting with SUNY Geneseo librarians, SUNY Potsdam conference hosts, and people across our state's campus. It also led to interactions with bemused bookstore systems, but that is another

topic. Ben Kenobi comments in *Episode IV: A New Hope*: "Let's just say we'd like to avoid any Imperial entanglements," to which Han Solo replies "Well, that's the trick, isn't it?" (Lucas).

Of course, this is not to say that writing is not important. Still, the writing game is an important one. Clichéd as it sounds, it does open doors for us. (Conversely, lack of writing closes doors and we presume of our students that they want to do jobs which differ daily.) But we may as well be cognizant of how writing actually works upon ourselves, just as we attempt to create documents which work upon others. This is all rhetoric, of course, and 2,500 years old. We haven't progressed much beyond old Aristotle with his definition of it as "Persuasion using the available means."

If this is a game, where is the fun? OER can be that fun. Figuring out which usable ideas you use is a practical issue. Whether the lecture comes from the start of one's career and only needs some tweaking, or is something entirely new that occurs to you through dealing with the software used to put together the book, creators can rely on a mix of sources to sift through. When I was adapting some chapter content from an outside source, I cut parts of it. Even just keeping the log that delineated my changes was a helpful and thought-provoking exercise. If I cut, say, a section on a scenario for critical reading because it was too long/basic, what would replace it? **Tip**: OERs generally do list the changes the editor makes, so it is important to do this as one writers rather than afterward. We tell our students that not "citing as one writers" is a recipe. . . .it is just that this is a recipe for plagiarism. Why would we not keep track as we create and follow those same sorts of advice?

Sorts of advice. . . . they are is the idea here. We already have writing styles. We're refining those. We already contribute. We're repackaging those contributions. This is all about process, checking, and utility. (Lest this sound like some UPS white paper, just consider how difficult it is to add emphasis remotely. Textbooks struggle to do this. In online courses, professors struggle mightily with the emphasis issue. As we will see, figuring out whether students "got our texts' emphases" is also difficult, as heuristics are a challenge needing more attention with OER.)

## The OER Processes are Chaotic

Now, all these processes I just mentioned are chaotic. I'd like to unpack each of these ideas, since we approach them not only with misconceptions, but also with 180-degree-from-what-they-are wrongness. (That's right, I'm telling people they are wrong . . . . hopefully, while also keeping them in the room reading!)

Chaos is not disordered. On the contrary, it has to do with small changes leading to huge knock-on effects later. It has to do with recursion: the micro processes and the macro processes basically "doing the same move" like one used to see in those Mandlebrot sets when screen savers "were a thing."  Iterating something, doing it over and over, and attending to scale. That sounds to me a lot like writing—and even more like what we do in creating OER resources. Work something at the minute level (say, a piece), and that same working occurs at the chapter (part) level.

"All this is new," we might think. It is exciting to be a part—rather than *apart from*—change. It is daunting as well. One of my points is that it is not really new and is definitely "not cookbook."  There is no easy formula. Well, there are formulae such as including an OER "as is" or barely changing it. Those can work, but even with that I'd encourage people to add something or at least to *look to add something* based on taking note of what worked the first few times through.

Figuring what motivates you to think of doing an OER is important.

Let's extend that chaos notion a bit further. Recursion works in one's career as well, whether that's the courses one teachers or the papers and studies one engages in. Why would that not work at the OER-creation level as well? Having worked through nine or so of these OERs, one also begins to see moves that were made recurring between books, or morphing and transforming.

**"Are OERs for Specialized Courses or the Required Courses?"**
**"Yes!"**

At community colleges, where research is not the focus, faculty tend to be siloed into repeat courses. "Of course," we'd say to our more specialized peers at larger institutions, "but we have four to six of those preps and teach 19 credit hours. How many do you teach?" OERs on specialized courses are wonderful; the scalability lets these be shared with the small number of others interested in the field.

OERs for specialized courses are tougher to begin because of the lack of obvious course shells with which to start. Still, you likely have more lectures, notes, worksheets, and specific assignments because of this, so it can be a positive. Generic, often-taught courses like ENG 101 can have a lot of (low quality) models, making sifting through precursors more difficult. Having created both (I mean, Survey of non-Western Literature is about as specialized as a community college tends to offer!), I like both types of courses. They present different challenges. One might create an OER for Literature and Composition with the idea that someone else might adopt it. At the least, I would try to make my OER reflect my values as an educator and my desire not to make something too typical and basic.

**Tips for Creating OER Content Follow**

**The Goldilocks Principle** obtains in most textbook writing. Of data: Not too much, not too few. Determine the "just right" amount of detail. This all sounds good, right? Now correct for users and round down a bit. If the paragraph is 150 words, either cut a third or break the paragraph into two or three chunks. Like online learners, any textbook users nowadays can handle less complexity. Detail gives them complexity like hot dogs may give one indigestion.

**Exemplify**. Start more sentences with concrete words. Avoid strings of generalization. As I tell my ENG 101 students, you're asking a lot of a reader's patience to expect them to read through strings of generalizations. Even if well-founded, the writing quickly resembles a newspaper editorial. Break up vagueness just as one breaks up strings of complex sentences.

**Frontload** key content. When editing, scan the paragraph for sentence subjects. If they always occur at the end, the paragraphs are going to be as unbalanced as the sentences they

contain. I have edited documents with persistent complex sentences and this premise that every sentence has to defer meaning till last. If the clauses "keep waiting for next," this sort of cliffhanger effect eventually tires readers. Change it up. Meaning comes first.

However, when doing all this changing up of one's approach, don't overdo it. That is, I see a lot of students who, once they learn the use of the semicolon, somehow get mystical and believe "Everything connects." Yes, English writer E.M. Forster does state in the fine novel *Howard's End* "Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer" (195). Very well. Still, every third sentence does not call for the semicolon. Too many dashes or exclamations or questions is cloying. Use but do not abuse these moves.


## Managing Tone is Tricky


**Tone**: About that last could be added "You know?" We too often make formulaic our writing, turning complex processes into steps, rules of thumb. Filtering everything through *you* or *I* can work to remind readers of those old rules about not using either word in arguments. Tone is inferred from diction, sentence length, sentence variety. Slight changes in wording impact tone heavily. Since the topics we teach are close to us, we can happen into these tonal traps.

Of course, OER texts are not subjected to the layers of profit-driven scrutiny and editing that large publishing houses feature. Shopping for available OER titles in one's field, it quickly becomes obvious that the crafted nature of the books shows. That could just leave them feeling domestic, homey, with their joints showing like some Arts and Crafts movement chair. Showing how they were made will appear from the table of contents title to the front/end matter to the ways different chapters get introduced. For example, if I open a Pearson education text, it will focus on new features and how it is "smarter than the average bear," to soil Yogi the Bear a bit with that corporate speak. An OER text would likely either be chatty in its personal approach ("As an educator with twenty-four years of experience, I hope to share my insights. . .") **or** the voice would be scrubbed almost entirely from the text. There are few in-betweens.

Whichever tone you choose to adopt and however you figure the needs, reading levels, prior experience, and skill set of your learners, the easy—and easily-forgotten—heuristic for checking tone is simple: Read it aloud. You'll hear those areas where the theory needs examples, or where the examples need to be related to some larger point which they supposedly illustrate. As educators, we often fail to gauge tone, yet the check on ourselves is fairly easy.

Another tip might be to add preview/review elements to OER books you adopted but didn't change or add onto much. This way, you can be sure that the chapters are paced correctly. Many longer chapters could easily be renumbered and repackaged with added preview/review sections or even analysis and application questions. Add scenarios in text boxes to the text. If you keep track of what you added, this is a fine way to make the text yours.

## Redress Other Texts' Glosses, Omissions, and Manifest Blandness

Playing devil's advocate is another excellent tactic. I happen to use a Pearson text for Principles of Education, so many of my posts are about what gets elided (skipped over), edited out, or sanitized. It's a "meta" sort of move, just as Ferris Bueller's breaking of the fourth wall in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, but allows for satire, sarcasm, and the play of tone. If what the book states isn't true-to-life or if the everyday reality gets scrubbed, then address such shortfalls. You can encourage students to look for what's missing. (I typically ask them to bring in another class' text—say, sociology—early in a term and, in composition class, we look at just two things to derive its pros and cons: Chapter titles and chapter order. A similar move later in the course is to have students look up a keyword like *stressor* and then, from scholarly source article titles only, to figure out what the article's authors did and found. It's nearly always possible.)

All this is fine for keeping from being bored oneself, too. However, the question arises: Can you play devil's advocate with your approach to the course? Can your inherent tendencies that include the lacunae, or blind spots, in the approach come to the fore? Taking one of the few serviceable aspects of the last few decades of literary criticism, approach even yourself as if you *always already* have those tendencies. Not that they should be backfilled with some approach opposed to who you are and how you teach, but at the least you should be aware of the lenses through which you see. Those are the ones through which you teach. (Look up any of the

numerous Michael Shermer science titles to see the extent to which we are absolutely awful gauges of ourselves.)

Chaos, remember? Small changes in initial conditions create huge effects. Control the initial output and you can guide where it leads. Well, to a small extent. Chaos is also about the instability at small scales, but let's not wreck the nice inertia we have going, shall we?

## Say What the Course or OER Is Not

Back in the early aughts, I created a lower level world literature survey. The thought process behind its name reflects this idea about chaotic conditions. Instead of it being World Literature, I chose to use Survey of non-Western Literature. The focus anyway was upon what isn't Western. Yes, the title still has the problem of assuming Western is somehow *It*, as if there's some negation or otherness to what is not in its canon. This can become a fruitful part of the course, from picking the readings to unlearning in the first units to exploring the implications of the title. We do all this in the course through an inherently flawed name. Rather than pushing the pencil point of analysis too far and breaking it, the idea is to know the challenges and pitfalls and to let in students on those. Taken too far, though, it can be annoying and precious. Again: Use reading aloud as a heuristic.

Stating what the OER text *isn't* can get one thinking about the humble nature of these constructions. Though some colleges offer small stipends for creating OERs, the professors with whom I interact all would do these for free. They create these experiences for their students, to make them more affordable, personalized, and useful. Also, they carry an awareness of their courses' scope and can communicate that to students.

Skills-based courses like composition and research tend to be lifelong learning opportunities anyway. If I advertise my course from the outset as "only" taking on critical reading, writing, research and rhetoric, that perspective reflects that we blend a lot but cannot be expected to master any one of those areas. It might take years for students to have much of this material click for them. That doesn't detract from its importance, even though we live in a menu-driven, fast response culture.

## Use One's Favorites

Since we are treating ourselves as authors, we should think of the corpus of work to which we have access. Instead of the knee-jerk readings books that just compile links or pre-1923 materials, consider looking to the favorite exercises you already have. Or use notes in new ways. In creating some of the OER literature texts, I ended up using an old Freud/Jung sheet from back in 1998 when I taught tenth grade at a New York high school. It turns out that my mythology unit then was exceptional, so I used it for myth terms, as well as an off-the-cuff "Fifteen Tips for Reading Myth" mini-lecture written during study hall duty one time when my students were struggling with the omens being discussed in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. With little revision, it was ready. Of course, that's the benefit of the Humanities approach. The texts may be older and it may not matter that it wasn't from the last eighteen months.

My tendency to teach older material such as *The Meno* and *Crito* naturally makes OER compilation and framing easier. Of course, a nursing text that used Empedocles's humor theory would be rather outdated! So the discipline does matter with regard to currency.

We are writers, though. Just generating ideas can be a challenge we all face, so here are a few tips with OER chapters in mind:

- Craft sarcastic titles which work to hook readers' interest.
- Play upon scholarly works' love of subtitles and use them either to impart a joke or to explain the title in ways that let adult learners know what they are about to experience.
- Use *your* pop culture store of references in making titles. If you don't, you risk being clunky with contemporary references which are immediately dated in our cultural ephemera. There's a great point on this in the Bob-Dylan-based movie *I'm Not There* (2007) where Dylan, in this scene played by a little black boy, is spouting off about unions and other typical 30s folk themes. He's at dinner and the mother notes to him (I'm paraphrasing) "Live the time you're in." Use those references and own their relevance to the material; it's likely that you can enliven the course and the OER in this way while also letting yourself have a sense of humor about it.
- Books like *Dune* feature epigraphs that are made up and which speak about the Dune Universe. Why not create little chapter blurbs or, in a throwback move to those nineteenth century novels, have a recurring "In which occurs _____" preview. These

can be more fun to create than the standard "By the end of this chapter, you will be able to _____." By the end of that sentence, students—well, they won't because they won't be reading it!

- Lacking faked quotes, find real ones. (Just realize that, in not citing those, you'll directly encourage that sort of dashed-off quoting in student writing. . . )

- Not only will you have to chunk up paragraphs, but also subheadings are often either missing or necessary for organization. These can get tricky to format in most of the OER software, which tends to use defaults when it notices headings. The same goes for titles: Be careful or you'll end up with 72-point font titles with huge swaths of white space beneath them. Remember that subheadings receive a slightly larger font sizing than the underlying texts when showing that visual hierarchy.

## Case Studies

Case studies, anyone? Tapping students' writing after getting the proper permissions might be a way to show what you're telling in the chapters. Another is to get peer case studies or to use ones of your creation. Whatever you can do to illustrate the abstract tends to be well-received. Proviso: Show the extent to which it's typical or representative. It might be my inner rhetor I'm channeling here, but we have enough misleading vividness fallacy examples in everyday political life. Situate examples.

If you work in a field or with texts that are so standard you never tried creating worksheets, activities, or your own notes and lectures, my suggestion is that you start. I'm taking an avowedly Humanities-based approach, where it's more common to have faculty choosing learning materials as well as course pacing, lessons, and how the larger course objectives get met. To the extent that you're able, treat OER not as a text-adoption decision but rather as a way to infuse your pedagogy into a new form and product.

If only for your sanity, teaching such courses semester after semester with materials someone else decided, then at least try OERs. As I mentioned earlier, there is no reason you cannot start with part of the course coming more from you, with plans to add more later.

An instructive example might come from Michelangelo and Italian art: the marble block from which *David* was made was a leftover from a failed decorative project. He released that potential form from what he saw. If nothing else, you're now temporarily cursed with seeing that David in the mind's eye.

> These examples made it possible for a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also alleged a fact which travelers have confirmed: *In the vast Library there are no two identical books.* From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite): Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogues of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.
>
> --Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel"

Scavenge whatever library resources you can in making a text yours. Since styles change (and, as the classic break-up line runs, "People change"), you may not want to include too much ephemeral information. Links work well. As our SUNY OER Conference presenters noted, linking to copyrighted material (with the exception of songs) is acceptable. While you might include hyperlinks, realize that print readers cannot click on wood fibers and reliably expect something electronic to occur!  Links also change, so remind students to use their existing search skills to find the texts. Otherwise, you risk a litany of excuses from them.

## Address Information Literacy

Whether the library is at your institution or not, most include usable information literacy tutorials. Jefferson's is at: https://sunyjefferson.libguides.com/informationliteracytutorial

Even in subject area courses within majors, it's advisable to include these tutorials or links to Online Writing Labs (OWLs). My favorite is *Excelsior OWL*, available at: https://owl.excelsior.edu/. Review its chunking and the ways the site uses video content. The site also contains invitations for feedback on errors or changes on nearly every page. So while students might be sent there for APA or MLA help or to take the burden off you for basic writing review, OER developers eye it with different needs.

Enlisting a librarian for help is not only required in many colleges, but also it is a good idea. Just like student writers, our task is to take a seemingly overwhelming process, breaking it into workable chunks.

Jefferson Community College's "OER Adventure," https://sunyjefferson.libguides.com/oer, site offers one such overview of the process. Its Explore, Adopt, Adapt, Create model is typical of the SUNY model and can be found on sites at sister institutions.

Another excellent resource is Melissa Faldin & Karen Lauritsen's *Authoring Open Textbooks*, available at a site such as Rebus Community: https://press.rebus.community/authoropen/. It presents a more thorough sort of guide than I offer here and has some useful heuristics for deciding which content makes it into one's OER.

## OERs should be More Sentimental

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done

> The silver apples of the moon,
>
> The golden apples of the sun. (17-24)

We should be more like Yeats, only we are not. Thus the need for Yeats. We might share a poem like "The Song of Wandering Aengus" and savor its sentiment in front of students, hoping somehow that, by osmosis, they'll get into it. Imagine trying to do that with an entire book. Even if it is just a collection of out-of-copyright readings, it has come to matter to its editor. Rejection hurts.

One should think that students would value these books, freely given, tailored to them, readily available. That would be an assumption, folks.

In my experience, there's the ironic unintended consequence of OER creation—one you would do well to anticipate: Students actually value the books less if they are free. This is a bizarre sort of point, but it has been borne out in the fifteen-plus sections in which I have used OERs. (I have taught using them in Research and Composition, Technical Writing, Survey of non-Western Literature, American Literature 1, Mythology, and Native American Literature, and have used the handbook in Research Strategies and Principles of Education.) Repeatedly, it becomes the case that students not only fail to thank us—gasp! Heaven forfend—but also largely disregard their worth. It's not particular the format. They just do not seem to mind not minding where these came from. The whole idea of having "skin in the game" apparently matters. When the students have had a nominal fee for the print copies they tend to respond the best, both in their attitude toward the materials and in learning.

## We are the New Pre-Raphaelites

We can tend only to value the old, ironically, with "this new OER stuff." That's due to copyright, but before casting aside the idea of using only old material, I would make the case for it. (Not that I do *only* that: I mainly link to *The Atlantic* and longer articles, but reading longer articles is also a sort of throwback pedagogical move in this age of chopped up data.) For my composition courses, I will gravitate toward *The Atlantic* because, though popular, it seems scholarly to students unused to reading more than a few pages of text at a time. I can access

*Project Gutenberg* for old science fiction or folktales. This idea of things only being good before a certain point (thus the Pre-Raphaelite title) is an interesting one. In the Humanities, we may worship past classics, and our backward-looking nature can seem ridiculous. When scrabbling together texts for courses, though, it allows me to look at models from a time when people actually still regarded them as ideals. We can be too Presentist in our thinking. Whatever course one teaches, this idea of current versus previous obtains somehow.

## Editing in a Vacuum?

I have not had much success working the SUNY OER system to alter my texts. There was enough hassling through the librarians just to get an ISBN for the book. Changing the book would, theoretically, change the ISBN and generate another iteration of an involved process. This can create an ironic disincentive for change.

Working alongside students for a few years with these texts, one would presume that their pros and cons quickly become apparent. While I have seen shortfalls in lecture content and have added to those through my Learning Management System, Blackboard, and in lectures, there have not been factual errors or changes in style through which I have had to endure. I can imagine that the next MLA update will call for a lot of page updates in my text. Fencing off style-specific questions into only one or two course areas can be a smart move, since then you would not have to review the entire text—or several—page by page to see what needs changing. Sure, I can hit CNTRL + F and find *MLA*, but it would make the most sense to have only a few similar areas with this style information.

For all the work which goes into creating and organizing OERs, we see a lot less emphasis on changing them. Past the stage of "Adapt" and OERs tend just to be "out there." In the rush toward their creation and the implementation of college policies to handle OERs, editing gets lost. One good reason for this is that our attention gets taken up instead by the following:

- Bookstore plans for per-credit blanket textbook costs or other industry responses to our responses to the publishing industry. (And down the rabbit hole we go there. . . !)
- Bookstore ordering issues

- Bookstore stocking issues

- SUNY/SUNY Press initial promises to publish books, deadlines for publication, and the ever-shifting reality of who will provide print copies of materials.

- The SUNY premise that there will be a central list of OERs so that other interested faculty can latch onto existing work(s).

- Including texts in one's LMS

- Pricing the text: If we do this to ensure lower costs and then those vary wildly from what students can purchase the books on Amazon for, this tends to perturb faculty

The simple fact that we order next semester's texts mid-semester can make it less likely that substantive changes would appear in an OER. Of course, if we are just using EPUB or PDF versions, this matter is simpler.

## The Object: Print vs. Electronic OERs

Should you go electronic-only, though? In my experience, it works fine for online learners, although some non-traditional students will rail against not having a print text and will want one. (Go ahead!  My *Research and Composition* text lists for $11.75 on Amazon at https://www.amazon.com/Research-Composition-Joshua-Dickinson/dp/1981213554, whereas it can be around $30-35 if purchased through a campus bookstore.)  If the course is online, it should work well. The students can access these books on mobile devices. They even might purchase a Kindle for around $35-$45 and add the best-looking version, the EPUB, for cheaper than a print text would cost.

However, if I am teaching a hybrid or fully on-campus course, I require print OER texts. This is because I do not anymore relish the feeling of teaching in the front of a room where A) nobody is watching, and B) everybody is staring at screens—often of smartphones. While I'll never avoid A, I can avoid B by having students purchase the book. I also require annotation and check frequently for it as a gauge of student interaction with course concepts, so having the print copier is easier—for me. Yes, I realize that it's possible to annotate on a device just as readily. It's just that my students never actually do that!  I have taught technical writing courses where

nobody had a print text. It is a disconcerting experience. Control freaks though we may be, consider that we are already benefiting students mightily by our courses' text costs and how well we tailor the content to student needs.

Print, EPUB, PDF, and through Blackboard. That last access point is worth noting. OER texts can be poured into most Learning Management System software to provide a more click-happy experience. I say *click-happy* both because of the number of added clicks Blackboard brings into my life and for the fact that only one part/section at a time will show up in Blackboard. I suppose on way around this would be to have chapters with only one section within them. Then they could be searched and navigated easily. If you want to have students read the text only in the LMS, then do not opt for a dozen pages per chapter (*pages* being Lumen's term for what Blackboard might call Mini-Lectures). Users of Blackboard also know that it tends to conk out and require a new login with too much clicking of the back button. . .

In classrooms, I'll open the text in a PDF reader such as Adobe, having already saved it to that work station's desktop. Within a LMS, the web-based reader software will tend to open it in a new tab. I find this clunky.

People's reactions to PDF vs. print are difficult to alter and illogical.  Expect this.

It's surprising to admit this, but I actually don't own print copies of any of the seven texts or *College Writing Handbook*. I suppose that's a good-enough ego test of the fact that I didn't do these to line the shelves of my office with publications!  I mention this mostly to show that OERs are an abstract concept as much as concrete items. If I focused too much on any one format—even print—it would seem to come at the cost of focusing on others. *Delivery* seems more important. And some of those texts have the coolest of covers. . . !  SUNY is wonderful in this regard, with its OER specialists seeking out faculty to ask if they want to have their books looked over for formatting improvements. Here is an example of the SUNY OER *ENG 203: American Lit 1* cover they worked up for me:
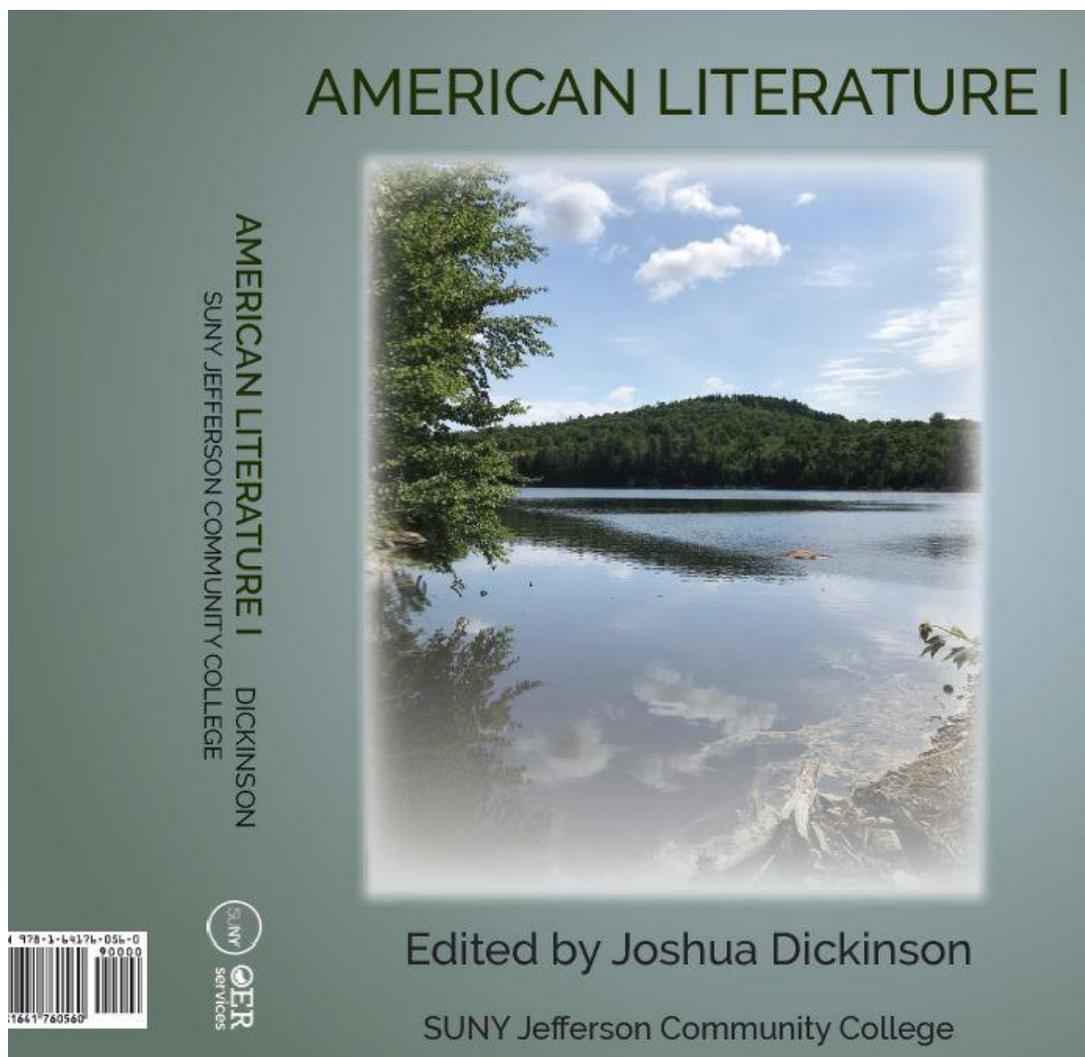
Figure 3  ENG 203 Cover

For this book's cover photo, I used an image from a trail run up Cat Mountain (in St. Lawrence County, New York, near Wanakena). Good as it looks, the image couldn't be printed by my Bookstore, unfortunately, when they did duplicating, so it's not all seamless and fun!

What is amazing for me is how these projects reinvigorate a love for the process of organizing learning. I can teach technical writing all I wish (hmmmmm), but actually involving myself in it expands my confidence for teaching its confidence. Since I have created these OERs, I have gotten involved in more writing and editing ventures, even editing an upcoming instructional technology title, *Digital Media for Learning: Theories, Processes, and Solutions*.

**"It is Time"**

People mostly ask about the time commitment involved in these OERs. I know that each OER I created—even while doing some simultaneously—differed markedly from the others. From the end-of-August 2017 SUNY Potsdam conference till when I had drafts of five completed was only a ten-week stretch. I had drafts done by late October of 2017 with courses rolling out those books in January 2017. Much of the polishing work as well as ISBN creation occurred through librarian Carleen Huxley, while Dean Dyer inputted the Blackboard course material. As anyone working in a LMS knows, there is a lot of hidden clicking and hidden work involved, iceberg-style. But these efforts—even with the slowdowns collaboration requires—don't have to be incredibly time-consuming. Saying that, I was all-consumed by this for a while, using the Pressbooks software Lumen employs to form of these books. Still, it's tough to put an hour count on these things. (It could just be me being weird: I once posted about whether I would rather run a marathon or complete a 50,000-word novel like we do at Jefferson every year for the National Novel Writing Month competition and I chose the former!) But it's sort of a nonissue, this question of exact hours spent.

Tallying up the dollar amount saved by students for this effort is also tricky. Since I began using OERs in the Spring 2018 semester, I have taught approximately 27 courses and the books have saved an average of $80 per student. When I plug in the number of students, this leads to an total savings of $43,200.

--Ironically enough, according to the *Syncrhomysticism Wiki* and many world myths, 43,200 is a mythologically significant number! See more at: https://synchromystic.fandom.com/wiki/432

Such a dollar figure puts that question of worth and time spent into a better perspective, I'd argue. Given this, it's not surprising that publishers are trying to out-OER OERs! Look up some of their efforts at going beyond the customization they trundled out in the early 2000s. They're coopting OER or at least attempting to.

## Savings Matter to Students

As a high school junior in 1987, I had to do my school supply shopping at the Jefferson Community College Bookstore. My mother, a human services major, had just gotten her student loan refund check. I remember being given $60 for all my school clothes and supplies. This was 1988.

My first date with my eventual wife took place in 1996 as I drove her from Hamilton, NY where I was studying at Colgate University, to my alma mater, Syracuse University. The purpose? To borrow books from the University Library. We went through about an hour's (pre-9/11) hassle just getting her a day pass so that I could take out the books needed for my MAT literature courses.

These anecdotes both reflect the centrality of books and bookstores to the student experience. Shopping as I had to—or not being able even to shop—left some memories about texts and costs. These things continue to matter to me.

## "You Will Respect My Authoritah!"

*South Park's* Eric Cartman famously uttered those lines in the heading. *Authority* contains *author*. But it also sounds like *awful* (if done in the properly misspoken accent)! Therefore, think about the tone with which you're conveying information. Come across as being didactic and the content coverage will be forgettable or memorable for the wrong reasons.

For the first few years (circa 2002) of the advent of widespread online learning, I cut material from my composition and literature courses. Cut much of the group work (how could I tell who was going to be active when so many choose inactivity). Cut small group presentations, placing ownership instead on individual learners. Cut the number of discussion boards. Increase only their length.

That same sort of cutting is recurring now, only it's not from the difficulties of getting used to teaching online or adopting a new Learning Management System. Instead, it is the nature of the learners themselves which is confounding many professors. Forget group work: these students hate to do even peer replies. Ask them to do a peer edit on an essay and it becomes a

major issue. "How can I put any comments on *their paper*? I mean, who am I to say?" At the same time that they may tend toward intense egotism, a lot of learners play this false humility. It is a byproduct of living in the age of grandiosity, perhaps.

My point is that it changes how we organize and emphasize textbook information. It may change how you assess your OER's success rates as well as the manner in which you edit the book after trying it for a few semesters.

## Busy Work? Try This!

I created five OER texts only to have to go and take out every section's title. It turns out that the Lumen platform automatically titled my sections, so all those titles I had added in trying to use good tech comm skills had to be erased. This was not fun!

## Locating OER Models and Sources for Readings

Sources for OERs might at first seem confounding. There are plenty of repositories containing completed OER texts by subject area. I'll share several of these, but really it's a matter of shopping the sites and finding what looks useful.

Thankfully, we don't have the whole popularity issue to bother us with OERs like we might with books. Still, popular sites such as Amazon, it's easy to search likely-seeming text topics. (I'm not sure that they have a filter for educational materials, but they might.) If you locate something for a cost on Amazon, it's possible to do a sort of reverse engineering job on some phrasing from the book (if it lets you click onto its cover to find keywords—a helpful little trick of using the books as concordances as well). Here are other tips for the Explore portion:

- If your initial interest in OERs is from around 2014 or 2015, it's likely that you gave up because of a lack of resources. When I revisited the situation in fall 2017, it was amazing how well curated the lists were. Two years on, I can only foresee this listing getting more expansive. Fields that lacked texts—say, physics or business communication—now have plenty of models.

- With expansion can come a lowering of quality. (Ask the post-9/11 Border Patrol about that. . . ) It's all the more important to adopt skillful search techniques.

- Use LardBucket, a resource dump of over 100 texts. It's legal to use these books so long as you give the proper Creative Commons attribution.

- Type *PDF* into a Google search and it'll filter by PDFs, which can narrow the search. Now that OERs have expanded, the commercial sector is homing in and somehow gets higher hits than one might expect. However, if you type *Free PDF* in, expect worse hits (in quality, not number).

- SUNY or other states' systems may not have an interest in the upkeep of lists of texts. They may delegate this to individual schools or to the OER programs.

- When exploring, consider yourself as an explorer! That is, you may not be looking for an entire text that's a great fit. I used a chapter from a Native American history text by a SUNY Potsdam professor in my ENG 245: Survey of Native American Lit course. I didn't find the entire book useful, but her chapter on Native religions gels perfectly with my first unit on Native creation myths.

- So, if you aren't looking for entire texts, you are freed to look for chapters. Anyone accustomed to a library search knows that, often, the best texts are the ones shelved to the left and right of the book you have a call number for. Those may be better choices (certainly they're more numerous).

- Consider looking outside one's subject area for a chapter. Even if it turns out not to fit your needs, you'll pick up on layout or the rhetorical moves of the OER creator. This is like students managing peer editing: far from being selfless helping of others, their work is inherently self-interested as they come to realize aspects of their own project that weren't illuminated before.

- Repositories like the *Project Gutenberg* site are mainstays of my text creation options. I used them heavily with courses such as Survey of non-Wester Lit and, more obviously, American Lit 1. (There are ways to get the Gutenberg images, but those can also cause huge hassles. Realizing this up front will save you from pasting in some 200-page document and then having all the pictures fail to come through. Ask a librarian to help if you get stuck adding or importing images.)

- Here's a strange-seeming point: However helpful Google searches are, their tendency to throw a search bar in below a website's name can backfire. If you do a Gutenberg search within their search bar, it will fail to turn up the very titles which will show immediately if you are doing the search from *within* the *Project Gutenberg* main page. So be careful: Thinking you're cutting out a step can alter what you get to see. The same applies to Creative Commons image searches.

## Images Matter

While file size and load times may be concerns, a judicious use of images enlivens most any text. I recently created the easiest type of OER (well, second easiest, the easiest being one you adopt without adapting): the reader. It's for a Children's Literature course and I'm using it because my standby text, *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature*, went out of print in 2018. Instead of students spending $115 for increasingly scarce used copies, they can get this for $25. Using mostly Gutenberg sources, I can cover the history of children's literature adequately. Though the text is 98% primary sources, it does include a few pages of links.

The images will look amazing and copied perfectly into Word, from which I made a PDF. Instead of going through the usual Lumen process, this was a fast-and-easy sort of approach to a course situation. (Look on sites like Half.com, eBay or Amazon for older editions or out-of-print materials and you'll see someone fishing with a $328 cost for a book. I would rather fish for the texts, many of which are the same ones Norton features.)

My Survey of Native American Literature books? I have used both anthologies of note which exist. Each is over $125 now, and both are from circa 2000. It's ridiculous to expect students to pay that much, even if I used the book for every class session.
Here are some tips for including images:

- The software may resize the image.
- Blackboard may not load the image properly.

- Color images have larger file sizes. Obviously, right? Well, not exactly. Some of the file sizes from these sources are *much larger*. Check those by saving separately and right-clicking on the file properties.

- Add images using a Creative Commons image search. To do this, though, you'd have to Google "Creative Commons Image search." It's not easy to find where on Creative Commons the images can be searched. Once you do, though, click the checkbox allowing adaptation (not commercial purposes) for the use. You can use attribution tags with the images; they are actually provided, so that captioning is easy.

- In my *College Writing Handbook*, I used an image of Lego Nazgul, the Black Riders of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, to illustrate the nine rhetorical modes. Coupling the image with an old mini-lecture was easy and the images more than double the impact of the coverage of what might otherwise be a basic feature of a handbook. This also works to illustrate the power of Creative Commons image databases: They would actually have a Lego Nazgul image!

- Did I state that captioning is easy? It isn't. That's an issue due to Word being default-happy-difficult. It's going to default things to italicized Calibri font. Word's Review tab is where you insert captions. (Also, never insert citations using Word when writing sections of an OER . . . that's like crossing the streams in *Ghostbusters*. It would be. . . "Very bad.")  If you want to get to the error-filled center of that Tootsie Roll Tootsie Pop, go ahead. You have been warned!

- There are online meme creators as well as image searches. In keeping with my Tolkien theme above, I use one of Boromir that riffs off the Peter Jackson films with Boromir's note that "One does not just attack a cave troll."  The fillable meme allows you to tell the world just what "One does not. . ."  This particular meme is available at:

- Use old artwork or smartphone images. You'll use the same attribution, most likely, for all of your own stuff if you end up making OER content. (In Lumen, the platform I used for nearly all OER work, the software tracked my previous entries, so filling in the fields was always either a matter of pasting or typing the first word.)  It's amazing how quickly one can put together images with text, carefully using CC-BySA tags or whichever others one chooses.

- Check the sizing of images so that they don't blur with enlargement or feature text that's too small to read.

- Likely you know of the Uncanny Valley, that near-human zone that weirds out humans. Images can suffer from this, too, if they blur, get overused to dazzle readers, or are too large/small. If we're learning about adapting, then the following three adaptation should be applied from technical communication: Manage contrast, white space, and the relation of images to the text. There must be some connection between the image and the text beyond mere captioning.

- Looking for a contemporary graph, statistic, or image? Check your library databases. The image databases (*ImageQuest*) and statistics databases (*Statista*) can be excellent choices. They also tend to contain some of the more accurate works cited/reference models of any of the databases.

- Importing images such as video can be tricky. I often just opt for putting in the link. If you use a video, remember what that textual area will look like if there are print users. You don't want some nontraditional student ruining a good fountain pen pushing it on the Play button!

- I have struggled to embed video using the instructions online or within software. It can be done, but it can also be tricky to manage. Save your document before attempting any of that!

- It should be apparent, but it's worth noting *not* to do a Google mage search, copy, paste, and then move on. This could create liabilities that make your institution unwilling to publish the text. The old student mantra of "Cite as you write; if in doubt about whether you need to cite, then cite" obtains.

## Attaching Files in Texts

Most of the software allows for attaching files. It can be a strange process, though, since it's then difficult to tell how the file looks or even if it appears to students. Any faculty user of a LMS like Blackboard can attest to this "from the student's view" blind spot. Often, we don't see what the students see, even if we check off the edit mode and see a limited Blackboard. I would

recommend only attaching files for yourself or other possible users—or attaching tough-to-format items like grading rubrics. It's good to hide documents in the Lumen shell; the students will not see them but they can provide good ancillary materials for your use or for the possible peer users of your text. We know that the accompanying materials often influence our adoption decisions. Why would it be any different for would-be OER users. It's one of those unusual features to consider, but still worth thinking about. Remember, if you're using a software like Lumen, you can hide documents or even not share them with the public document. So you can have the super-secret stuff which only you can see. Of course, by "only you," it's never only you: several librarians, techs, and other administrators will have access to your document.

I should note that we often pick course shells into which we pour our OERs. For the literature courses, I would often pick an Introduction to Literature Lumen shell. It was a vanilla, generic intro course. These can contain surprises, though, such as the American Lit shell that had a neat late section on the history of the graphic novel, as well as some weird H.P. Lovecraft story. I kept those in there but didn't end up teaching them. The shell's creators' extra options for late in the course became mine. Of course, I gutted most of their course material, keeping only some genre-based introductions and adding my own chapters on the writing process and responding to literature. Still, I could have just kept their pace, ideas, and materials and called it good enough. And maybe that would work for you.

Just getting the OER thing started and using the book along with some other non-OER materials is also a choice. Most contracts surrounding OERs—at least in SUNY—just require three years of OER use at 50%+ OER. That's not excessive (but, then again, neither is the OER stipend). With a plan for adding your content—and hiding theirs—judiciously in place, that could work for some people.

Adding more self-created content changes the dynamic. Depending on one's academic subject, the level, experience, and comfort level sharing materials, the text will come out differently.

Starting by creating a reader has this risk: that's all one will do. I would worry that the compiling of all these outside texts lessens one's voice. I mean, how thoroughly do these get contextualized, commented on, and questioned in the work before/after the primary information?

Below is a snip of the typical Lumen Manage view where editors can decide on visibility and export availability for each piece in a part (mini-lecture in a chapter, in other words).
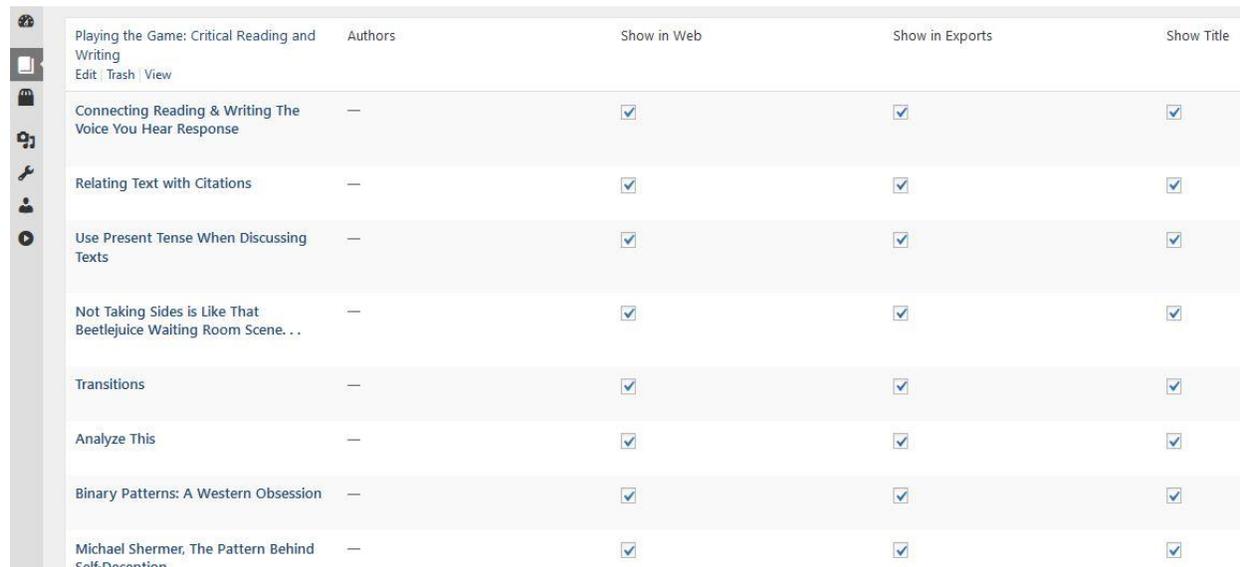


| | Authors | Show in Web | Show in Exports | Show Title |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Playing the Game: Critical Reading and Writing<br>Edit \| Trash \| View | | | | |
| Connecting Reading & Writing The Voice You Hear Response | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |
| Relating Text with Citations | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |
| Use Present Tense When Discussing Texts | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |
| Not Taking Sides is Like That Beetlejuice Waiting Room Scene. . . | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |
| Transitions | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |
| Analyze This | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |
| Binary Patterns: A Western Obsession | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |
| Michael Shermer, The Pattern Behind Self-Deception | — | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ |

Figure 4  ENG 101 Text Chapter in Lumen Organize View

The focus is on what gets shown. Since we can control this, it's useful to hide information while still keeping it in the text. (In fact, during our first go-around with OER text creation in 2017, we were encouraged to hide but retain the course shell chapters.) Another software feature worth noting is that every chapter has a number, so moving them around can be accomplished through clicking into chapter headings and renumbering.

The software also logs any changes, time stamping those and keeping track of how many times a given item has been updated. Especially when versions of things can matter, collaborating with librarians or technical specialists is much easier with this time stamping feature.

## Apply Some Aristotle to the Tendency to be Grandiose

In *The Laws of Human Nature*, Robert Greene includes a chapter entitled "Know Your Limits." It focuses on the pros and cons of grandiosity. Like I noted already, there's a lot of hidden work in OERs and we don't often find our finished products precious as objects. Instead, they are subject to change, fallible objects just as we are fallible subjects.

I remember a professor of mine at Syracuse University in the early 1990s, author Michael Martone, noting that published authors pull down their books from bookstore shelves and start looking for errors. OER creators start looking for new titles or for things to change in their works. Instead of, as Martone stated, knowing authors who actually change their names to be next to a famous writer alphabetically and thus increase sight and sales, OER creators frequently use the names of their courses for their textbook titles. Like writing, it's a process full of misconceptions about how it actually turns out to be. Anyway, in his chapter Green ends with some tips about harnessing the power of grandiosity. He notes five approaches which work (315-16):

1. Come to terms with your grandiose needs.
2. Concentrate the energy.
3. Maintain a dialogue with reality.
4. Seek out calibrated challenges.
5. Let loose your grandiose energy.

Of these, the second and fourth are most interesting:

> You want to get into the habit of focusing deeply and completely on a single project or problem. You want the goal to be relatively simple to reach, and within a time frame of months and not years. You will want to break this down into mini steps and goals along the way. Your objective here is to enter a state of flow, in which your mind becomes increasingly absorbed in the work, to the point at which ideas come to you at odd hours. The feeling of flow should be pleasurable and addicting. . . . If you do not enter this state of flow, you are inevitably multitasking and stopping the focus. Work on overcoming this. (316)

Though Greene here might be channeling Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his book *Flow*, the point remains valid. OERs are build a piece at a time. Getting a series of items into the shell may not be fun in itself, but moving them into positions and then moving chapters into positions is. It's real-time authoring. As I mentioned, the software's fields are simple and fill with the same sorts of items. You remain the author for all your content, so clicking J for me shows my name and I can tab onward. Pieces go together in seconds, not hours. Plus, I do this to get to the point where I can play around moving things. It's a sort of sandbox game such as we see in video gaming.

Green also has a point about meeting the learning curves:

> Your goal with practical grandiosity is to continually look for challenges just above your skill level. If the projects you attempt are below or at your skill level, you will become easily bored and less focused. If they are too ambitious, you will feel crushed by your failure. However, if they are calibrated to be more challenging than the last project, but to a moderate degree, you will find yourself excited and energized. You must be up to this challenge so your focus levels will rise as well. If you fail, you will not feel overwhelmed and you will learn even more. If you succeed, your confidence increases, but it is tied to your work and to having met the challenge. Your sense of accomplishment will satisfy your need for greatness. (317-18)

These sorts of reminders can be inspiring. (Greene has these positives after a long chapter on the negatives of grandiosity. I think everyone in contemporary America can attest to being a bit tired of the grandiose. Here, though, it's encountered in the self and employed intentionally.) Green is also noting a sort of reverse of the Peter Principle, that theory that we get promoted to the level of our incompetence.

While we might not be the greatest judges of our abilities, the OER universe is a low stakes arena for testing out how accurately we can gauge our work rates. The flow can be enticing and annoying at the same time. One can blast through the prosaic tabs in the software as quickly as possible, with one's mind already on the next ideas, which get jotted down on paper feverishly. It's as close to novel writing as I have seen an activity get.

I like this notion of harnessing our personal and teaching tendencies without essentializing them.

## Like NaNoWriMo, OER is a Proving Ground

I mention this because I participate in the yearly National Novel Writing Month, without which I never would have taken on OERs. Each November, thousands of writers take on this contest, attempting a 50,000-word novel. While 2019 has seen me struggle with fiction, it spun out this OER document you are reading!  It will not be a novel, but when I began it, I thought it was novel. ("Do your research" we tell students; while there are some OER guides, they can be more of the how to sort than this, which I have tried to drum up exigency for by calling a Humanities approach!)  The first NaNoWriMo novel I did was fantasy in 2011. I finished well before the end of the month and attest that I learned as much about writing from that weeks-long crucible of typing than I did from college composition courses. I learned as much from it as I had from teaching some years, too.

As with OERs, there's a bit of showiness to it. It's a contest. It's timed. You can finish early. Names get printed on certificates. There is a neat graphing of one's daily word count: How high above the 1666 words per day can one get? (I once finished in eight days.)  So there's that idea of versatility and self-challenge, as well as what Greene was getting at with avoiding staleness. That old notion that "I didn't know what I knew till I wrote about it" has validity. Since I earned neither a doctorate nor a writing contract, these are my stand-ins. They both involve learning by doing.

## Graphing One's Progress & Applying Heuristics

Would charts and progress bars work for creating OERs? In some cases, they might allow people to see that the process is simple, if not direct. With all the contingencies—self-made, partially from the self, or mostly from the source, or used untouched from the source being just one—show that we could just send would-be creators scurrying away. There are a lot of if/then statements involved.

Sure, these nice progress charts might offer excellent incentives. Like in the kids' game *Candyland*, we could track our progress. At the same time, there's something excruciating about the process. It's just slow enough to feel like things are getting a bit stretched. Two allusions

come to mind: one from science fiction, the other from fantasy. In Frank Herbert's 1965 classic *Dune*, the protagonist is learning shield fighting. This being science fiction, the shields have these power packs and basically work by repelling the fast blade but letting in the slow blade. It's the slow attack that works. In Tolkien's world, Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit who bore the evil of the One Ring, which wore upon him, notes this: "I feel thin, sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread" (Tolkien 34).  That feeling of having gone too long between haircuts might be a similar notion. Herbert and Tolkien were fascinated by the wearing down of the characters through the actions from which emerged their character.

With dozens of parts in eight to ten chapters, one can easily get that sense of being overwhelmed, flooded with the clicks and choices. At the same time, it's a bit of what Freud called that oceanic feeling. Do you dissolve into the whole or is it dissolving into you? Often when I'm in the middle of this work, the shield example in particular comes to mind and I think about how it both tires me and spurs me on, if only so that I could say I'm done.

So those are some thoughts on framing the process realistically. Like reading one Shakespeare play, reading another is much easier. While it might not intuitively make sense to do bunches of these, in actuality it's not doubling or trebling the work or the difficulty. Items get shared. In the copying, new ideas occur. Even if it's only to reorder items or to retitle lectures to fit another subject's take on the field (like I did with Survey of non-Western Literature), you're engaging flexibly with the material. Is this not what we expect of our students?

Would basic heuristics just work better? Though they derive from tech writing, this is not to say they must be boring-sounding. For instance, take Emily Dickinson's heuristic for reading authentic poetry. Her 1870 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson notes: *"If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?"*  A bit intense are we, Emily? While we cannot hope to match that elemental heuristic, surely there are ways to set up checks so that we know what we know, how it's being conveyed through the text, and how we know students know it. We tend just to focus on that last bit, as that's what most education administrators and business managers (often the same) would like.

## Create Shorthands

With the flow of activity, writers need to develop shorthands (no, not the digit length that slows my typing right now). That is, create symbols for use in your process so that editing, spelling, or veracity concerns do not impact the workflow. I use right-clicked yellow highlighter as a way to note spelling or grammar errors, green for awkward passages needing rewording, and light blue for sections where I have to add text or more fully rework it. It's sort of like a green light, yellow light, red light system—which would actually make more sense than mine—but those end up being the first row of Word highlighter colors and the most common errors get the most common highlighting color. I'll bold additions needing work, listing items worth writing about which are not worth my immediate attention.

Thinking sideways like this, one can capture creativity and harness it. And it is important to do this rather than to overlook it: Four or five days into my NaNoWriMo 2019 effort, waking at four in the morning, I had three great ideas. I put the second and third most important ones at the front of my mind, walked into my office, jotted them down *promptly forgetting the most important one.* (My thinking was "I'll never forget *this* idea. . . . better get down the others first. Then I forgot it.)  By being active with one's writing and process, we're doing what we tell students: "Annotate. Develop your own signature way for meaning-making, recording running interactions with the text."  Just refining one's process is arguably a justification for creating OERs, albeit a self-centered one.

## Establish Exigency

Students are taught to establish exigency, the urgency of an essay, early and explicitly. Most of the time, OERs fail at this, bogging instead in lists of changes, thanks, and table of contents. We can argue the need being filled by the work, not just stating *that* it was made. Even in the middle of a text, readers could be brought back periodically to the text's themes or its overriding argument. (We tend to state arguable opinions such as "How this book leans toward this and avoids or devalues that" as if they were facts. This process should occasion some self-searching and rethinking of what we assume.

At the least, you should uncover and use these assumptions. Instead, we usually supply vague, definition- and classification-filled introductions if we have intros at all. We also rarely sum up the arc of a text's chapters, probably since that would compete with the end-of-semester tiredness, projects, and course reviews. (Let's face it: those course surveys could probably be better completed by students if they were offered a version of what learning the book purports to have opened them.)  Students could respond to books rather than merely react if they understood the basis for its choices.

## Include a Section on How to Use This Book

Technical writing manuals often include sections on how to use them. One model I employ when launching our capstone manual project is to show the the the *FEMA Guide to Retrofitting*. This PDF has excellent visual cues and an immediate coverage of how to use it. It's useful for seeing how images can be used with proper contrast, white space, and relation to the underlying text. Looking at what works can let us brainstorm novel ways to provide cues for usage.

You might consider adopting a trick from all those "complete idiot's guide" titles. They often contain text boxes with additional content. Sometimes the content is definitions, warnings, or even "you don't need to know this" extra/trivial information. The last type can be useful in making the subject more real. Even supplying scenarios or questions in separate texts boxes would work.

Remember that electronic book users vary in skill. They might not know about the CNTRL + F find command or how powerful its use can be.

## Simulate with the OER

Using an OER can be as simple as simulating it. Simulations can range from uploading an OER text to your LMS and trying out a chapter on students to diving in and using a book as a supplement for a whole semester. As the cliché goes, they are a captive audience. Publishers do this frequently; with some focus, you can put in a reading or section or unit (probably mid-semester) and see whether the organization, tone, and feel of the text are right for your students.

Students could be prompted both to create a heuristic for trying out the text and for evaluating it. They often write reviews instead of analyses anyway, so we may as well take advantage of their tendencies!

Or have them reorder the contents, suggest missing chapter content, retitle chapters, or challenge the guiding suppositions in chapters. (This is easier in literature analysis than in most subject areas, since the whole trend is for critics to matter more than the material about which they write, but it's not too great a leap, I think, to get them thinking of the refashioning based on their tastes. So long as they can back up their points, they become worth arguing over.

## Drive Test the Book

If we check over others' OERs, we may not test ours quite to the same extent. Being close to material is typically going to create lacunae, blind spots, as well as biases. How do we know what we know? (Lest we get into some Donald Rumsfeldian recovery of his garbled thoughts as insightful and start enjoying the man's ideas, we can at least credit him with his "Known unknowns and unknown unknowns" distinction.)  What we don't know can hurt us, of course, but these are basic questions of scope. We could go back to Aristotle and take rhetoric to be about the discovery of arguments. That can work. But how do we test our books more intelligently?

Currently, this is a hassle. Testing often occurs at the lesson level where the material either connects or doesn't with students. It's so ad hoc, so scattershot an approach. At the same time, OERs and professors and subjects (and students and instituations, etc.) differ so much that

it's tough to advocate for a particular way of trying out the texts. Instead, we could argue just *that* they should be reflected upon and changes—as needed—instituted.

One would think that there would be dozens of versions of a given text floating about. They remain strangely inert, utterly unlike the documents we revise, edit, proof repeatedly. For such active, dynamic processes to have gone into their creation, one would suspect that they would remain that way once actually used. Again, it's an ironic feature of OERs that we don't do much changing within a text, but that the change would be easy *between* texts. It's as if we are different selves when we find these books and first make them.

After that, these fledgling little OER texts are *precocial*. They work immediately and are left to themselves. (So we're *altricial* in creating them and then switch and become precocial. Paradoxical as this is, this has been my experience.)

The ad for the famous denture cream goes "Fixodent and forget it."  Could the same be said for these OERs? If so, then this has implications. Like the NaNoWriMo contest novels I crank out and then intend to go back and edit, the OERs are sort of dead-ended, if not truly orphaned. They can become like those students whose names we commit to memory but whom, afterwards, we can't recall easily. This could just be me not using the books properly or only using them electronically.

Readers may remember where on the page the memory of marking up the text occurs; some studies show that there are spatial differences related to reading on devices versus on pages. Perhaps there should be OER editing months just like NaNoWriMo runs editing months. A little insight from this: whereas the writing contest asks for lowering standards and cranking out words per day or month, the editing month commitment is for a writer's *time*. Think about that. There's no metric for changing words once they appear on the page. There is the notion that spending time with editing will work to improve the "work," the object, maybe even letting the work *work*!  Strange.

**Faculty Guild: Another Venue for OER Conversations & Conversions**

As one of 30 SUNY Faculty Guild Fellows in the Fall 2019 semester, I have been working in a circle sharing weekly reflections, reading exemplar reflections, responding to peers, and gauging the teaching tendencies I have. The Faculty Guild model has led to further rethinking and overhauls of lessons, pacing, expectations, and how I can best teach students. Our Ash Circle has faculty from all over SUNY. We teach in the Humanities and have varying degrees of experience and comfort with technology. To say that this has been an amazing experience would be an understatement. Also, our circle is OER-based, so every one of the faculty has worked with an OER. While one might think that this would form the basis of our connections, it has not. We mention the OERs and may create teaching goals that are OER-related, but these haven't consumed us or become fixations. Not all OERs are that personalized.

The Faculty Guild is a wonderfully grounding experience, allowing me to catalogue the pros and cons of what I do and to question the research underlying my suppositions. It attunes me to best practices. The experience does reflect that creating OERs can offer a lonely route, from the lack of empathy from bookstore managers to the perception among peers that somehow we think our OERs are our precious little children (there is that Tolkien again—"'gollum!")  Put simply: we know less about how these texts impact students that we'd like. Given the sunk costs of creating and publishing these works, one would think that we might know how to validate or improve them. Yet there are lots of unintended consequences instead.

**Including Students in OER Creation Processes**

David Wiley's 2013 blog post "What is Open Pedagogy?" (linked on the [JCC OER page](#)) comes from a blog site entitled *iterating toward openness: pragmatism before zeal*. Probably you are hearing plenty of that zeal from me, but hopefully there is sufficient pragmatism as well. The blog covers some quantifiable benefits from changing to OER while also questioning the fact that some faculty who switch to OER never actually change their pedagogical approach. This is a key point to underscore: There are inherent changes in attitude that we have in order to make

OERs, but those have to be communicated to students. Wiley advocates for bringing in students to this process.

If the principles behind change are simple and the technical savvy is not that difficult, why not bring in students? Letting them alter assignments or create OER material is a powerful idea. Wiley notes "What if we changed these 'disposable assignments' into activities which actually added value to the world? Then students and faculty might feel different about the time and effort they invested in them. I have seen time and again that they *do* feel different about the efforts they make under these circumstances." His challenge may seem daunting if you are just considering OERs, but this is a chaos-based decision: You change those initial conditions and larger impacts occur.

Breaking out of the corporate textbook market is one little rebellion. Riley is noting that it can lead to more meaningful—and thus more shareable—lessons and assignments. Including students on projects where they share and publish materials is now a workable option. Recall that eighth grade self you had (probably minus the plastic pants, mullet, jelly bracelets, etc.): You likely took learning farther when it interested you than at almost any other time in your life. That self is still in there and would probably find many of the high-stakes assignments near your courses' ends stultifying.

Bringing in students like this is daunting and, from lab classes of all sorts, it's initially difficult to gauge how long things take to complete, but it is worth doing. Showing a sample end product initially might spark student interest. There are entire books devoted to OER learning, not just this sort of how-to guide, so I'd defer to those. (See Suggested Resources at the end of the document.) Here are just a few more tips in case your OER experience coincides with significant alterations to the structure of your pedagogy:

- Beware the ceding of so much authority that students forget that, ultimately, "This is not a democracy. I know that's probably something that got stated in tenth grade and again when you were handling a student complaint in college." Here I'd twist that a bit and add ". . . and neither is it a fascist dictatorship."

- Think on this: contemporary models of leadership may be found wanting in empathy, focus on a sort of command-economy of top-down decision making, glorify the "big man" ruler, and be exclusionary in a host of other ways. Put simply: Students do not have

many *realistic* good models of leadership and instead see a dumbed-down version from our coarsened political discourse. They may grandstand.

- If you open up the class to creating OER projects have a group project they delegate roles on, it could also be that the people who speak first and step forward without consideration will try and take over the projects. This can cause resentment.

- Often, nontraditional students will defer to glib younger students in the process of setting up roles. Bring their wisdom into the process. (In fact, think of how you could use nontraditional students as test readers. Often, they are not the first adopters of new technology and they'll certainly locate unforeseen effects of your delivery method and content.)

- Anyone who has let in students to the creation of course policies can attest that students tend to create harsher penalties than we might. They also grade more harshly. It's important to set up clear expectations through syllabus and assignment wording. Check for understanding. Students also tend to hear with inversion in mind: Stating one thing, often they take it that you meant the one-hundred-eighty-degree opposite!  It's one of the ironies of teaching.

- As we learn more about the nature of confirmation bias, we know that new learning often merely serves to reinforce incorrect beliefs. As the faculty handling content *and* OER *and* new in-class methods for its delivery, guess what?: You'll be the contact point for a lot of that negativity. I'm reminded of Twain's "Political Economy" from *Sketches New and Old*, where there's the story of the aggressive lightning rod salesman who keeps interrupting a thinker trying to hold forth on the subject of political theory. Finally, the thinker gets exasperated at the sales pitch and blurts out:

    Put up a hundred and fifty! Put some on the kitchen! Put a dozen on the barn! Put a couple on the cow! Put one on the cook!—scatter them all over the persecuted place till it looks like a zinc-plated, spiral-twisted, silver-mounted cane-brake! Move! Use up all the material you can get your hands on, and when you run out of lightning-rods put up ramrods, cam-rods, stair-rods, piston-rods—anything that will pander to your dismal appetite for artificial scenery, and bring respite to my raging brain and healing to my lacerated soul!"

Isn't that bit instructive? Replace lightning rods with OERs or new methods and you can see the satire of faddishness being put into place (as well as cutting satire toward the supposedly inviolable job of the thinker). Doing something new just to do something new tends to be impractical.

So students might be enticed by the prospect of publishing something. At my level, however, community college students seem bemused by the idea of improving their cv by being able to point to something published. It would take a lot better buy-in by subject-area faculty to create projects that they would find useful.

Lacking a useful student heuristic to gauge existing student reception of the techniques and changes and texts thrown at them, it would be difficult for me to speak more about such core changes to major course assignments. Wiley sounds promising, and maybe this is a case of my own confirmation bias against practical assignments!  It could spark the next changes: Not new texts, but rather opening up *textuality* to include student creative efforts. Likely those would take a lot of modeling and time, but it could be that they are worth the effort (he said, just as Generation Z steps in with their notable bias against group work). Greene notes to take on those challenges just beyond one's skill (and comfort) levels (317). Would this be a step too far, like Tolkien's Gandalf the Gray notes in *The Fellowship of the Ring* of the demon Balrog monster: "Fly! This is a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way. Fly!"? Perhaps this way only seems narrow. Like those Arthurian knights tasked with crossing the raging stream by striding across a sword's edge, it could just be a metaphorical difficulty.

To what extent do we trust ourselves? I think we covered that already. Add to this, though: To what extent do we trust to our students? I think we trust their abilities and potentialities more than we trust them as people.

We have our own confirmation biases, having been pummeled by stubborn plagiarists, lead into misleading vividness to remember cases where something outrageous was spoken, or even made to fear some mentally unstable students. As in a long relationship, we may have our edges worn off, becoming molded in ways we know but cannot control. Surely the OERs are more than some psychological method of imparting control!

Wiley's idea isn't new to me, though the supporting facts on his blog are. He's doing what OER creators do: looking toward the next great challenge. Retooling the mode so that it can continue to evolve. I could see his suggestion to include student work and even student OERs as

end products being doable if explained properly. Students might

- Create group white papers or clusters of those on topics in their career fields (tech writing being required by those fields and otherwise energetically avoided by students)

- Show the writing process through curating a modeling of the prewriting, drafting, editing and revision processes. Actual student models are largely lacking in writing instruction. (Try looking up an actual student sentence outline or paper not on some free cheat or paid paper sites!)

- Show initial approaches. For instance, if students were taking a history course and the OER had a reader with, say, the text of Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*, they could freewrite on his table of virtues. (It's a ridiculous table with its ending "Humility: Imitate Jesus and Socrates" that, as Twain notes, ruined childhood for American boys because their parents took it to be realistic!)  Rather than only focusing on polished, edited finished products, my writing professor tendency would instead be to want to see the initial ideas as well. There is room in a student-made OER for those fumblings and halting starts. That's where the students write out 90% junk but happen upon those bits of amber, those new ideas they didn't realize they knew. Counterintuitively, this would be a value of OERs for me. It could show students what I can only tell them: The process matters.

- Blend contraries: It would be possible to have pro and con sides clashing in new ways. If a group created a pro paper and, on the same topic, another group did the con (and a third did similarities between them or else argued why both sides are misguided to an extent), the result could be a nuanced project that gets at what current student papers don't: Nuance, contingency, complexity. A fourth editing group could be tasked with documenting the process and creating reflection activities for the other three.

- Craft semester-long themes or scenarios. Students in American Literature 1 could be given the job of reinvigorating a canonical text with the addition of quality diverse voices blotted out by history. Or they could research and argue to replace existing works by included authors with other, better works by the same author.

- Adopt an obvious approach: Tech writing students, based on their major, work together on an issue of current import in their field. They write a recommendation report, manual, or white paper on this.

It's exciting thinking about how reading turns into writing as well. These thoughts are mostly about how writing turns into better writing, but if we import the reading-into-writing notion, radically it alters even the list above.

Always, the onus is "on us" ("Hey, is that a pun?") to justify our approach. If students devalue free texts, does their publishing effort increase the buy-in? That's worth thinking about. At the least, it gives us something of inherent value: Access to their selves. If you're like me, current students become an increasingly slippery group to engage with. They can be tough to draw into conversations and often give unreliable cues. Taught online, their tones can be tough to read and it has become increasingly accepted for them to opt out of participating. Public and private blur in their minds. Translation: I'm forty-eight and own much of this disconnect. Even so. . .

So probably we have to adopt corporate publishers' moves in this one respect: Advertise the change. List benefits of a new mode of learning and tout those in advertising the course. (Many courses can even be flagged for different features in a college's registration system. Some schools list "affordable texts courses" where the book cost is lower than a set dollar amount. Others list honors courses or theme-based courses, such as an intro to lit course which is going to focus on Irish texts.)  Flyers can advertise the OER emphasis as well. Or we put in bulleted lists of changes (as SUNY actually calls for in the front matter of OER books to document "Who does what?") The point is that there are features of published texts and their selling that we can coopt.

Communicating which niche a course fits can be difficult. I once did an online, gamified, flipped OER class. I had to explain each aspect. For tech writing, I teach a hybrid flipped OER course. These creations can start to look like Dr. Frankenstein's dreams or older video games which simulated evolution:
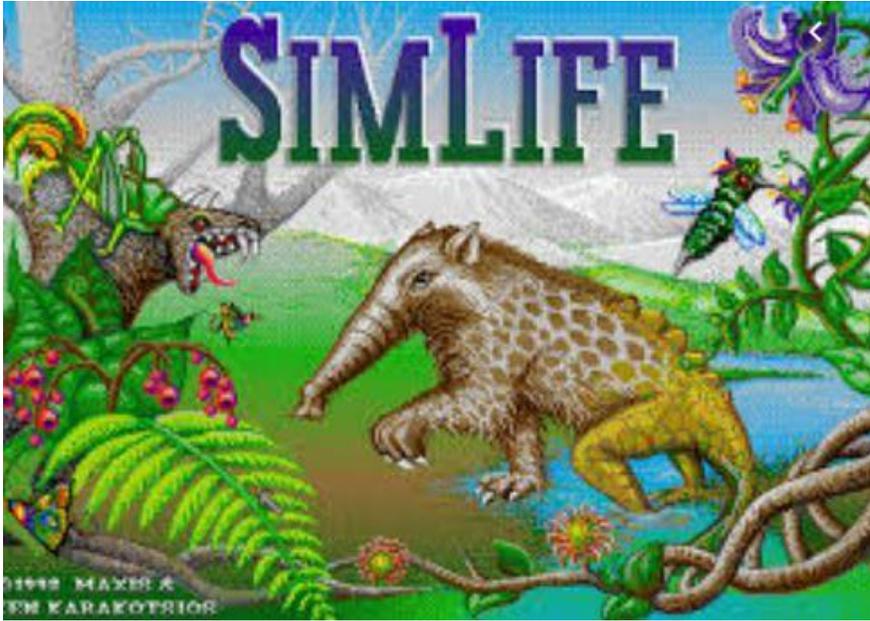
Figure 5 *SimLife* Creature (Charles)

The catch is that these are not the *Impossible Creatures* of another video game's title, melded jaguars and sharks. They aren't merely blended versions of this and that. Like my earlier example of the pushmi-pullyu, we get paradigmatic change from this creation. It's not merely that our ideas get sparked and inspiration somehow "occurs" (as if it's passive). Yes, there are byproducts of the OER process that "will out" in day-to-day lesson planning and delivery. But I hope I have shown, if anything, that the process is fruitfully disruptive. It should be challenging to our assumptions.

Unlearning is difficult and there's a degree of unlearning involved here. I hope that these tips, coming as they do from a Humanities perspective, can help. You are welcome to contact me at jdickinson@sunyjefferson.edu with any questions. My office number is (315) 786-2221.

Thanks!

## Suggested Resources

Carnegie Mellon Open Learning Initiative site: https://oli.cmu.edu/courses/

Education Resources from the Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/education/

Harvard Open Learning Initiative: https://www.extension.harvard.edu/open-learning-initiative

Jefferson Community College's "OER Repositories":
https://sunyjefferson.libguides.com/oer/repositories

Jefferson Community College "OER Textbooks":
https://sunyjefferson.libguides.com/JCCOERtextbooks

Lardbucket's 2012 Textbook Archive (usable with the proper CC attribution):
https://2012books.lardbucket.org/

*OER Commons*: https://www.oercommons.org/hubs/open-textbooks

The University of Minnesota's *Open Textbook Library*: https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/

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