OERs provide flexible, cost effective option for students and faculty

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By Shaelin Sweet
HAYS, Kan. – Student needs are the primary motivation for Jason Harper's pedagogy, and using open educational resources in his classroom was an easy decision for him to make.

"I started incorporating open educational supplements into my courses from my first year of teaching," says Harper, instructor of English at Fort Hays State University. "My initial thoughts on them were very positive – especially the flexibility that they provide and their affordability to students."

Open educational resources are any online teaching resource that is freely accessible and openly licensed. Teachers can edit and add to materials to better fit them to specific courses or lesson plans.

Harper frequently modifies open educational resources to fit the specific needs of his students, depending on course content, student culture and classification.

"Not all students have the same experiences that a specific traditional resource seemed to target. When I taught in Paraguay and China, I wasn't teaching a demographic that had the same cultural contexts," says Harper.

OERs allow Harper to create custom materials suited to the specific needs of the demographics he is teaching.

"I'm able to 'Frankenstein' materials together and make my own monster," he says.

Collaboration and adaptability are not the only benefits of open educational resources. They are also free of cost, which makes them attractive to students and professors. With traditional education resources, such as physical textbooks, students often spend large amounts of money only to use a few pages of the text.

"That's like asking students to buy a toolbox of 100 wrenches but only teaching them how to use 33," Harper says of the frustration that comes with utilizing only parts of a text. "There's a relief that comes with not wasting dollars on unused portions of a traditional textbook."

For professors considering open educational resources for their courses, Harper has just three words: read, research, and review.

"The biggest challenge of using OERs is finding one that fits, but the rewards are that I'm better fitting my student's needs," Harper says. "I work with the materials to make them fit, and I'm learning about myself along the way."

Harper also encourages faculty to remember that utilizing OERs is not an all or nothing decision. "Old habits die hard," he said. "Slow incorporation can lead to a total adaptation."

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