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OERs: Not Just Free Textbooks

When most people think of an Open Educational Resource (OER), they think of a free digital textbook. While textbooks are one form of OER, professors have other ways to provide students with free resources. Many schools have created programs to promote the use of OERs, but many of them only use textbooks. However, faculty can expand the definition for OERs. Dr. Dan Kulmala, professor of English at Fort Hays State University, explained his ideas of what constitutes OERs and how to make classes engaging for students.

FHSU developed programs in the past to promote OERs, such as the Red Balloon Project, but the project was discontinued. Forsyth Librarian Claire Nickerson, however, did not stop supporting the use of OERs. In fact, she currently advocates for their use. Nickerson organized a project to interview faculty that currently use OERs and use their perspectives to promote OERs' use.

Dr. Dan Kulmala is one of the faculty who support wider OER use in classrooms. He supports the idea of free content for the students, noting how OERs can offset the tuition costs to the students. In his classes, Kulmala uses various forms of OER such as articles, websites, interactive games, free textbooks, and custom lesson plans. To him, OERs are not just free textbooks, and he supports using teacher-created lesson plans to engage students. He believes in making more use of the resources teachers have at their disposal, such as websites, databases, and the new games or tools that have been developed to make classes more interactive.

Kulmala defines OERs as any resource that a teacher can use to engage the students in the lesson. For example, he set up a website for one of his graduate-level courses. The website kept track of the assignments, as well as provided the resources that would be relevant to the course. It was tailored to the course, with interactive games or links that were intended to engage the students in the course material. Kulmala mentioned that his students enjoyed when he "gamified the content, making the course more fun and engaging for them." Students responded well to use of OERs in Kulamla's course, which led to their implementation into his other courses. Kulmala believes that teacher-created content, including OERs, will engage the students more in their course. He also believes new content will promote OERs' positive qualities for universities to evaluate for expanded use.

The interactivity of the course work is a key advantage of OERs. The unique uses of teacher-created content are another reason to implement OERs. Expanding the use of OERs allows for the benefits that most supporters list for students, such as lower costs and flexible course work, and it adds the benefit of engaging students in classes. With so many advantages, OERs are likely to attract more students to FHSU. Kulmala is sold on using OERs to engage students, and while converting to OERs will not be an instantaneous transition, using the OER system will benefit both universities and students in the long run.