

Working Together: Publishers and Open Educational Resources

The mission of educational publishers is to provide continuously effective learning resources, tools and services for teachers and students using the best media available. Dynamic and progressive educational publishing delivers learning resources developed with the quality, coherence and scope that individual students need and their teachers expect. For thirty years, publishers have been exploring the effective use of technology in education. They continue to adapt to the rapidly evolving environment as technologies and devices enter into education from consumer and professional markets.

Publishers and Open Educational Resources both have value

Alongside professionally published products, there are now many freely available Open Education Resources (OERs)¹ offered for use in the classroom — many created by publishers.

OERs are a perennial of education. Teachers have always developed their own material to complement and enrich the commercially-published, curriculum-focused, structured learning material that makes up the backbone of resources used by most students and teachers.

With the availability of the Internet and digital production tools, the means now exist for easy distribution of these free, crowd-sourced learning objects. OERs have also proliferated due to backing from not-for-profit organizations or government-supported public funding. These initiatives are motivated by important policy objectives, such as equal access to education, affordable education even for the poorest, and the use of technology to improve the educational experience and cut costs. Some technology companies also promote the concept of standardizing curricula internationally and making available free content to encourage use of digital technologies in schools and redirect textbook budgets towards their own technology.

How do commercial publishers align with these policy objectives?

They recognize the beneficial role that OERs can play in a mixed media world and in some specific educational environments. Some create such content for marketing purposes or provide links to such content. They are skeptical, however, about the long-term capacity for OERs to maintain high-quality content. A reliance on OERs will endanger the quality of school level education until a number of challenges are addressed relating to sustainability, quality, and efficacy. There are also issues associated with public funding of OER development.

¹ The term OER was identified and defined at UNESCO in 2002 as 'teaching, learning or research materials that are in the public domain or released with an intellectual property licence that allows for free use, adaptation and distribution.'

OERs lack long-term strategies for sustainability, quality, and efficacy

Sustainability: OERs contribute useful content to the totality of available learning resources but often lack important features commonly associated with commercially-published resources that are needed to fully support students and teachers. Lacking the market incentive for renewal, OERs tend to become out of date quite quickly. Few OER programmes have built-in sustainability strategies or an on-going capacity to keep a wide range of material up to date.

Quality: The development of quality instructional materials requires great amounts of knowledge, experience, expertise, investment, and persistence to ensure they align with current academic standards and are effective in improving educational outcomes. Publisher-developed materials are carefully researched, designed, and reviewed using an established quality assurance process. Few recognizable quality-assurance procedures exist, however, in association with OERs.

Efficacy: Publishers routinely make available studies and analytics about the positive impact their products have in the classroom. No reliable analyses currently exist of the extent to which OERs improve learning outcomes. Few, if any, OERs have the assessment and data features often built into published products, nor the extensive network of teachers suggesting practical improvements.

Government funding of OER development can restrict choice

Effective course materials need to be driven by teacher demand, fuelled by national standards, adapted to specific curricula and aligned with assessment frameworks. They should be refined by selection and competition in an open market. Historically, government-funded projects have a poor track record for impact or sustainability, prompting concerns about the use of public funds for OERs. Ironically, government-funded OER programmes can restrict choice for teachers and learners because they undermine the ability of private sector providers to compete with different products. This leads to a drop in investment confidence and a steady withdrawal of providers from the market.

OERs can play a positive role in extreme circumstances, where the open market is unable to deliver a full set of appropriate learning resources. OERs then tend to arise naturally to complement and fill the gaps in commercial provision. Publishers contribute their skills, experience and expertise to OER projects, but ask that they be sustainably funded and fairly remunerated.

A balanced solution to resource provision is needed

With balanced solutions in mind, the IPA suggests that the following questions, which constantly concern publishers of professionally produced learning resources, need also to be applied to OER initiatives:

- What have we learned from the latest research, pilot schemes and educational initiatives around the world about the use of new technologies and types of content?
- Do we fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of the application of new technology for education?
- How do we attain and sustain good quality in learning content, short- and long-term ?
- Can OERs attain and sustain the same high-quality levels expected of professionally published resources?
- What role do we expect OERs to play alongside professionally published resources?
- What quality levels are required in order to fulfill this role?
- How do we assess the quality of OER resources?
- How can a healthy plurality of provision be sustained?

Publishers care deeply about serving teachers and their students by enabling successful learning experiences and improving educational outcomes. The IPA's Educational Publishers Forum (EPF) stands ready to engage in a dialogue around all these issues, indeed any issue related to the effective use of learning resources.