

Faculty Conversations About Teaching

In our faculty conversation, we will discuss strategies for “teaching without a textbook”, i.e., creating and adapting course materials from a wide variety of sources, to better address course learning outcomes. Mason faculty will share how they’ve created, adapted, and incorporated open educational resources (OERs) and non-traditional textbooks in their courses.

Teaching Without Textbooks: Collaborating and Developing OER for Your Courses

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Our Opening Idea or Definitions

Provide a 50-150 word opening statement with your understanding of the most interesting or important aspects of this topic (to you and your teaching).

The English 302 OER collection allows the diverse, far-flung, community of English 302 instructors, currently numbering 62 instructors teaching 136 sections, to participate in an ongoing process of curricular development and faculty collaboration. We are able to explore innovative ways of achieving our common course goals while giving each other credit for individual contributions.

What Have We Tried?

Summarize 3-4 approaches, emphases, scenarios, or assignments, each briefly explained (50-100 words each) so that participants can envision your past and/or current teaching experiences, whether successful or still evolving.

1. The composition program already has a well-established practice of using locally-created curricular materials, and of sharing them among instructors. We have tried a variety of ways of making syllabi, assignments, and other materials available to the English 302 instructor community, but each approach presented problems. We like the idea of creating an outward-facing, easily updated, and possibly searchable collection. Our current Bb platform offers some of these features, and we’re planning a transition to one that offers more.

2. We also needed a way to give each other credit for assignments which we borrowed, revised, or remixed, and to ensure the materials submitted for department review and promotion accurately reflect our own and others' contributions. Creative Commons licensing solves that problem.
3. Many of us have independently tried teaching without textbooks, or with limited commercial material, but we've never had a coordinated effort to locate or create curated materials that can stand in for popular composition textbooks. The English 302 collection allows us to share resources we've created or discovered.
4. The composition program has recently created learning communities, funded by SAS, focused on applying recent composition theory to curricular design and practice. An obvious next step for both this initiative and the OER project is integrating the products of these communities into the English 302 OER collection.

What Are We Exploring? What Are We Interested In?

Provide a list of 3-4 questions, activities, or options that you have been considering as you continue to adapt your teaching approaches.

1. We're planning a transition from our current Bb platform to the Mason journals platform, which will allow us to create a public-facing collection with better indexing/tagging and a generally more user-friendly interface. We need to think about our possible audiences (GMU and non-GMU) and how to present the materials in a way that will be useful to them. Issues include deciding how many files should be included with an individual item, and how to handle framing material (syllabi, calendars, major assignments) that provide context for smaller activities or assignments (but may also serve as the focus of items themselves).
2. We'll also be creating a peer review process for new items, and figuring out how to make that process sustainable in our institutional context (no guarantee of ongoing funding; participants whose contracts do not include service). There is real enthusiasm among English 302 faculty for continuing and expanding the OER collection, but also justified caution about whether and how we can make the collection sustainable, given the contingent/transient nature of the English 302 faculty, the other demands on our time, and the need for ongoing updates as course and university goals and student needs change.

3. We need to continue figuring out how to combine true OER (creative commons-licensed materials that we can reuse, revise, remix, redistribute, and retain) with Free But Not Open materials (to which we can link, and which we can reuse as long as they remain available, but which we cannot revise, remix, retain or redistribute) and copyrighted materials that are free to our students (e.g. articles from library databases and e-books) (see <https://opencontent.org/blog/archives/3221> for background). Future issues include use of affordable commercial textbooks and student work as examples.

What are some Best Practices, Tips, or Resources We Would Like to Share with Other Faculty?

If you could recommend a list of 3 core values, teaching tips, and/or resources (articles, books, and links) that faculty across disciplines could find helpful to Increase quality feedback for students, while also saving you time, what would your list include?

1. Saving students money is certainly one of our goals, but it's not necessarily the only or the most valuable outcome of creating an OER collection. Our experience suggests that creating and curating an OER collection fosters conversation and collaboration among instructors, including those who have limited opportunities to share experiences and ideas due to varying schedules and teaching platforms. Creative Commons licensing allows us to track the results of this conversation, and the ongoing process of creation and revision it fosters. While authors give up most control over their creations, they retain the credit for their work.
2. OER offer students several advantages over commercial textbooks: lower cost, and materials that are both more up to date and more closely adapted to the particular needs of GMU course curricula.
3. OER offer instructors the opportunity to make practical use of the pedagogical research that naturally occurs while teaching a class, and to share the results of that research with other instructors. This process especially benefits new instructors, who have access both to current, tested materials and to mentoring by the authors of those materials.



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