

Chapter 9

Open Educational Resources and Student Engagement: The Use of In-Class Exercises to Enhance OERs in Introductory Political Science Classes

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ABSTRACT

Innovative technologies are playing critical roles in higher education teaching, especially in promoting student engagement. In particular, open education resources (OERs) have increasingly shaped teaching practices in a variety of disciplines, including political science. The goal of this chapter is to explore the use of OER materials, combined with in-class activities, in introductory political science classes. The authors begin this chapter with an overview of OER materials, including an online textbook and a database of activities collected by the team. From there, the chapter presents several activities that address voter participation, freedom of speech, and tensions between states' rights and federal authority. The chapter concludes with a discussion of assessment results that measure student performance and attitudes towards OER resources and classroom activities.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) in social science teaching is experiencing constant growth. Due to their affordability and ease of access and use, OER materials should be effective tools in increasing student engagement. However, the question of whether OER materials enhance student engagement remains understudied. Drawing on two bodies of literature (the use of OER materials in higher education and active student learning approaches to political science and international relations classes), the main goal of this chapter is to contribute to the understudied area exploring the relationship between the use of OER materials and student engagement.

The emerging literature on the use of OER materials in higher education underscores the accessibility of OER materials to faculty and students, highlights the potential for faculty cooperation, and explores whether there are fundamental differences in learning in classes that use OER materials compared to those that use traditional textbooks. The literature on active student learning in political science and international relations classes underscores the value of supplemental online and in-class activities, especially for lower achieving students. Jozwiak (2015) highlights the importance of small, low stakes assignments that let students accumulate points and prepare for exams. Such activities help to increase student engagement. Since the relationship between student engagement and student success in the classroom is well documented; the use of low stakes assignments should increase student performance.

The authors of this chapter hypothesize that the use of OER materials without supplemental online and in class activities cannot significantly affect student learning, especially among lower achieving students. Consequently, the second goal of this chapter is to present several in-class activities using OER materials and assess the degree to which these activities enhanced student learning. In this chapter, we briefly introduce the main OER text that we have used (*OpenStax American Government*) and then present three activities that use this text and other OER materials. To evaluate the effectiveness of these activities, the team conducted a series of surveys of our students, comparing the performance of students in classes that used OER materials with that of students in classes that did not use such materials. Therefore, the third goal of this chapter is to introduce the results of our research on student attitudes regarding the activities and the use of OER materials in class. Drawing on the results of this research, we conclude that OER materials can be as effective as traditional textbooks (which is consistent with the findings of several studies on OER materials)—but only when supplemented with engaging supplemental online and in-class activities.

BACKGROUND

In higher education, the use of OER materials to teach introductory general education courses in the social sciences is growing. One may ask why instructors decide to use open educational resources, as opposed to relying on traditional textbooks. After all, a 2015 study shows that recent generations of college students (Generation Y) sometimes prefer traditional textbooks, even if the same resources are available as online textbooks (Millar & Schreier, 2015). This result could be attributed to the fact that Generation Y students did not actually grow up using online textbooks prior to their admission to higher academic institutions. However, the authors of the 2015 study acknowledge that attitudes may change as the “iGeneration” or “Generation Z” students, who have become used to such technology, enter higher education institutions.

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