

# The OER Curation Life Cycle: Closing the Loop for Our Learners

*Researcher: "Why don't you have school librarians curating your OER repository?"*

*Superintendent: "Because I don't know which side they're on. Some of them just care about books and I don't think most of them know anything about technology or STEM."*

About a year ago, at a meeting about the educational promise of open educational resources (OER), I overheard this exchange between an education researcher and the superintendent of a district that had adopted digital textbooks. Yes, I was eavesdropping, but I was struck by how this conversation reflected the very real disconnect between school leaders and school librarians in regard to OER curation to support the National Educational Technology Plan's goal to "enable engaging individual learners' personal interests by connecting to learning standards, providing options for adjusting the challenge level of learning tasks to avoid boredom or frustration, and bridging informal and formal learning in and outside of school" (Office of Educational Technology 2010, 17)



Similar conversations may be happening in your own district. How will you talk to your administrators and teachers about the clear relationship between school librarians and OER?

## Standards-Based Learning Environments and OER

With ever-changing access to devices and content, K-12 instructional planning has changed. Whereas teachers were once left to their own devices (literally and figuratively), and hopefully to their school librarians, to identify and integrate high quality learning resources, recent federal educational initiatives have transformed instructional materials selection from one based on "pull" (i.e., resources gained from colleagues, found through search engines, and located in specialized digital libraries) to one based on "push," in which resources are presented to teachers in the context of an instructional improvement or learning management system. This fundamental change in the way teachers construct their instruction has been driven by the common standards (e.g., Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards) and college and career readiness movements (Evans 2012). These shifts have encouraged many state and local education agencies to join efforts like #GoOpen, a federal initiative to increase the quantity of free, open, vetted resources upon which to base instruction and assessment while cutting the cost of commercial materials acquisition (U.S. Department of Education 2013).

A benefit of moving to OER-based instruction is the potential to close the loop between what is taught and what is learned. In this effort, K-12 schools are increasingly adopting systems that allow them to truly individualize and differentiate instruction by incorporating data from rapid, formative assessment feedback into instructional decisions that include use of a wide variety of content. Instruction can be fine-tuned with better knowledge and a ready supply of resources tailored to learners' needs. This is personalized learning,

and having an expert who curates the school community's OER repository with a supply of carefully chosen videos, images, simulations, assessments, and other learning resources is essential to this promise (Harber 2010).

### The OER Curation Conundrum



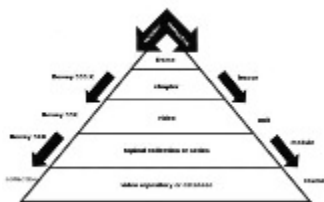
The word “curate” is everywhere. As with most trends, the term risks being overused to the point of losing meaning. From a school library perspective, curation is more than collection development and it's certainly more than link aggregation. So what does curation mean?

Think of curation in its customary context: the museum. In a museum, the curator discovers the works that best represent the museum's mission; organizes artifacts according to logical relationships; describes objects in intellectually accessible ways; promotes the collection by

providing compelling experiences with and through the items; engages with the community to understand new areas of curiosity and interest; and applies this knowledge to determining if new works are needed, if existing works would benefit from repurposing, and assessing which items can be removed from the collection and sent to other collections. Curation is not an event; it's a life cycle of knowledge.

### Discover, Organize, Describe

Faced with an urgent need to create an OER repository, many administrators are disaggregating their online courses to extract digital content and turning to trusted sources like the federal Learning Registry ([learningregistry.org](http://learningregistry.org)) to get more content. However, when this supply of vetted content is exhausted, many administrators resort to paying teachers to search Google for more OERs or, as the overheard school administrator put it, paying commercial vendors to “sell their blood back to them” by purchasing ready-made OER records from commercial textbook providers (Porcello & Hsi 2013, National Digital Science Library 2013). Due to the sheer number of these items, ongoing curation is crucial to ensure that evolving definitions of quality are reflected (Rosenbaum 2011).



### Key Concept: Granularity, or Matching Content to Context

A key to matching content to learner needs is an awareness of the size, or granularity, of the content needed. Introductory activities can make use of large grains of content such as entire websites or reference works. However, reinforcing a concept or providing additional practice requires a more tailored

piece of content, like a short video or specific set of practice problems. Even more focused thinking is aided by an even smaller item such as a single photo to critique or poem to share. Only when the content matches the extent of the need can educators differentiate instruction and learners personalize it to their needs.

For school librarians, content granularity is both a benefit and a challenge. As the only person in the school charged with curating the school's resource base, librarians already have tools and skills available to them to ensure that OER content is described at appropriate levels of granularity and linked to standards; there may even be circumstances in which the same content needs to be described at multiple levels. While there are many tools that will allow librarians to aggregate content and perhaps even to add descriptions or tags, the school library catalog and traditional cataloging skills are all librarians need to systematically curate collections of digital content at the levels necessary to make OERs findable by educators and learners.

The challenge of granularity is decontextualization. The key to curation is remaining aware of context —remembering the whole when looking at the parts of an object. While it may be obvious that a chapter decontextualized from a book can result in that chapter losing its meaning, less obvious is how a clip from a video can undermine its purpose or even violate use and editing restrictions. No school librarian relishes being the school's copyright police officer, but inappropriately editing and mixing OERs can result in a counterproductive experience.

### **Promote, Refine, Extend**

Even when school administrators are able to find enough content to fill their repositories, they still need to promote and refine them. The superintendent in the opening lines of this article noted that while 5% of his teachers, the “cream of the crop” (in his words), sought their own resources outside of the district's OER repository and that about 50% more teachers used the repository because it was easily available through their learning management system--his biggest concern was to reach the remaining teachers who relied on textbooks, worksheets, and materials of questionable origin. Teachers rely on resources that are trusted and effective. In many instances, these resources can be the ones used in the next classroom or in another school in the district. Teachers want to know what works in classes like theirs with students like theirs (Maull, Saldivar, & Sumner 2010). How will this desire for local validation translate to an OER environment?

The superintendent mentioned that he needed a plan to reconcile teacher feedback to the OER repository content. “What do I do if a resource has been in the repository for three years and only one person has used it? Does that mean it's a bad resource?” This dilemma is one faced by librarians every day: the collection's usefulness must be constantly reviewed and decisions guided by policies established to make resource decisions clear and consistent. Sometimes resources see increased use if they are described differently, featured prominently, or used for a different purpose. By organizing OERs in a system that generates usage data and allows users to provide ratings and feedback (e.g., the school library management system), librarians can capture use data and make decisions about improving, expanding, and repurposing OER.

We tend to think of OER as digital versions of traditional learning resources, complete learning units. However, the advantage of OER is openness—the endless possibilities to combine, edit, mix, and apply. OER have the potential to allow each learning community to share in a common foundation of resources and simultaneously tailor their use to individual learners' needs. For this strategy to be scalable and sustainable, these uses must be captured and recorded to inform all educators.

Curation is more than adding links to a page or bookmarking a website. Curation is an ongoing process of skillfully selecting resources that meet the school community's needs and creating an experience with those resources through organization, description, promotion, reflection, and engagement. School librarians who expertly engage in the entire OER curation life cycle can contribute to closing the loop between what is taught and what is learned—and that is the side we're all on!

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### **About the Author**

**Marcia A. Mardis**, EdD, is associate professor in the college of communication and information and assistant dean for Interdisciplinary Research and Education at Florida State University. She earned her master's in information science from the University of Michigan and her doctorate in education research and leadership from Eastern Michigan University. Mardis has authored and co-authored articles in journals including the *Journal of Education in Library and Information Science*, *School Library Research*, and *Library and Information Science Research*.

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