Alternative Texts: Creating, Maintaining, and Supporting an Open Access Textbook Project on Your Campus

Steven Irving and Phil Roché

Professor Roché's Account

In late January 2014 I was asked by my library administration to review some information pertaining to a new pilot project. I was forwarded a document entitled *Alternate Textbook Project Philosophy and Guidelines—Southern Utah University 2014–2015*[1] and invited to examine the thinking and recommendations presented, I provided input (regretfully, as I was later to learn, not enough), and was then further delegated the charge of ensuring that this undertaking be carried to fruition. Thus began a journey in to creating, maintaining, and supporting a campus Open Access Textbook (or Alternative Text or Alt-Text) Project.

Getting up to Speed

Of course, even though I had offered some suggestions, once placed in charge of the endeavor I realized I knew very little about alternate forms of textbooks and how they would work within the university environment. I did, however, have limited knowledge gained via a somewhat similar undertaking in 2008. At that time library administration tasked me with purchasing a select number of course textbooks to be placed on to the library's Reserve shelves and made available for limited checkout for students. This project proved very successful and, in fact, the library's textbook collection continues (and continues to grow) to this day. As a result, through this occurrence I gained some (albeit limited) experience with providing access to course materials through a non-standard manner and library administration had a positive experience with providing an alternative to the typical textbook purchasing model. Regardless, I realized I would have to quickly become better informed about open access and alternative text concepts and models.

Initial work in becoming familiarized with the task at-hand was to glean more information about how the project had come to realization at the point at which I inherited responsibility of it. In late 2013 library administration had convened an organizing committee of interested campus entities to discuss an open access/alternative text venture, as well as to create a funding mechanism so as to encourage interested faculty to participate; delegates from instructional support and experiential education concerns, the Education Department, and the Student Association were present and, together with library administration, investigated similar open access text ventures that had taken place at U.S.-based institutions of higher learning. Further, and perhaps more importantly, the group constructed a modest budget to support the project.

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Establishing and Organizing the Project

In establishing and maintaining an alternative text program, the organizing committee (as well as I) was fortunate to have access to information from two universities that had already conducted similar ventures: Temple University[2] and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst[3]. Each of these campuses had not only successfully generated and completed an alternative textbook project, they also made available documentation concerning key aspects of their work including information about goals, objectives, philosophies, guidelines, requirements, timelines, and more. It was with these ideal examples that the SUU contingent began the process of crafting a model for the campus. Among the ideas that were formed was the concept of a single project goal, one of supporting faculty "in their efforts to replace traditional commercial text books with alternatives," in addition to a set of key objectives for the plan which included lowering student costs, improving student learning, supporting faculty experimentation, and encouraging an institutional culture in support of open sharing of scholarship. Further, the committee established a statement of philosophy which considered the current state of transition in publishing, the high cost of textbooks, an opportunity for enhanced pedagogy, and the chance to make more relevant, customized, and timely materials available. The organizing committee also generated specific guidelines, eligibility criteria, selection criteria, and requirements that would be judged to select faculty applicants for the project. These elements outlined who was eligible to participate, what would qualify as an acceptable alternative text, mandatory training sessions (in the areas of pedagogy, copyright law, instructional technology, and library/information resources), and descriptions of how chosen faculty would eventually evaluate the undertaking. In addition, a LibGuide[4] and course management shell were established to serve as clearinghouses to distribute and collect information and resources. Lastly, the committee decided to award $1,000 to each faculty applicant selected to participate ($500 awarded at launch, $500 upon completion). In total, seven faculty members applied for acceptance and, while the establishing committee had hoped for more submissions, those received were all very high-quality. From among the seven applicants, six were selected to participate and these included faculty members from Computer Science, Education, Nursing, and the Library.

Challenges and Solutions

Besides the challenge of attempting to schedule four training sessions for six faculty member in the final weeks of the spring semester, the required trainings component was almost immediately questioned. Understandably, faculty who possessed expertise in one of the subject areas covered in the trainings (pedagogy, copyright law, instructional technology, and library/information resources) asked to be excused from that session. However, library administration felt strongly that all participating faculty should experience the full breadth of the training exercises as well as make use of the occasion to bond as a cohort in order to support one another in their Alt-Text work. Therefore, I discussed this issue at length with the library dean to try and arrive at an equitable solution. Eventually, it was decided that faculty who possessed expertise in the subject covered in a given mandatory training should assist with organizing and instructing that session. This turned out to be a pleasant surprise as it provided all of the participating members with access to augmented expert knowledge through each of the trainings.

A much more challenging situation arose during the training sessions when participating faculty began asking what was expected of them, specifically what they would need to submit to collect the $500 promised at the conclusion of the project (what came to be known as "deliverables"). The original organizing committee had, due to the late start of the project and the then-current availability of funding, hastened the process of soliciting applications from faculty prior to establishing clearly defined outcomes. There was some discussion of this crucial aspect of the venture, yet outcomes were not officially set at the time the call went out for applications and, not surprisingly, this

caused significant ambiguity and confusion. Upon being asked by participants for clarification, I immediately raised the issue with library administration for discussion. The philosophy and guidelines that the organizing committee had composed contained, in this regard, only the cryptic note "Still to be contemplated: What form will our assessment and questionnaire take?" However, since creation of this original documentation, no substantive consideration had been given to this fundamentally important aspect of the project. This issue was exacerbated due to the fact that the conclusion of the training sessions coincided with the end of spring semester, which meant most of the original committee members were no longer on campus or easily accessible. It was further complicated by the fact that library administration was undergoing a massive upheaval with both the dean and associate dean set to leave their positions as of June 30, 2014. Consequently, I was left to determine how to assess the results of the project when I had not been among the original designers of it and, having to do so after faculty had begun work on their Alt-Text efforts. Since that time, recommendations and standards have been established that mandate a project summary and bibliography, but there is lingering uneasiness because of the manner in which this key aspect was not addressed at the start of the endeavor.

What's Next?

The results thus far have been rough, but positive. A key reason is that the majority of faculty are implementing Alt-Text materials they designed in spring 2014 during this current semester. Thus, deliverables (materials, notes, citations, handouts, etc.), a summary, and evaluation of most alternative texts undertakings on this campus will not be submitted for a few months. However, I have taken time to speak with most of those involved with the project and, in general, they've responded positively to the experience. Anecdotal comments about the approach of implementing an alternative to the standard textbook include "they [students] have resonated with this approach," "they're [students] better prepared in class,"

and, in the case of one instructor who utilized this project to have her students identify pertinent course readings "it hasn't been an easy transition, but they now have more confidence and feel successful."

Upon discussing the success and challenges of the Alt-Text Project with the new library administration, in addition to considering that much of the work is still in progress, it's been decided that while it is unquestionably worth consideration to conduct another alternative text/open access project, the library (as well as the other entities who have supported the project) will wait until at least 2016 to do so. This will provide time for most of the partaking faculty to complete the implementation of their Alt-Text efforts, evaluate and summarize those endeavors, submit their materials and findings, and for the library and other members of the organizing committee to better prepare for the next round of alternative text/open access submissions.

Professor Irving's Account

Technology for Library Media Teachers, a required course for the Library Media program at Southern Utah University (SUU) and was a class in need of updated course readings. The class is only offered once a year and is a combined section of undergraduates and graduate students, with a majority of them in the Bachelors or Masters in Education program. Although the textbook does cover a variety of sources relevant to school librarians, some of the information in the text was becoming dated from its 2010 publication date, as many technology books do from the fast changing field of technology. The textbook for the class was only about $60 and not too cost prohibitive and completing this program would give my students current information from a variety of sources in the class and to also save some money for current and soon to be teachers. Previous class evaluations included comments from students that talked about some of the dated material from the four year old textbook. With this, I decided to submit an application to the Alt-Text program at SUU to update the class and give the students the opportunity to read current literature for the class from a variety of sources.

In the Program

After being accepted into the program, the applicants attended the four mandatory training sessions to complete the first part of the Alt-Text program. Open access and library resources was the first session, of which I was asked to assist the administrators in presenting to the group. We introduced not only the library services available to faculty to assist them in finding material for their class, but in addition, we covered Open Education Resources (OER) available online to all by faculty at universities and colleges, teachers from public schools, and others who want to share their sources and ideas in a copyright free area.

Three additional sessions followed that covered Instructional Design/Pedagogy, Copyright Law, and Instructional Technology. Faculty who were accepted into the program, and who are leaders in their respective areas at SUU, facilitated in all four of the sessions and sharing their expertise. After completing all four sessions, the participants were then asked to complete the Alt-Text program for their classes for the fall and/or spring semesters, and submit a short summary along with a bibliography of sources used in their class to complete the second part of the program with the above deliverables.

What to Change

The first choice was to decide if I wanted to make any changes in the course objectives and outcomes before finding new and updated readings for the course. I decided not to make changes as I thought the course objectives and outcomes were still relevant and only the readings needed to be updated. Additionally it would be best to make as few changes to the course right now and focus on the updated readings and make changes to the objectives and outcomes in the near future when they are necessary.

The research for new course readings started with library databases at SUU and Google Scholar, as I was most familiar with them and knew where to start. I did some find literature on my topics, both new and old, but it was not enough for the entire course sequence. I then started using OER's to find more current research on my topics. Not wanting to get overwhelmed in this new world of OER's I stayed mostly in two popular OER websites (Creative Commons[5] and OER Commons[6]) to do my research for this project and the class.

Both Creative Commons and OER Commons offer plenty of resources and many topics for students and faculty, but they are not perfect. There are overlaps and irregularities with subject headings, specifically between the humanities and social sciences, which can lead to mislabeling and confusion for the end user. Having used paid databases that can be just as confusing to use, someone with experience searching both good and bad databases should not have too much difficulty finding resources for their class.

At this writing it's debatable how user-friendly OER Commons and Creative Commons are, depending on the end user. There is still a substantial amount of scrolling and searching to find materials rather than use of sifting materials using filters. An advanced search allows users to select a media format such as audio, but there is no icon or way to indicate the appropriate media format when search results are retrieved. With this, it's arguable whether beginner users will be able to find the necessary material needed. Nonetheless, OER Commons and Creative Commons are models for the discovery and creation of open textbooks and many other OER materials. As with paid Library Management Systems (LMS) and other similar systems, OER's are a step forward in finding materials and are still growing and evolving and should become better over time with proper support. Both websites also promote the idea of open access to this information and supply training materials for those just learning about them. Support services and OER tools are also available to help with any issues one may have using the site and information gleaned for educational purposes.

Between using the library databases and OER resources, I have enough current literature for my class and have found new ideas that I will implement in the class in the future. Additionally, I am considering an assignment for the class for the students to use OER

resources for classes they currently or hope to teach in the future. Although I am using the Alt-Text for the first time this spring semester, there have been positive student comments with the readings and their relevancy to the topic at hand and the students' career as a teaching professional.

At the end of the semester I hope to see if there is an improvement of grades and student evaluations from the new OER format of the class. Students are no longer limited to the single viewpoint of a textbook with the additional required and supplemental readings and these new sources opened students to new and different viewpoints to engage them in a student centered course and prepare them for their careers in education.

Notes

1. "Alternate Textbook Project Philosophy and Guidelines, Southern Utah University, 2014–2015," last modified January 24, 2014, http://goo.gl/w66RxB.
2. "The Alternate Textbook Project," last accessed February 16, 2015, http://sites.temple.edu/alttextbook/about-the-event.
3. "UMass Amherst Libraries Open Educational Resources," last modified February 12, 2015, http://guides.library.umass.edu/oer.
4. "Southern Utah University, Gerald R. Sherratt Library, Alt-Text: Library and Open Access Resources," last modified February 18, 2015, http://libguides.suu.edu/alt-text.
5. "Creative Commons," last accessed February 18, 2015, http://www.creativecommons.org.
6. "OER Commons," last accessed February 18, 2015, https://www.oercommons.org.