Shift to digital perspectives on Hilton (2016) from the perspective of practice

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Abstract

This paper offers the authors perspectives from a lens of practice on the paper, Open educational resources and college textbook choices: A review of research on efficacy and perceptions, by John Hilton III published in Educational Technology Research and Development volume 64, pages 573–590 in 2016. The commentary offered is specific to Hilton’s work in the context of the pivot to remote instruction experienced on a massive scale during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Keywords Open educational resources · Computers in education · Textbooks · OER · COVID-19

In the present paper I offer my views on John Hilton’s 2016 paper, *Open educational resources and college textbook choices: A review of research on efficacy and perceptions*, from the perspective of *practice*, especially as it relates to practice during the world wide shift to alternate instructional delivery modes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key ideas

Hilton’s (2016) review of efficacy and perceptions regarding open educational resources and college textbook choices included 16 studies published prior to October 2015. Hilton’s conclusions were that students in courses utilizing OER materials were able to achieve necessary learning outcomes, and that faculty and students have positive perceptions regarding the OER materials. Based on these findings, Hilton recommended that future work in this area focus more on evaluations of OER textbooks rather than the problematic comparisons between OER and commercial resources observed in the studies included in his review. Hilton also questioned the added value of commercial textbooks in general when OER textbooks appear to serve the same purposes just as well with no cost to students. Research related to Hilton’s 2016 work has continued and has produced similar findings (i.e. Clinton and Khan 2019; Colvard et al. 2018; Hilton 2020).

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Value

What is the value of Hilton's 2016 paper? Recently, Weller (2020) described OER as "something of a success story" (p. 79) compared to many educational technology innovations with funding initiatives and international conferences devoted to OER, as well as several repositories of OER materials available. With the "shift to digital" observed in the recent massive shift to remote teaching resulting from COVID-19, many instructors are redesigning or revising courses, often looking for course texts and materials that are easily accessible online, away from campus. Hilton's 2016 conclusions offer clear evidence to instructors supporting the inclusion of OER materials in their courses. Instructors should note that "OER does not appear to decrease student learning" (p. 586), students and instructors "generally find that OER are comparable in quality to traditional learning resources" (p. 588), and "the decision to employ OER appears to have financial benefits to students" (p. 588).

Limitations

What are the limitations of Hilton's 2016 paper? In my opinion the biggest weakness of the paper is the quality of the papers reviewed, which is somewhat out of Hilton's control. Many of the studies utilized research designs like comparing end-of-course grades between courses that utilized OER materials versus commercial textbooks. These types of comparisons often yield results of *no significant difference* in the same way that educational technology researchers have seen with media comparison studies (see Lockee et al. 1999).

In terms of the limitations of Hilton (2016) regarding *practice*, the problem practitioners will face after reading it is how to find and implement quality OER materials. While not the focus of Hilton's paper, directing interested readers to additional resources to help them find OER materials, and point to best practices for using them would be helpful. While not all available at the time of Hilton's 2016 paper, practitioners may find the following suggested resource helpful: Kim's (2018) framework for implementing OER-based lesson design, West's (2019) process for creating an introductory OER book, or repositories of OER materials such as <https://www.edtechbooks.org>, <https://www.oercommons.org>, and <https://openstax.org/>.

Future implications

A case has been established by Hilton (2016) and other scholars that OER materials are good and viable choices for inclusion in the learning experiences they design. However, Pitt, Jordan, de los Arcos, Farrow, and Weller (2020) note that "USA educator use and awareness of OER rose steadily over between 2014 and 2018" (p. 305) but that "awareness and use of open textbooks are typically low outside of North America" (p. 306). Even within North America, only 55% of Chief Academic Officers "agree that open educational resources are of sufficiently high quality that they should be used in most general education courses" (Jashcik and Lederman 2020, p. 43).

How can the positive findings of Hilton have a greater impact on practice? First, some scholars (i.e. Pitt et al. 2020; Lyon et al. 2020) have called for local OER champions to

drive OER use. Since much of the evidence and information regarding OER materials resides in scholarly journals, practitioners from disciplines outside of Educational Technology and Instructional Design may not encounter information about OER. Local champions, campus experts, who know the benefits and implementation aspects of OER materials, should be established to increase awareness and ultimately adoption of these useful learning resources. Some well-positioned professionals to be those local champions are librarians (see Lyon et al. 2020), and instructional designers (see Ren 2019). Librarians and instructional designers have been in-demand resources for faculty during the recent pivot to remote learning and should be in contact with more faculty than ever, thus enabling them to reach a larger audience than normal to advocate for OER use.

Finally, despite the positive evidence, there is still a long list of reasons faculty are apprehensive about creating or selecting OER materials (see Taylor and Taylor 2018, or Martin and Kimmons 2020 for representative examples). To increase the use of OER, thus increasing the number of users impacted by the positive findings of Hilton (2016), additional study of the reasons faculty are apprehensive about adopting OER materials, and ways to mitigate those apprehensions is needed.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

Human and animal rights This paper does not include human subjects and, therefore, does not require approval by a human subjects review board.

Informed consent Informed consent was not required.

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