



## Open at both ends: how a remixed OER project expanded the inner world of an Australian university's Library Services team

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### Abstract:

*The past 15 years have seen a global increase in the production of Open Educational Resources (OER), yet one option for producing OER has lagged notably—the remixed resource. This paper adds to understanding of the processes and benefits of remixing by recounting the experiences of a Library Services team at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) who developed a remixed resource on academic skills for Australian tertiary students. The influence of the resultant textbook spread not only through the outer world, but also through the inner world of its creators in an academic library.*



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## Introduction

The past 15 years have seen a global increase in the production of Open Educational Resources (OER). Championed from an equity platform, the technological capacity to disseminate open resources is transforming education, offering opportunities that reposition what is meant by access and information transfer (Hylén 2021). Of the five possibilities for reproducing open content—retain, reuse, revise, remix and redistribute (Wiley & Hilton 2018)—the remixed resource has lagged notably in the growth. Wiley (n.d.) defines remixing as ‘combin[ing] your original or revised copy of the resource with other existing material to create something new’. In a time-pressured society, using the permissions of Creative Commons licensing to modify existing resources appears to be an inviting production shortcut, yet the uptake has been comparatively slow (Hilton et al. 2012; Rodriguez-Solano et al. 2015). In an examination of *Flat World Knowledge* openly licensed textbooks, Hilton et al. (2012) found that 1.6% of 247 book customisations used remixing processes compared to 60.32% that deleted content, a revision process. Their acknowledgement of the difficulty of measuring remixing accurately due to the possibility of remixing offline then posting on a personal website (p. 55), combined with the challenge of tracking derivatives through incarnations may contribute to scarce statistical support. Regardless, Mallinson and Krull (2015) venture that elaborating on the processes of remixing may stimulate practice.

This paper expands current understanding by examining the events and experiences of the authors while producing a remixed resource for the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The authors were members of the production team from USQ Library Services: Ms Debi Howarth, Manager of Student Learning and Development (SLD), and Dr Wendy Hargreaves, Learning Advisor, SLD, and the designated project lead for this remixed OER project. The manager perspective is one of generating opportunity for students to equitably access a high quality academic skills textbook, and opportunity for the SLD team to develop, and then leverage off their scholarly identity, through writing an open textbook. The learning advisor and project lead perspective emanates from the practicalities of generating and delivering resources needed in a student-facing role. These joint perspectives add breadth to the discussion.

The paper begins with an overview of the context and processes of creating the remixed resource *Academic Success* (Bartlett et al. 2021). This is followed by a discussion of the motivations that prompted the project. Next, it reflects on the perceived benefits experienced by the team as a result of participating. These include the opening of opportunities and the germination of an OER culture. It concludes by looking ahead at the growing influence of *Academic Success* in the world and the continuing influence the experience exerts on the team from the academic library who created it.

## The Context and Processes of Creating *Academic Success* — Wendy Hargreaves

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is an Australian regional university with an academic library supporting over 27 000 students currently. The Manager of

the SLD team had conceived of an idea to develop an open textbook for academic skill development to create better access to essential information by students. At the time, she had asked for some assistance in finding such a textbook to remix. Some months later, the Associate Director, Content, within Library Services informed her of an American open textbook that might satisfy the need—*College Success* (Baldwin 2020). It became the foundation for our remixed Australian edition, *Academic Success* as it aligned well with the remit of the writing team, and it contributed to the team's writing confidence in this new venture. Funding was available but the project needed to be completed within a very short time frame. Consequently, I was contracted by the SLD manager for nine weeks to coordinate production.

The major resources available for this remixed OER project included *Microsoft Office*, *Adobe Creative Cloud*, the publishing platform *Pressbooks*, and the time and expertise of two librarians and 14 SLD learning advisors. The SLD team members were competent academic writers and well-practised in teaching academic skills; however, most were inexperienced with remixing OER. The other pivotal resource for the project was the assistance and guidance of an Open Education Content Librarian. Her role was created by the USQ Manager of Open Education Practice and the Associate Director (Content) to support open content use and production in multiple USQ OER projects, with a particular focus on open textbooks. Stagg (2014) had been visionary in predicting the power of providing such practical support.

Prior to engaging the team, I spent the first two weeks of the project on two goals. The first was to learn about OER, and the approaches to and boundaries of remixing, through reading and meetings with my manager and with the Open Education Content Librarian. There was little available literature on remixing processes to guide me, with the exception of a draft of an upcoming publication *Open Textbook Handbook for Authors* (Andersen 2020).

My second goal was to explore thoroughly the content and structure of the foundational textbook *College Success* (Baldwin 2020). In *Microsoft Excel*, I coded then mapped which major portions would be adopted, adapted and rejected. Next, I inserted the retained elements into a bespoke plan for the new book. This process also revealed which topics lacked sufficient existing text, and thus would require new writing to meet our vision.

Next, we held a team meeting, where individuals and/or small groups nominated chapters and/or sections of the textbook to edit or write. Due to the team's limited previous experience with *Pressbooks*, I decided we would start work immediately in *Microsoft Word* then transfer the final drafts into *Pressbooks* later. I designed a template in *Microsoft Word* to standardise our formatting and facilitate a smooth transfer. In hindsight, the template had limited value, as *Pressbooks* imposed formatting defaults. Conversely, the seven-page style guideline I produced proved useful for unifying our writing voice, and standardising language, chapter length, chapter structure, and referencing style.

From this point in production, we entered a series of processing loops. As each chapter was completed, it was reviewed by different team members then returned to the authors for revision. The process was repeated a second time with input from new team members, before the final version was submitted for uploading into



Practice, and the Open Education Content Librarian. Further, we were awarded a grant to support the production as part of USQ's open educational practice funding. The university is committed to widening participation and strategies to create equitable opportunity including the development of open, free, textbooks.

## Opening Opportunities — Wendy Hargreaves

At the start of the project, I learnt quickly of social justice and environmental advantages of producing OER. I was, however, oblivious to the benefits the team would also reap. Twelve months on and my colleague and I are still identifying positive effects in our workplace. We have categorised these gains broadly into two groups:

- 1) opening opportunities, and
- 2) opening an OER culture.

Opportunities will be discussed first, from my perspective as a learning advisor. Following this, my colleague will draw on her observations as manager of a growing OER team culture.

Participating in remixing a resource facilitated many opportunities for development as a learning advisor. First, I engaged quickly with this new territory of OER, because the project involved remixing rather than producing new creations. By beginning with a product that was already, in one sense, finished, I could see how *College Success* (Baldwin 2020) used permissions and how the original author organised structure and content. This information was accessible immediately, although I knew I was not obliged to adopt it. The experience was not unlike assembling furniture—it is often faster to figure out how major pieces connect by examining a finished product rather than interpreting a manual (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: It's often faster to examine a finished product than interpret a manual.  
Illustration by Jemma Hargreaves used under CC-BY licence.

Researchers do caution creators not to underestimate the time it takes to remix resources (Mallinson & Krull 2015). My experience was that fast engagement and production was possible because I dedicated the first two weeks at the start of the project to design a clear, achievable plan for constructing the textbook. This was

followed by a team meeting to introduce the plan and outline the production process. The plan enabled the team to work simultaneously on isolated components without compromising the continuity or style of the new, emerging resource. Clarifying the project's direction, team requirements, and book structure prior to the rest of the team's engagement meant that the advantages of using pre-existing writing were maximised. From that point onwards, development accelerated.

The second benefit I noted while working on *Academic Success* was the opening of opportunities to hasten the evolution of content. My previous experiences in academic publishing produced journal articles, conference papers and book chapters, which to date have not been re-published. This contributed to my previous assumption that academic writing output often exists as a fully-evolved publication carved in stone for posterity. In contrast, OER are living creations that have already been birthed and may continue their journey in a never-ending evolution. While the evolution of a resource still exists in traditional publishing methods, OER create opportunities to change sooner and with greater ease.

The second iteration of *Academic Success* is evidence of this speedy change, with the team at work on a second iteration within one month of the book's release. Rather than wait years for feedback and sufficient impetus and funds to create another edition, authors could react quickly to forge change. The new iteration includes revisions, new discussions, new chapters and the addition of content to make the textbook more engaging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Remixing created an ongoing momentum in cyclic production, with production of the second iteration occurring soon after the nine-week project had concluded. As a consequence, the team continues to use a spreadsheet to record all ideas for future changes. These ideas can be their own suggestions or those gathered from interactions with academics, students and any readers engaging with the textbook. The number of authors implementing these changes in the future is likely to grow as the impact of the project spreads through Library Services and beyond.

The third benefit arising from the remixed resource experience was greater opportunities to connect with colleagues within USQ. The success of the publication prompted discussions exploring potential collaborations with USQ Research Support and with the USQ Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program administration. The latter resulted in a collaboration for five chapters of the book to be pared down and redesigned in *Articulate Storyline 360*, to suit a senior high school audience. Production of the second iteration also expanded the writing team, with an additional six librarians joining due to the Manager of Education Support noting an increase in the capacity of her staff to participate. One additional learning advisor, the newly appointed Learning Advisor (Indigenous), also joined under the instruction of the SLD Manager. New members benefitted from the ease of working with existing material and the coaching from original members, generating the trademark swift engagement of remixing resources. More advanced writers undertook whole chapters, while those with less experience built confidence in modifying smaller chunks of text. Work was reviewed by multiple members within the team. The option to participate to varying degrees was particularly advantageous for the newly appointed Learning Advisor (Indigenous) who had many demands on his time and priorities. The nature of remixing meant that he could make adaptations and add new elements progressively to the second iteration in small yet powerful ways,

while knowing the potential and ease for increasing his contribution in the future is achievable.

A fourth benefit I experienced from the project was opportunities to use my newly acquired understanding of remixing OER to improve the quality of other resources I create in my role as a learning advisor. Not only do I use my knowledge of Creative Commons licensing to full advantage, but also my knowledge of search engines to find suitable resources for my purposes. I am testament to an increase in personal productivity resulting from drawing on existing resources rather than 'duplicating efforts' (Rodriguez-Solana et al. 2015, p. 1123).

Overall, as a comparatively new member of the SLD team and a previous novice to OER, the opportunities I have identified and the benefits I have gleaned, while meaningful to me, have focussed on what better enables me to fulfil my responsibilities and connections within USQ. In contrast, my manager has enjoyed a front seat and bird's eye view of the effects and changes in not only my thinking and interactions, but those of the whole team as we shared our experiences of the growing OER culture.

## **Opening Our OER Culture – Debi Howarth**

My team has advanced their practical knowledge of the remixing process, and of OER more generally, in a very short period. Appreciating the greater implications for open access is now evident across the team, allowing them to seek out the philosophical and equity underpinnings of operating with an open mindset. In this, we recognise that 'openness is a social construct' (Nascimbeni & Burgos 2019), and as such allows us to place degrees of importance and relevance on an open project according to our perception of an equity need and the intended application of the proposed open textbook. David Bull (2013) claims that:

Institutions are now toying with a range of initiatives that will lead to more widespread and effective open pedagogical practices based upon the creative use and management of OER with the intent to improve the degree of openness and the quality of provision. (Bull 2013, p. 127)

As a reflection of this, USQ has been proactive and committed in the OER space, with its academic staff publishing several open textbooks.

USQ academic library staff, including librarians and learning advisor academics, inhabit a highly privileged space, and with ease of access to knowledge, expertise, and technology, library staff directly and indirectly influence, and contribute to, the creation of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). By virtue of our privilege, that is, our own social and cultural capital, we can see advantages of being 'open' to equity in student learning and, therefore, enable the creation of readily available textbooks at no cost to the student user. 'Social capital provides the glue which facilitates co-operation, exchange and innovation' (Organisation For Economic Co-Operation And Development 2001), and it is through this bonding that our project not only 'got legs' but was able to be sustained at an intense rate across a short span of time.

A significant part of the project was engaging the writers in a new process of writing, and then enabling them, through a funded project lead who took responsibility for the technical aspects of the project, to create. The need to work within a tight budget, and even tighter timeline, were the initial concerns, however the interest and enthusiasm of the writers was always evident. The project was received well by all staff in Library Services. While some potential writers were unable to contribute to the first iteration, as they may have liked, due to capacity issues, we were pleased to have two writers contribute to one chapter and for the rest of the potential writers to have opportunity to contribute to the second iteration. An agile approach (Agile Alliance, n.d.), where just enough, just in time, and rapid response to changing contexts, was adopted. Together with robust, regular interactions, and small team collaborations being keenly enacted, our motivated writing team became *parents* to the first iteration of *Academic Success*.

During the development of the first iteration of the textbook, awareness of the remixed OER project was raised through regular team updates, presentation of information by me at Library Leadership Team meetings, and through the Learning and Research Team to which I also belong. As a result, by the time we had finished the first iteration, in only nine weeks, we already had other writers lining up for the second iteration. Social capital, in the sense of our academic library workplace 'neighbours' seeking to be a part of creating the textbook as a committed collective, was evident (Aequitas Consulting 2018). The project became, and remains, a significant contributor to equity principles heightened by increased writer skill and awareness of OER creation as a global disruptor.

A shift in thinking, visible during the project, was movement towards the concept of students as partners in the creation of open textbooks. In their 2019 article, Nascimbeni and Burgos suggest a need to advance the way higher education institutions 'adopt OER and the implementation of open teaching practices,' especially the expansion of what is meant by open education practices (OEP). OER has been, and can continue to be, a 'trigger' in deploying OEP and the whole concept has evolved 'to the point of formalizing the concept of OER-enabled pedagogy, defined as teaching practices' (Nascimbeni & Burgos 2019), which utilise the 'retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute', 5R permissions (Wiley & Hilton 2018). The ability to use and remix resources with students changes the teacher-learner dynamic, fostering a different relationship, where the learner can partner to transform the remixed resource.

Evidence of this altered interaction is seen in *Academic Success* in the inclusion of student stories—inserted extracts of interviews with students discussing their experiences of learning academic skills. This element of 'student co-creation' is what Stagg (2014) categorises in his Continuum of Open Practice as a complex and mature use of OEP. As we experienced, the dynamic can be transformative in producing textbooks that are 'in the moment', shifting quickly in short periods of time, yet authoritative and nuanced as appropriate, to the context. It is in this space that *Academic Success* may well experience its greatest impact.

Two iterations on, and ample ideas and enthusiasm to create a third, interest in the remixed OER project continues among my team and within the academic library at USQ, more generally. Moreover, the recognition that opportunities for library

professionals to engage and create for the purposes of inclusion and *doing good* is embraced. As we create new iterations of the textbook, we not only model good open practice and develop our knowledge and skills around open access, beyond the functional, but also signal to colleagues, and those external to USQ, that we seek to mirror educational quality and inclusion tenets such as those described in, and promoted through, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). This goal aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations. Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). It also aligns with UNESCO's Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (UNESCO 2019). USQ's Strategic Plan 2021-2025 emphasises the institution's commitment to widening participation, equitable learning opportunities, and inspiring creativity and innovation (University of Southern Queensland 2021). The plan supports both SDG 4 and the UNESCO recommendation. I believe we can be well pleased with our efforts to meet the goal.

## **An Exciting Future**

Remixing a resource generates collaboration of a new kind, still to be comprehensively explored and tested. It is perpetual learning, which assumes a reincarnated, reimagined, cross-generation of iterations, a living textbook. Given our positive experience with remixing a textbook and the capacity to write and create free of the usual publishing constraints, we are faced with endless prospects. Creation of new iterations is limited only by imagination. A significant factor in the project was the capacity to create a living textbook that could engage at several levels but retain the ability to morph into something else, almost, at whim. This is exceptionally tempting and exciting. In our case, both academic and professional staff within Library Services at USQ were collectively engaged and invested in the writing project, rapidly and expertly producing a second iteration within only months of the first.

The potential challenge with remixing is managing the writing to produce an authoritative textbook, one that is well received by the student audience and endorsed by academic staff. Many contributors to our remixed resource were skilled writers. This provided some levels of quality assurance around the mechanics of writing. While verifying text for authority, accuracy, currency, and relevance remains a necessary step on behalf of the user, we were conscious of this as we worked our way through the book, including the development of substantial amounts of new text for iteration two, and therefore utilised the expertise of others within Library Services, including the Open Education Content Librarian, to help mitigate against accidental error. Nonetheless, the acceptance of OER as 'fit for purpose' remains a potential barrier, and practitioners are engaging with, and developing, frameworks that support the user to manage the choice of OER (Jung et al. 2016).

General endorsement from various quarters, including universities who are now remixing our versions and or using the textbook in their own institutions, has been encouraging. After the rush of creating the first two iterations, collecting and locating relevant data, as enablers of good planning for subsequent iterations, will become more critical.

A Power BI dashboard has been created by the Evidence Based Practice Coordinator to facilitate access to basic analytics for *Academic Success*, such as usage by country, number of textbook users or parts thereof (see Appendix). Not only was it heartening to see gradual, sustained, increase in viewers of the textbook, but also, surprisingly, the top five chapters remain stable across almost five months. We can also view unique page views of *Academic Success* in comparison to all USQ Pressbooks. At the time of writing, 8.54% of unique page views are for *Academic Success*, an increase of almost 5% inside of four months. This figure continues to rise daily. This is also encouraging as it is not a mandated textbook. Further, we have noted over 500 referrals to the textbook via our learning management system (StudyDesk). This indicator of student traffic to the book is one, of others, that the Evidence Based Practice Coordinator is compiling as evidence of both reach and impact. Our analytics also show that at the time of writing 69.91% of readers are international, 30.07% are domestic and .02% are unknown (cannot be identified with accuracy). While the data is certainly not conclusive in respect of user endorsement, it is indeed encouraging at this early stage.

Through a remixed OER project, the USQ Library Services team experienced a remixing of a resource that resulted in the swift production of a comprehensive textbook to meet an identified equity need. In developing the open textbook, the team has not only advanced their practical knowledge of the remixing process, and of OER more generally, but also developed a greater sense of student need in and around purchase of conventional textbooks. Appreciating the greater implications for openness is now evident across the team, allowing them to seek out the philosophical and equity underpinnings of operating with an open mindset. The potential of the resource to benefit the USQ student community had been foreseen, although the extent of its reach was beyond our initial vision. Likewise, we had not fully predicted how the project would impact our team. The result was an experience that unlocked the mysteries remixing OER and generated benefits at both ends of delivery—for student consumers of the textbook in the outer world and for creators of OER in the inner world of a university library.

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# Appendix

Excerpt of Power BI Capture of *Academic Success* on 22 November, 2021.

