

Open Education Rising Podcast (www.openeducationrising.net)

Hosted by Deep Shenoy

Transcript of Episode 3: Dr. Richard Sebastian, Part 2: OER in Transition

Deep: Hello, and welcome to Open Education Rising, a podcast about growing and improving open education. I'm your host, Deep Shenoy. This is the second half of my conversation with Dr. Richard Sebastian, which took place at the Open Education Conference in October 2018. He's the director of Achieving the Dream's OER Degree Initiative. In the previous episode, Richard talked about the degree initiative in detail. So if you missed that, you'll want to go back and check it out.

Deep: In this episode, we talk about the big picture of OER. We cover a lot of topics, so I wanted to outline a few of the main ideas for you before we dive in. We talked about how OER is reaching the mainstream more than it ever has before. At the same time, the conversation about OER is changing, it's moving beyond cost-savings. The transition to OER is an opportunity to improve how we teach. I was very excited to hear from Richard that OER has invigorated many instructors' sense of connection with teaching and learning.

Deep: Richard also observes that what is perceived as faculty resistance to OER is, when you dig deeper, actually a set of practical concerns. Instructors want to know, how do I get started with OER, and where do I go for help? Fortunately, with the right institutional support, we can solve these problems. Richard also encourages us to really embrace the open in OER as a mindset. For example, we discussed developing regional disciplinary collaborations to continually grow and improve OER. Richard also shares interesting examples of how OER can open up place-based and service-based learning. Here's the rest of my conversation with Richard.

Deep: At Open Ed, there have been a lot of conversations this week about tipping points, are we at a tipping point? Critical mass, these kinds of things. What are your thoughts on that, where do you think we are and where is this thing at right now even beyond ATD, just globally?

Richard: I would agree it's at a transition point. Certainly awareness of OER is at the highest it's ever been, it's moved into ... I mean you can hear it in mainstream conversations, whether it's any good or not or even useful to think about it, instead of why it's like how a conversation is. There's a level of acceptance that hasn't always been there. That's maybe new. Even if you look at this conference from year-to-year, and I've been coming since 2012 maybe. You recognize the people. There's a very tight community that really kind of grew. Incrementally, over the years you start to see these new folks coming, and more faculty, and folks who are very new to this, and the growth of it has been really amazing, as well as the different perspectives.

Richard: If you look at the graph it's certainly on an incline. That's as far, and I don't know how useful it is to go beyond that, because I think there's still threats to it, there's still ... maybe it's even more threats as it moves into broader acceptance. I think of oftentimes, my background is in educational technology, we compare OER, the efforts to introduce OER into practice of colleges and college faculty to distance learning or online learning, so to growth of that a decade or more ago.

Richard: For me, if you look today, colleges have online learning. They have online courses, they have whole programs online. That's great because it's opened up courses to so many more students, and made them more flexible, especially for community college students. I felt we missed an opportunity during that, it was like pushing adoption, shifting faculty to online courses, similar to the remarks I made earlier. There was an opportunity there to look at pedagogy, and to look at what is teaching online? What are some ways of doing things differently? How can you engage differently with your students, or what are some practices they do? That just wasn't there.

Richard: I have felt that with when I was in Virginia in the system there. The thing that got me really hooked to OER was, I would give out these grants, and I would say, "You're gonna swap out your textbook for OER," and that's success for me, right? Back when you were great, that was happening ... and I went to some presentations from faculty at this professional development conference, and they were talking about their course. Not like, "we save students hundreds of dollars." That was great. They were like, "This has reinvigorated my sense of being a teacher and a faculty member. It's changed. I've got a renewed sense of connection and passion to it." Right?

Deep: That's awesome.

Richard: Yeah, and uniformly, maybe there was one or two who said it was hard, and maybe it's okay, but for the most part it was a personal testimonial, in some ways. I thought at the time, this is the moment where we should be able to walk over, as you were saying, and have something for them to kind of guide them like, "Let's do something with this feeling that you have, and think about pedagogy, and think about what teaching with OER means, and the five Rs, and how students can be involved," and to have some way of really harnessing that. I think we need that. I think if this is indeed a transition point as it's moving into mainstream acceptance, is it going to be textbook swaps? Is it going to be massive scale of swapping out textbook that are created by publishers, with textbook looking OER that's free or has a small fee to it?

Deep: Then we don't get any of the pedagogical reform.

Richard: I think it's a lost opportunity because really, more broadly, I think really particularly community college faculty, are really hungry for support, and how to engage their students more. I think they want that, and I think we misread them sometimes.

Deep: Misread the faculty or the students?

Richard: Misread the faculty. For example, I was at a session today at Montgomery College, and they were talking about this project with faculty that required them to connect with faculty at another institution and another discipline. They talked about how the faculty were resistant to that. We hear that a lot. Faculty are resistant, they don't like change. I asked them a little bit about that because they came around to it. It was that they needed help doing that. Right?

Richard: It wasn't the idea of connecting with other faculty. They were actually receptive to that. It was just that, I think they were thinking, "Now I've gotta somehow figure out how to get in touch with this faculty member, and I don't know them." There was more noise in there than real resistance, and I think that's true. I think that faculty want some more input, and structure, and support on teaching and learning, which they generally don't get a whole lot of, particularly when you look at percentages of adjunct faculty at community colleges.

Richard: I think there's more faculty that want to ... they teach at community colleges because they care about the students. They like teaching. They want to see their students succeed, and if you provide things, support for them to improve their students lives, I think they're really motivated to do that.

Deep: People will embrace it.

Richard: I think the issue often is that we ask faculty to do these things on their own, or without really any kind of compensation just because it's a good thing to do. You've got your superstar, champion faculty at every institution that do this stuff, but really it's not going to change things unless you really figure out a way to support it more broadly amongst your faculty. I think faculty drive these things, like I said before, but at some point, they've gotta hand the reigns over to the college to say, "This is important. This is something we're going to invest in and support you with because it's good, and it's a good idea for our students and it helps us meet our goals."

Richard: Perhaps, we misread faculty on their resistance to change and things, and it's really maybe a frustration with being expected to change without really the supports to do that well. Because I don't like to do something poorly either. If I think I'm going to fail or something. [crosstalk 00:08:58]

Deep: And I think there's that and there's also everyone is naturally ... I think probably in balance, in life, maybe correctly skeptical of something new, until you tell me what it's about. I think, certainly, I'm definitely hearing at the conference this week that you can't just throw the technological tool at faculty and be like, "Oh here's an OER portal. Good luck." It's actually changing a lot of how to do your day to day work.

Richard: Yeah exactly. I've made that mistake, too, many times, where you just, because you're excited about it or you think it's a good idea, that faculty is going to do it, and really if you do think it's important, and you think it's service to your students, then you certainly can go to the trouble of finding a way to support your faculty in making that

shift, and explaining to them and showing them why, what the connection is to their pedagogy and to their student outcome.

Deep: Yeah. So where do you see OER as going from here. Because, you said, we are a transition point. Do you have any thoughts on where we are going or where it could go?

Richard: Yeah, I really wish I knew the answer to where we are going because-

Deep: That would be nice, right?

Richard: That would be great.

Deep: Where would you like to see it go? Maybe we start with that.

Richard: It seems, on some days for me, just right within reach, of this world in which we ... I think maybe reimagine our institutions, or maybe it's return, because ... I think at one point higher ed and community colleges were like this. Where this idea of open or OER moves really ... dissolves this textbook kind of model right, to how do we build interdisciplinary connections to material? How do we build collectives? I don't know what this would be like, so you could imagine a regional or statewide collective of social sciences community college. Professors that generate or support some kind of level of activities and content, curriculum around their discipline, and there's a community around that. That it also extends to other things like engaging students in this work as well, and not only contributing to whatever content is in the course, but if you're making OER content of some sort, could you connect with your graphic design program and the students can ... I think they do this at SUNY, which I'd love to see [crosstalk 00:11:53].

Deep: Yeah the textbook covers. They did that, which was great. It was a nice opportunity for one particular student who then ended up working for them. It really ... it was a very helpful kind of engagement.

Richard: In some ways, really looking at your students and your institution as the sources of the expertise, and around the creation of content, but that you're also ... build this culture that's also looking beyond the institution, and looking, and connecting to, other institutions, and sharing ideas, and teaching becomes this thing of ... this competitive activity? Maybe that's not the right word, I know, but it seems to have been a worry that if I reveal too much, I'm gonna ... somebody might steal my class from my or whatever.

Deep: Giving away your trade secrets with that mindset.

Richard: Yeah, right. Rather than, "That's a really great activity that you're doing in the same course that I'm teaching, is it okay if I use it because it seems to really work with your students," and "Here's one that I do. You can use it." To really see it as more of a collaboration amongst higher ed institutions that are really kind of, "we're all working for the same thing, we're all trying to help our students." The differences are minor compared to what's similar in curriculum, and goals and outcomes.

Richard: I think the technical processes are there. I even think the resources are there. I think it's that shift in mindset that needs to happen, and the support that needs to happen with faculty to get there of expectation. Part of tenure and promotion, when you do these things that actually counts towards something. How do you engage your adjuncts to do that? Because they're half your teaching workforce, and, if you leave them out, you're not gonna get consistent participation with that. How does all this pertain to what your students could do, and how they can contribute, and do some kind of meaningful work while they're in college. The scene has many people on it, and they can see the impact of it because everybody loves that, right? If you see something that you're doing has a use to someone else.

Deep: Yeah, it's amazing. I just wanted to highlight some of the mindset shifts that you're talking about ... maybe this is a bit of a caricature, but thinking of your value as an instructor, as the unique knowledge you possess, shifting to saying, "No, really, what is unique is how well I interact with the students, and impart that knowledge," so, "It's not my secret trove of slides or charts that are the magic. The magic is in actually communicating, and the teaching act."

Richard: Yeah, I take it further. Some institutions do this, but I think it should be uniformly shared that, whether you're teaching freshmen ... cohort of the freshman English students, right? A lot of students come-and-go, and community college populations are ... for good reason, they shift and they're not that stable. You should care about, and you should have some investment in whether they make it through or not.

Richard: Not just your course. That they make it through the next course, and the next course, and that you can see, and feel, and share in the success when a student graduates, and see what your part is in that. If they don't, to question like, "What could I have done better? How could we do better as a group of faculty." Rather than, I go to this course, and then I move to this course, and I move to this course.

Deep: It's much more transactional.

Richard: Yeah. If I get enough courses, the right courses, then I get a degree program. We don't really try to help students make sense of that, and why they're doing that, and how we can better connect that.

Richard: I think there's an opportunity with openness, if you could see that, first of all. If I'm a student, and I can see the entire curriculum before I even apply for community college, and see, am I up for this? What are some things I can expect, and maybe I can start to work on it.

Deep: Yeah.

Richard: Then I can see the material, and then when you're there, it's a little bit more manageable. From a faculty member, I can see what's happening in year two, or these courses down the line as they go, and how you could shift some things, better prepare your students for that. Or, maybe there's some activities that you can actually

collaborate on in between your psychology and your history class. That ... interdisciplinary connections.

Richard: The session that I mentioned earlier that I went to, at Montgomery College, was around ... They're doing a project with the UN Sustainability Development Goals, with your students. As that, it's a new way of thinking where they take those goals, and they're really around climate change, and around ... these really ambitious goals. Faculty build activities that use open pedagogy, and these goals and student activities, so students do service learning. They're connected to two different disciplines, at least. I think it's a really interesting model. I think what they're doing, and institutions are doing similar things, when you ask about where I hope the future would go. I hope that's what opened, what enabled those kind of things. That kind of innovations and connections to be made, and make it easy to do that.

Deep: I love that vision. As you were mentioning that, I was also thinking about some of the OER I have been hearing about is actually about dual-enrollment. You're already getting them started.

Richard: Mm-hmm (affirmative)- Yeah.

Deep: You can view it, and actually engage with it even before you get to community college.

Richard: Right. Yeah. You could do that at all your levels of ... if you're gonna be a transfer student. If you could see your-

Deep: You get engaged the higher [crosstalk 00:17:49] ... before, yeah, of what's going on.

Richard: Higher level, 4-year courses that you're gonna take. It's not a mystery behind this curtain that you're not gonna see until you get the first day of class. You spend your class time engaging with it, and building on your strengths, and not in this ... We both have been through PhD programs, right-

Deep: Yeah.

Richard: Where it's a lot of hurdle jumping. It's like, "I'm doing this. I don't know why." Some of it's ... they're trying to screen out students, who they know they can't make it.

Deep: Yep. [crosstalk 00:18:20] Yeah, the "weed-out" class.

Richard: For what?

Deep: Yeah, doesn't make any sense.

Richard: What am I lacking to do this? They really haven't any kind of ... it's almost mean. To see-

Deep: Probably not super-effective, either.

Richard: Yeah, right. Who knows, though?

Deep: Yeah, who knows?

Richard: Rather than looking to really seeing instruction as a opportunity for faculty and students to really build something together, rather than this ... I feel like you mentioned early on, imparting my super knowledge of physics to you, and-

Deep: Yeah.

Richard: You're gonna note it done, and then I'm leaving. [crosstalk 00:18:52] I don't have any role-

Deep: When I've talk to some people who know we are, they're very excited about the potential applications with open pedagogy, and things like that. I've been trying to think to myself, why is that such a hard sell? I think it's ... there is some, the underlying assumption is that students are receivers of knowledge, at least in the old way of doing things, instead of participants. I think if we shift that mindset a little bit, too, to say, "Well, look. We wanna engage them." This is a co-created experience, rather than a ... like the impression that you get from sitting as one person in a 500-person lecture hall, which is ... There's a speaker and a recorder. A stereo speaker and a recorder. Just a one-way flow of information.

Richard: Yeah. There's some good examples in our initiative. For example, at one college, I would say, before they even same to this initiative, their college focused on community, place-based learning? Community learning, right? We need to deliver curriculum that reflects the diversity of our students, and reflects the communities they come from ... that they have some kind of connection to it, and feel part of it.

Richard: OER for them ... yes, cost-savings is one issue, right? That was an immediate great thing, but really, what they saw, was an opportunity ... this makes it really easy to do that. We can change these materials. We can take existing materials and adapt them to reflect our students' interests, or have our students do that.

Deep: I'm not sure what place-based learning is.

Richard: One example is, in their statistics class, I believe it is, they went out and collected local census data from the community to do ... rather than this generic stuff, the pulled-

Deep: Localize it to their experience.

Richard: They localize it. It's a very diverse college, so doing some demographic data they can makeup [crosstalk 00:20:54] in neighborhoods that are there.

Richard: Another example, this is in some criminal justice faculty, who primarily teach, I believe it was ... I don't remember the class, maybe ... Anyway, I don't remember the exact class. In the textbook is page-after-page, often times, of people in jail, and they're typically,

for the most part, repeatedly, African-American males. The message that is sent is that, African-American males are primarily the criminals, right? People in their class were primarily African-Americans, right? They felt really bad. Here, we're sending a message through this content, that we don't have control over, because this is the content that we have to buy and that's available. They were really excited when they developed their OER. They could put a variety of different photos in there doesn't necessarily ... send this message of bias to their students.

Richard: Faculty bring a lot to this. Often, and in surprising ways, of how they OER opens up some things for them, or allows them to do some things that I think are really valuable. I think open pedagogy, (a), I guess it's not so hard. I think this needs to be a priority of colleges. The reality is, if you start as a faculty member, and you don't really have any base training in pedagogy, which is not often required to teach, right? You need a master's degree or a PhD, and some experience with the course content. Often times you don't get any instruction. You're just given your class. Especially if you're adjunct.

Richard: Why do we expect them to know how to do this effectively, or how to engage their students? The reality is, when you move into these more open pedagogy approaches, that's a little harder to assess. It's a little harder to say, "You know this content from the multiple choice tests," right, when you're doing collaborative learning, or some kind of service project. There's a little more complexity there to acknowledge that.

Richard: If you can show, when we do these kinds of things, students are engaged, and they complete at higher rate, and they complete their programs at higher rate, and they perform well when they move out into the community, and get jobs, then something's right. Something's working with that. I think that's gotta be a part of it, as well.

Deep: Alright. I'm looking forward to reading this report, and the final report from all these studies you guys did. I learned a lot from this. Thank you.

Richard: Good. Thank you. Appreciate it.

Deep: I appreciate it. [crosstalk 00:23:42]

Richard: Alright. Take care.

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