Can Open Educational Resources that **Embrace Visual Communication** as their **Primary Language Empower Learning** and **Brand Higher Education Faculty?**

Research in Progress
Visual Communications

Conceptional Idea

An investigation into the need for original development or implementation of Open Educational Resources (OERs) that embrace visual communication as a primary language from West Virginia higher education faculty.

Can visual communication OERs attract students and brand faculty? Do West Virginia faculty lack confidence in designing visual teaching materials? Are resources and training available to faculty to engage in visual communication techniques? Are OERs that embrace visual communication needed? Will they be doable with the resources and technology on hand? Are OER resources that employ visual communication as primary learning content financially sustainable? Do West Virginia faculty need visual communication-based OERs to learn how to develop visual communication-based OERs? Will embracing visual communication as an equal to the written or spoken word be transformative in learning? Is proficiency in visual communication as imperative as the written and spoken word?

The term OER is used in this study to mean more than textbooks. It encompasses all learning open education materials.

Objective 1: Investigate if faculty understand visual communication's power to enhance learning.

Objective 2: Analyze how faculty understand the desirability (do people need it), viability (business model), and feasibility (technical requirements) of the student user and institutional stakeholders when developing OER products.

Objective 3: Access the level of visual communication and design skills faculty currently possess that are needed in developing original visual communication-based OER content.

Objective 4: Discover the extent of faculty's openness in embracing visual communication as the primary language of instruction.

Objective 5: Identify the barriers for West Virginia faculty in producing OERs that employ visual communication as the OERs' primary language.

Objective 6: Survey the level of importance to faculty in creating original learning content that employs visual communication over text-based learning materials.

Objective 7: Examine how significant developing course branding through visual communication and design interaction is to faculty and its possible benefits to enrollment.

Justification for proposed research: This research aims to ask if West Virginia higher education faculty see value in, and are supported in, creating original or implementing visually communication-based OER learning products that give a unique value-added education to their courses, programs, and institutions.

Research Methodology

The researchers will seek Marshall Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to meet ethical considerations before commencing the research. For this study, only faculty employed by West Virginia universities, colleges, and community colleges will be sampled. The research methodology is structured in two phases, utilizing primary data collection methods.

Primary Data Collection Phase One

Quantitative Data Collection

Create a representative sample of committed or potential OER adopters and creators by gathering information from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and the West Virginia Community and Technical College System's Open Learning WV initiative.

Add to the above sample participants from the Commission's OER Community of Practice for faculty awarded OER implementation and development funding from the West Virginia Open Educational Resources Grant Program.

Create a representative sample of multi-disciplinary West Virginia faculty not committed to OER development or adoption through departmental websites. Eliminate intended or committed OER users through the already committed or considering OER sample.

The researchers will address key research questions in this phase. This research does not focus on why faculty do or do not implement OERs in their courses but on why they do or do not consider or develop highly visual OERs for their courses. This research goes beyond OER textbooks and considers all forms of open educational resources. Perceptive consideration will be given to whether OERs using communication design as the primary language to accommodate learners, as judged by faculty, are economically feasible and develop faculty branding. Is faculty branding, viewed by faculty, valuable in the highly competitive educational environment?

Qualtrics will be employed as the platform for collecting quantitative data.

Primary Data Collection Phase Two

Online Focus Groups

Engage multi-disciplinary WV facility in online focus groups during the second phase of the research committed to utilizing OERs to identify barriers in design competencies and the access to the technology needed to create substantially visual original OERs tailored to their pedagogical approaches.

Engage multi-disciplinary WV faculty in online focus groups during the second phase of the research not committed to utilizing OERs or in objections to considering creating substantially visual original OERs tailored to their pedagogical approaches.

Use insights from quantitative research to develop a comprehensive questionnaire for the focus groups.

Purpose of Primary Data Collection

To ensure that the research addresses essential queries and provides a thorough understanding of faculty perspectives on visual communication-based OER learning products, it is important to note that although there are many sources of secondary data, they focus on OER implementation through established OER libraries, student responses to using OERs and textbook costs. Primary data specific to the research objectives is imperative for the accuracy of findings and to address the wants and needs of West Virginia educators. This study does not evaluate student needs, but faculty needs and faculty's perceptions of student needs. The researchers believe this study will have scalable potential.
By employing a combination of quantitative surveys and online focus groups, this research methodology aims to capture a nuanced and comprehensive view of faculty receptivity to adopting visual communication teaching techniques as the primary language of instruction.

Primary Findings

OER is rising in use, and the comfort of paper textbooks remains a barrier to reducing student costs and implementing active learning. Is digital content over traditional print textbooks hampered by the perceived normality of what a textbook should be or by the lack of understanding that only "creatives" can implement visual communication? OpenStax, one of the leading OER publishers, served over one million students in the 2020-2021 academic year (Knox, 2022). As of December 2023, it claims seven million students in 150 countries, with 70% of the U.S. higher education institutions using OpenStax (Education for, 2023). While many academic institutions are encouraging faculty to implement existing OERs into their courses through institutional grants, is enough being done to encourage faculty to create original OER materials, in particular, visual communication-based OERs specific to courses, the mission of the institution, and the user (Innovative Open, 2023)? Professors who successfully apply brand characteristics in the quality of their instruction develop a brand that students recognize, which adds to the professor's brand equity (Charles, Papagiannids, et al. 2016).

Despite the priority use of visual language demanded by small screen sizes, academics have yet to embrace visual language into learning resources with equal importance as the printed word (Kedra, 2022). Visuals serve too often as fillers, decorations, or as a means of copyfitting lines of body copy (What are, 2023). Typography is not always implemented with its full potential in organizing and delivering complex messages. Endless strings of paragraphs do not encourage student learning. Textbook creators should consider experience design as a necessary component in delivering content. Students have a "greater willingness" to use online delivery (Coffey, 2023), but is this also the faculty view? Should faculty learn visual communication, the components of UX design, and design thinking with as much vigor as they learn to write? With the right publishing tools and basic design knowledge, faculty can develop unique content to personalize their courses and brand their programs with individual OER learning products for marketing to potential students in a competitive environment that now includes micro-credentials and courses from well-known industry firms (Jillapalli et al. 2014).

This research intends to empathetically discover the needs of higher education faculty across West Virginia in applying visual communication as a foundation for developing original OER products that enhance student engagement and build brand recognition.

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