

AN EXHILARATING EVOLUTION

University of Southern Queensland

Dr Wendy Hargreaves

Overview

Open Education Resources (OER) are celebrated for sharing knowledge further than ever before across the digital world. **Remixed** OER have the bonus of being quick to produce. With our eyes captivated on moving far and fast, we may overlook another remarkable motion spinning within OER themselves: the same technology and licensing that enables easy dissemination also accelerates the potential rate of revision. The switch from fixed, hard-copy textbooks to author-controlled, publishing platforms produces exciting opportunities for writers to refine their work across multiple, frequent iterations. Such potential for rapid change invites the question, if remixed OER can evolve quickly, what measures can creators take at conception to enable a positive, long-term development?

To answer this question, I trace my experiences as leader of a team who produced four iterations of the remixed open textbook *Academic Success* (Hargreaves et al., 2021) over four years. I share pragmatically my learnings about growth, change and time when I switched from regarding *Academic Success* as a single, fixed publication to a living, continually-evolving, educational resource. I present six recommendations that future creative teams may incorporate in their own resources to smooth development.

Using this case study

This case study demonstrates how the benefits of team-created remixed OER can be increased by incorporating the following six recommendations to facilitate the long-term development of resources:

- Create a Writing Guidelines document
- Create an Authorship Policy for contributors
- Create an Editorial Board
- Include a **version history** in the resource

- Decide whether to retain or change URLs for resource revisions
- Create a spreadsheet for storing and mapping the resource's possible futures

Background information and stakeholders

In 2020, the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) offered an internal grant to encourage staff to produce open textbooks. From this funding, I was contracted for nine weeks as Project Lead of a team of learning advisors to remix Baldwin's (2021) text *College Success* into a textbook on academic skills for Australian tertiary students. My responsibilities involved reconceptualising the aim and structure of *College Success*; making editorial decisions on existing content; overseeing new content created by our team; and managing a short production timeline. For a detailed description of production, please see Hargreaves and Howarth (2022).

Academic Success began as a short, time-limited project, however I soon realised it need not be viewed with the finality of conventional publications. Ideas that I discarded due to time constraints could be resurrected only weeks after publication. A combination of instant, digital self-publishing and the speed of incorporating remixed content, altered my perception of the book as a single project to an ongoing iterative series. Our team could benefit from the ease and speed of revising, while students could benefit from a continually improving book.

Project description

Once I re-envisaged *Academic Success* as a living publication, previous work was renamed Iteration 1. The book has undergone a further two iterations since, and a fourth is in progress. (See *Table 1* for an overview.) Each iteration begins inviting authors to revise old or pitch new content. Authors then work offline on their chapters, undertake a review process and incorporate changes. New chapters are inputted and released publicly on a nominated date while revisions are inputted progressively over several days.

	Iteration 1	Iteration 2	Iteration 3	Iteration 4
Release Date	20 January 2021	21 July 2021	12 January 2024	Expected release December 2024
Production Time	9 weeks	6 months	1 year	Expected production 1 year
Contributors	14 learning advisors 2 librarians TOTAL: 16	Additional: 1 learning advisor 5 librarians 1 peer coordinator TOTAL: 23	Additional: 1 academic 4 learning advisors 2 students TOTAL: 30	Additional: 2 students 6 digital learning staff TOTAL: 38
Content	4 new book parts 11 remixed chapters from <i>College Success</i> 7 new content chapters, but with remixed images	1 new book part 5 new chapters 9 revised chapters 9 retained chapters First Nations content added in revised chapters throughout book	4 new chapters 5 revised chapters 18 retained chapters Glossary Version history New First Nations artwork included	1 new chapter 27 retained chapters 5 videos
Structures Supporting Change	Writing Guidelines document created Authorship Policy document created Mapping spreadsheet created	Decision to create iterations rather than editions to retain the URL	Editorial Board formed Version History included	

Table 1: *The Evolution of Academic Success 2020–2024*

In addition to the listed contributors, an Open Education Content Librarian provided logistical assistance and copyright advice throughout the book’s development.

Key outcomes

Iteration 1 of *Academic Success* met the brief for an Australian remixed textbook on academic skills. From February 2023 to August 2024 alone, the book received over 154 900 unique page views. Referrals to the book grew across iterations from a handful of academics recommending it to students, to it being embedded automatically as a recommended reading in all our university courses via the Learning Management System. The book is also utilised daily by learning advisors in student consultations and workshops.

Iteration 4 of *Academic Success* is currently in production. This release will extend student input in two ways. First, a new chapter will present student stories drawn from a student experience survey, expanding

on the quotes previously interspersed through the book. Secondly, five open content video skits written by students will be embedded in the book to illustrate concepts.

The relevant key outcome in this case study, however, is not the book's future direction nor its positive reception, but the implementation of systems and structures that I will describe that have enabled fluid evolution.

Learnings and recommendations

My observations of *Academic Success* since conception offer insights on how to facilitate the development of remixed OER in three areas: growth, change and time.

Growth

The number of UniSQ contributors to *Academic Success* increased from 16 to 38 over four years. Maintaining a consistent writing style and format with a sizeable team required effort. The Writing Guidelines document I created in Iteration 1 circumvented repetitive conversations with new contributors in subsequent iterations. In hindsight, the guidelines could have also included an explanation of Creative Commons licence levels; instructions on writing attributions; and links for finding remixable resources.

Next, I created an Authorship Policy to address the order of authors' names in a chapter. A conventional "level of contribution" rule is unworkable in remixed OER when valuing one author's small input of new text against another author's large input of edited, remixed text. The policy stated that co-authors would choose their order jointly and use alphabetical order if conflicted. More importantly, the policy explained that the altruistic and collaborative spirit of OER should flavour negotiations.

Across four years, the book's content grew from 18 chapters to a startling 28. The restrictions of production costs that normally curtail length in conventional publishing were absent. "Adding more" was simple, fast and cheap. The new challenge became retaining a clear vision of the book's scope. For example, for Iteration 4, a potential contributor proposed a chapter on one specific student cohort. The editorial board declined it because it would open the gates for chapters on every student cohort, ultimately shifting the emphasis from the book's primary purpose. I was reminded, however, that OER, by nature, unlock possibilities. The author could produce their own **derivative** of *Academic Success* that remixes the entire book for the cohort and includes the proposed chapter.

Change

The expedited growth of *Academic Success* sparked administrative changes. From Iteration 3, my designation as Project Lead of co-contributors changed to Lead Editor of a three-member editorial board.

In application, I performed the same duties, however I appreciated the recognition and valued accessing the combined wisdom of a board.

With an editorial board, *Academic Success*' future as an ongoing publication seemed more assured than depending on one person's employment. Indeed, employment changes prompted challenges in author attribution too. Iteration 3 brought a new contributor who wanted to heavily revise a chapter from an author who departed. Theoretically, as Baldwin was clearly acknowledged as the original source, we could have replaced our old author's name with the new. In practice, it felt disloyal, particularly knowing that the departing member cited his chapter in his publications list for his new job. The situation was resolved by including both members as co-authors of the chapter. Admittedly, endlessly extending the list of authors is not an elegant solution for iterative publishing. Consequently, from Iteration 3, we incorporated a version history in the back matter of *Academic Success* to acknowledge all authors and their contributions. Retrospectively, it would have been ideal to have included a version history from Iteration 1 and state clearly in the Authorship Policy how we would acknowledge departing authors' work.

Changing chapters created other challenges for the book. New chapters were prepared privately then released publicly on specified dates, while revisions were inputted live across several days. For Iteration 2, I considered briefly duplicating chapters, revising them offline then releasing them publicly, but that required using new **Uniform Resource Locators (URL)**, which would break the hyperlinks embedded throughout the university. Consequently, I opted for live editing on nominated dates with sufficient staff assigned to assist. Strategically, *Academic Success* was released in iterations rather than editions specifically to retain the same URL. Not only were the hyperlinks secured but data on book usage was accumulative, which looked more convincing when leveraging support and building recognition.

Time

When I changed from viewing *Academic Success* as a mortal book to an infinite publication, I discovered interim strategies for enabling long-term ideas. For example, when the chapter *Working with Information* expanded, the content on academic integrity was moved to its own, temporarily-short chapter in Iteration 2. For Iteration 3, it was expanded to full length and included a new, timely discussion on artificial intelligence.

My experiences with *Academic Success* taught me to consider immediate and distant timelines simultaneously. I managed the deadlines of each iteration while also using a mapping spreadsheet to plan for the future. For example, the idea of a glossary was conceived after Iteration 1 but not implemented until Iteration 3. Forward thinking also included contemplating remixed derivatives. For example, the authors of the chapter *Maths Foundations* wrote their chapter while discussing reusing its content for a dedicated maths textbook. Currently, I cannot predict when or if *Academic Success* will finish evolving. The structures I incorporated support its continuing development, and ideas for new content and revisions keep flowing.

6 Recommendations

Creating resources with a long game maximises the natural advantages of team-produced OER. Here are six recommendations for enabling a smooth development:

1. Create a Writing Guidelines document to instruct contributors on the resource's style, writing voice and Creative Commons licence type. Include an explanation of licences, instructions for writing attributions, and links for searching for reusable materials.
2. Create an Authorship Policy for contributors. Include a discussion of the order of authors and how content is acknowledged when team members leave.
3. Create an editorial board to share so that the longevity of the book is not dependent on a single person's presence.
4. Include a version history in the resource to acknowledge all authors and their contributions.
5. Decide whether to retain or change URLs for resource revisions. Consider the impact on data collection and sustaining hyperlinks.
6. Create a spreadsheet for storing and mapping the resource's possible futures.

Useful resources

Baldwin, A. (2021). *College success*. University of Central Arkansas. <https://openstax.org/details/books/college-success>

Hargreaves, W., Bartlett, C., & Derrington, K. (Eds.). (2021). *Academic success*. University of Southern Queensland. <https://usq.pressbooks.pub/academicsuccess/>

Hargreaves, W., & Howarth, D. (2022). Open at both ends: How a remixed OER project expanded the inner world of an Australian university's library services team. *Proceedings of the 21st Biennial Conference and Exhibition VALA2022, Online*. <https://www.vala.org.au/vala2022-proceedings/page/4/#>

In practice

The change to regarding Academic Success as a living, ongoing publication was rewarding and unleashed an exhilarating evolution at a speed foreign in academic publishing. It is a force worth harnessing.

Reflect on this case study by considering the following in relation to your own practice:

- Creators of remixed OER have an opportunity to maximise the advantages of digital publishing with remixing for greater impact.
- Consider taking a long-term view of your resource at conception and implement the relevant recommendations even if your initial intent is for a single-issue resource.

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About the author



Dr Wendy Hargreaves

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/wendy-hargreaves-phd/overlay/contact-info/>

Dr Wendy Hargreaves is a Senior Learning Advisor at the University of Southern Queensland and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She has worked in education across 30 years in Australian primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Her PhD and subsequent publications examined differentiating learners in jazz improvisation. Wendy's recent research interests include Open Educational Resources; Academic Language and Learning; and coaching in higher education. She is lead editor of the open textbook *Academic Success* – a study skills handbook for enhancing the first year experience of higher education students.