

## USING COURSE PACKS TO ADDRESS LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL TEXTBOOKS IN LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

### Abstract

Leadership educators face unique challenges in identifying relevant reading materials for their courses. This paper explores the utility of course packs as a tool to address the limitations of traditional textbooks. We describe the process of development for designing a course pack for an undergraduate Leadership Education course. Following this, beneficial outcomes and limitations of course packs are identified and strategies for overcoming the limitations are presented. The paper concludes with reflections of faculty that have implemented a course pack along with recommendations for implementation.

### Introduction

Among the range of duties that a faculty member is expected to perform regarding teaching, selection of course materials is an important component of those responsibilities. The materials selected influence pedagogy, the course flow and structure, and students' interaction with the course concepts. Selecting the right materials, and the right kind of materials, can be an important step in creating an accessible and effective learning environment.

Faculty who teach in Leadership Education programs may face some additional challenges in identifying suitable materials for their courses. In this paper, we assess some of those challenges and offer a potential solution in the form of course packs. We describe our experience utilizing a course pack in an introductory leadership studies course, and examine potential positive outcomes and limitations of utilizing course packs. Finally, we offer some reflection and recommendations for other faculty who may be interested in developing or adopting course packs for

their own classes.

### Issue Statement

Leadership Studies as an educational field is relatively young. One of the challenges of teaching within a developing field is the identification or creation of relevant teaching materials and readings for students. In mature fields that have been offering curriculum for dozens, or perhaps hundreds, of years, curriculum is often highly standardized across universities and programs. This standardization allows for traditional textbooks to be aligned very closely with the outcomes of specific courses. Leadership Education is not like this. Given the great diversity of programs, specific emphasis areas of those programs, and curricular structures, it is difficult for traditional textbooks to be developed in a manner that broadly aligns with many courses. At our Midwestern university, we have often struggled to identify suitable materials for courses in our Department of Leadership Studies.

There are several strategies that faculty may pursue to overcome this challenge. One common solution is to assign several books within a class, each partially relevant and utilized, but none fully aligned with the course objectives. This is, at best, a compromise solution. In an era of ever higher educational expenses for students, and constituents questioning the value of higher education, it can be difficult to justify assigning several expensive books when none are fully utilized. As faculty, we have an obligation to assign affordable and relevant materials to our students that add value to the educational outcomes of the course.

Another possible solution to this issue is for faculty to author their own textbooks that align well with their courses. While this strategy solves the relevance issue, the reality is that few of us have the capacity to engage in authorship of textbooks, and even if we did, it doesn't solve the issues of affordability. The current publisher dominated system of textbook authorship and distribution doesn't lend itself to an affordable, adaptable, and accessible course materials in a way that can be faculty led.

Given these harsh realities of the current system, this paper attempts to illustrate an alternative method of development and distribution of course materials that may solve some issues of affordability and relevance. Course packs, made up of free or low-cost resources, offer an opportunity for faculty to create relevant and affordable materials in a way that is far easier than traditional textbook authorship. While course packs are not perfect, they are worthy of consideration in a developing field like Leadership Education, that may struggle with identifying suitable materials.

## Review of Related Literature

The idea of finding suitable replacements for

traditional textbooks in college classrooms is not new. While there are a wide range of possible tools and resources for this type of endeavor, the term Open Educational Resources (OERs) is often used to describe these efforts. OERs have been defined as, "...any educational resources (including curriculum maps, course materials, textbooks, streaming videos, multimedia applications, podcasts, and any other materials that have been designed for use in teaching and learning) that are openly available for use by educators and students..." (Butcher, 2015, p. 5). Often, these resources are combined in logical ways to form resources that can replace traditional textbooks.

As the price of textbooks, and higher education in general, continues to rise, OERs have been shown to offer significant savings with quality that is comparable to traditional resources (Hilton, 2016). In addition to findings of comparable quality, OER use has pointed to other measurable factors related to student and faculty success. For example, recent research has shown that OER adoption has improved end-of-course grades for all students including Pell recipient students, part-time students, and historically underserved populations (Colvard, Watson, & Park, 2018). OER use has also been associated with increased positive perceptions of the faculty member. For instance, in a study of undergraduate psychology students, researchers found faculty who used OER resources, as opposed to a traditional textbook, were rated higher on kindness, encouragement, and creativity (Vojtech & Grissett, 2017).

Incorporation of OERs is greatly simplified when high-quality OER resources are created for a class and offered through a shared repository (e.g. OpenStax) (Watson, Domizi, & Clouser, 2017). Unfortunately, for some areas of study including leadership studies, reaping the benefits of OER use in the classroom is not as simple as picking a well-developed resource and plugging it into a class. For

courses in which high-quality OER resources have not been developed, the successes described above become more difficult to accomplish (Lawrence & Lester, 2018). However, development of effective OERs does not necessarily require the faculty member to create a high-quality resource from scratch. As content experts, faculty members can select from a wide range of resources to create an OER to fit the needs of their class.

Leadership Education and development is facilitated through a variety of non-traditional approaches (Jenkins, 2013). At the same time, the ways in which students learn and engage in the 21st-century classroom are changing. Wisniewski (2010) describes how Millennials are seeking an integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum that is research driven rather than textbook driven. Course packs provide leadership educators with unique opportunity to address this issue by giving them the freedom to adjust and adapt their curriculum to the changing needs of the students rather than trying to alter their curriculum to meet the current edition of the textbook.

## Description of the Application

We teach at a regional midwestern university in the Department of Leadership Studies. Our department offers two bachelor degrees in Organizational Leadership, and as such, we have a variety of courses that are focused on specific aspects of leadership theory and skills. One of these classes, Introduction to Leadership Behavior, is a broad survey course designed to expose students to an array of common leadership skills. In this section, we will describe the process we went through of identifying a resource to meet the needs that were identified for the class.

As we began this process, we started with the course outcomes and objectives. Using these as a

guide, we began to search for resources that were already created and could be used to help us reach the outcomes that had been set for the course. The primary content areas covered in the course are teams and groups, communication and 360 feedback, conflict management/resolution, creative thinking, collaboration, adaptive leadership, and strategic planning. Since this is an introductory undergraduate survey course, we needed a broad overview of each area, at an accessible reading level, and without too much depth or technical complexity.

We initially conducted a literature review of traditional textbooks that are common in our field. Such texts include "Leadership" by Northouse, "The Leadership Challenge" by Kouzes and Posner, "Leadership in Organizations" by Yukl, "Leadership: Research Findings, Practice, and Skills" by Dubrin, "Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills" by Johnson and Johnson, "Understanding Behaviors for Effective Leadership" by Howell and Costley, and "Making the Team: A Guide for Managers" by Thompson. Each of these textbooks contains a variety of high-quality and relevant content, but none covered every aspect of each content area in the class. In addition to these gaps, each resource book also contained extraneous material that was not useful or relevant to the class.

In addition to the concerns regarding content coverage in each of the identified textbooks, we were also conscious of the expense for these books for students. At the time of this writing, the MSRP for the latest edition of each of the books identified above ranged in price from \$35-\$249.95 with a mean price of \$132.33. Given this price point, simply adopting two or three books to provide adequate content coverage was not a viable solution.

For some time, the university has been encouraging faculty to adopt OERs for use in their classrooms. There have been a variety of workshops and

trainings offered on how to find and implement OERs, presenters from the Creative Commons have presented to and spoken with faculty, and there are resources available for faculty to develop and integrate OERs into their classroom. While OERs seemed like an interesting and noteworthy idea, we simply did not have the time or resources to create what would essentially be a new book on leadership behavior. However, as we continued to struggle to find suitable resources, the benefits associated with the use of OERs became difficult to ignore. For this reason, we decided to engage in an effort to create a course pack that would include a collection of materials that were identified by faculty and housed in an on-campus repository that would be free to students.

Rejecting the idea that quality assurance is the sole responsibility of publishing companies, we found a wide range of open source and copyrighted works that fell within the domain of fair use to piece together the course pack. These resources included sections from OER and published textbooks that fit the various topics of the course, educational videos, websites, and journal articles. For example, using the Open Textbook Library, we identified an OER on organizational behavior that was licensed as attribution-noncommercial-sharealike (Organizational Behavior, 2017). Given the creative commons license associated with this book, it was simple to mix and remix the content we wanted into the course pack. Once all of the resources had been identified, they were vetted by faculty members who teach the course and have experience and training in the content areas relevant to the outcomes. Resources that were deemed credible were mapped to the structure and flow of the course as outlined by the content areas.

In order to effectively incorporate these materials into the class, we had to consider the way in which the course materials would be presented to the students. We needed to create a repository

for the materials that would allow easy access, and there were several options. One option was to integrate the materials into individual course shells on the course management system which, at our school, was Blackboard. However, we did not choose that option because after the semester was over, the students would lose access to the course materials. Another option was to place the files in a shared cloud drive such as Google Drive or Dropbox. We also did not choose this option because it required us to use an external resource to manage our course content.

Ultimately we chose to work with our university library to host the content in a course pack that would be housed on the library website so that it would be available to the students throughout their time at the university. By intentionally placing these resources in the course pack, we were able to create a central location for the resources that would be accessible by all sections of the class at any time. This was especially helpful given that, at our university, this class is taught in multiple different modalities. Students at the university taking the class on campus, through the online program, or through one of our international partnerships all had access to the same resources. If we needed to make a change to the course content, we could just make updates to the course pack and those changes would be reflected across all classes.

## Discussion of the Outcomes

When considering outcomes of utilizing course packs in Leadership Education, like most pedagogical decisions, there are both benefits and limitations to this approach. In this section we will explore some of the most important benefits to adopting these kinds of materials, as well as examine several limitations that should be considered before utilizing course pack resources.

Benefits. The most significant benefit of utilizing a course pack is almost certainly the flexibility of being able to customize the materials to be closely aligned with the needs of a particular class. One limitation of traditional textbooks is that the author writing the book is unaware of how that book will be integrated into a course. Faculty are often faced with selecting from a range of book choices that all have some relevance, but without finding one that is both comprehensive and without extraneous material that will not be utilized. Course packs elegantly address this problem. By being able to select a range of resources, and being able to incorporate only the components of those resources that are relevant to the course, faculty members can create a fully customized set of reading materials that are both comprehensive and perfectly relevant.

In addition to the benefits of relevance, another important strength of course packs is their ability to be easily edited and maintained. Because these resources are hosted online, faculty may elect to make changes at any point in time, with no cost and only minimal effort required. This is a tremendous strength because it allows faculty and academic programs to maintain their course materials easily over time. Unlike traditional textbooks, the development and maintenance of course materials can happen continuously, which breaks the cycle of courses needing to be redeveloped every time a new edition of a book is released. Courses that incorporate a course pack for materials can be both more up-to-date, and less susceptible to outside influence from publishers.

Of course, another primary benefit of adopting a course pack for reading materials is the cost to students. Most course packs can be made available entirely free of charge to the individual student. In an era of increasing costs of higher education, and questions about access stemming from those expenses, this is a very real benefit to students. It may also serve a pragmatic function in assisting

programs in recruiting students given the affordable nature of the materials they are required to access in a Leadership Studies course. In fact, some universities and state systems have even begun designating free and low-cost materials within course catalogs. The University System of Georgia is one such example, and has, beginning in Fall of 2018, begun requiring institutions to designate courses that have either free or low-cost materials (Affordable Learning Georgia, 2018). A course utilizing a course pack would generally meet this definition and could prove attractive to students who may be particularly concerned about the cost of books and materials when selecting courses for their program of study.

A final potential benefit of course packs is the ability to utilize them in tandem with other more traditional resources. Because they are free to students and can be customized to include only relevant materials, some faculty may find utility in adopting a course pack to serve as supplementary to a traditional textbook. This method may be particularly relevant for existing courses that already have identified textbooks in place that are working well. In these cases, faculty may elect to develop the course pack as a substitution for some, but not all of the textbooks, or simply as an ancillary materials alongside the required textbooks.

Limitations. While course packs have a number of strong benefits, they are not a panacea or without limitations. There are several important considerations that faculty should be aware of prior to adopting or developing a course pack for a course. In this section, we will examine some of the main challenges associated with course packs, and offer some recommendations for strategies to combat these weaknesses.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation of a course pack is that it is created by the faculty member him or herself, and can represent a significant

amount of labor, particularly during the initial development. Typically, the process of adopting reading materials from a traditional textbook is relatively straightforward; a faculty member reviews various options and selects one or more books. The development process for a course pack can be significantly more involved and may include both aspects of reviewing and selecting resources, as well as some limited authorship of materials on the part of the faculty member. Unlike authoring traditional textbooks, faculty can generally not expect any financial compensation for their work in developing a course pack and implementing it in a course.

As an example, for this specific development process, a team of three faculty members and one librarian spent about six months developing the course pack. We estimate that it took approximately 40 hours of dedicated work to complete the project. The labor intensity and time required to develop other course packs will be highly variable, depending on the content, availability of suitable resources, expertise of the faculty, and support from university staff.

One potential solution to address the issues of workload and compensation can be found through the faculty member's institution. Some institutions, largely to promote the benefits of free or low-cost resources to students, have implemented mini-grants or development resource pools to help compensate faculty for the work associated with the development of a course pack. These funds may be available through an independent process or associated with a larger course development process. In addition, university libraries are often excellent resources for the development of course pack materials. A library may have staff who are specially trained in developing these resources and can assist in the identification of materials, vetting sources, and hosting the course pack.

Another limitation of course packs, and free

resources in general, is quality control of the resources. Traditional textbooks generally have a rigorous editorial review process, and faculty have some assurance of the quality of the source based on the reputation of the publisher. With free and low-cost resources, this can be challenging, since there is no single editorial or review process that governs all of the resources, and it can be difficult to verify the process for some resources. Faculty may be, rightfully so, wary of assigning a low quality reading resource in a course.

Several strategies may be brought to bear in addressing the quality of sources within a course pack. First, it is important to remember that faculty are the ones selecting the materials, and they should have expertise in identifying materials that align with the course needs and are presenting accurate information. It is also possible to identify any review procedures that may have been utilized for a particular source. For example, some OER materials will include peer review procedures that were utilized in the development of the resource. University librarians may be helpful in this processing of vetting resources. Finally, it is certainly possible to incorporate more traditionally vetted materials into a course pack. For example, a faculty member may wish to include a peer-reviewed journal article as part of the reading for a portion of the class materials.

Another important consideration for faculty who wish to utilize a course pack is the implementation process into a course. Traditional textbooks usually have substantial editing for cohesiveness and accessibility, leading the student-reader through the material in a logical manner. In contrast, course packs, which are often made up of disparate and unrelated materials, do not offer the same level of guidance for the reader. Faculty may need to offer additional instructions to students in how to navigate the materials included. Grouping the readings by topic, offering clear instructions,



and checking in with students to ensure they are correctly accessing the materials at the appropriate time are all potential methods of overcoming this challenge.

Finally, the last limitation that faculty are often forced to confront when adopting a course pack is the likelihood that the materials they identify will be available only in electronic format. Given the prevalence of mobile computing devices, and students' willingness to access resources in electronic format, this may prove not to be a significant limitation. However, it is worthy of consideration in light of the teaching methods used, and how the materials will be incorporated into the class. For example, faculty may need to make provisions for access if students will need to work with reading materials synchronously in-class or in situations with limited internet connectivity (such as a field assignment). Generally, this limitation is fairly easy to overcome, but depending on the specifics of the teaching environment, it is important to acknowledge.

When taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of course packs, it is evident that with some consideration given to specific limitations, this method of material delivery provides substantial benefits. In the next section, we provide some reflections on the overall utility of these resources, particularly in light of the challenges identified above.

## Reflections of the Practitioner

Acknowledging the limitations presented in the previous section, we have found course packs to be a beneficial resource in the development and teaching of some of our leadership studies courses. We are currently piloting the course pack for the first time, and initial feedback from faculty and students has been very positive. Students have

commented that they appreciate the low cost and custom nature of the materials, and faculty teaching the class have indicated that it was not a difficult transition to adopt the new structure.

As we reflect on this experience, it seems that one of the most important things to focus on when deciding to adopt a course pack is the purpose and outcomes of the reading and materials. Like all things in education, intentionality is critically important for the success of course materials. Faculty should be able to identify why, specifically, they are assigning a particular piece of reading material, and what purpose it serves in the larger context of student learning. Focusing on this at the outset is useful because it gives guidance to what materials may be useful in the course, and how to structure the reading to be most effective.

Course packs will not work for all situations, or for all classes and programs. If a particular course is already developed with an existing textbook, and it's working well, that is not a situation that likely has a strong justification for adopting an alternative resource. But in those circumstances where faculty are struggling to identify a relevant and affordable set of reading materials, it may be justified to consider a course pack as the primary or ancillary materials for a class.

## Recommendations

The idea of replacing traditional course textbooks with a course pack is certainly one that should be given careful consideration. This process is not without cost, and not all situations will justify the resources needed to develop a course pack. We recommend that individuals interested in making this type of change in their classroom take several things into consideration. First, it would be advisable to start slowly as finding, selecting, and putting together a course pack for any course is

going to include some degree of trial and error. We would recommend starting with one course (preferably one that would be well aligned with this type of approach) to experiment with rather than attempting to change an entire program over to course pack resources. Next, when selecting a course to redesign in this way, the faculty should evaluate the reasons for the transition rather than just making changes for the sake of being innovative. Courses that have high-cost textbooks, multiple textbooks, and/or textbooks that only marginally address course outcomes are all good examples of classes that might benefit from a course pack type resource. Finally, once the resources have been identified and compiled, it would make sense to pilot the use of the new course pack in a single or small sample of classes to determine where improvements need to be made. Utilizing this type of approach can provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the developed course pack prior to widespread implementation.



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