

# “Opening” Art History: Exploring the Motivations and Practices of Faculty using Open Educational Resources in Lower-Level and General Education Art History Courses



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## ABSTRACT

Although over the years the conceptual understanding of OER has improved, more insights are needed on faculty's discipline-specific practices with OER. This study explored the motivations and OER-related practices of faculty in lower-level and general education (GE) undergraduate art history courses in the United States. Using twelve in-depth interviews conducted over nineteen months, it investigated why, how and to what ends a diverse group of art historians use OER and related practices in their teaching. The study found six, discipline-specific main motivations for adopting OER, which extend well beyond cost savings for students. At the same time, only small changes were reported in faculty's teaching practices as a result of adopting OER. That is, OER didn't simply trigger pedagogical innovation by virtue of being adopted. Instead, these resources were strategically utilized by faculty to address existing teaching needs and goals, which were shaped by broader conversations and concerns within the field of art history. This suggests that it is impossible to disconnect OER from current pedagogic practices and models, as well as the social and disciplinary context in which they are employed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Open educational resources (OER) are free teaching and learning resources that grant users legal permission to copy them, modify them, and share them with others. For advocates, OER don't merely offer financial gains, but also open up the possibilities for new pedagogies that respond to the potential and challenges of contemporary digital technologies. As compared with studies on OER efficacy and cost savings, there has been little empirical research on individual educators' use of OER in specific disciplinary contexts. Qualitative, interview-based studies on OER usage also remain limited in the U.S. context, with the majority of OER-related research so far employing survey methodologies. Moreover, despite growing interest in open pedagogy and open educational practices (OEP), few studies have examined how OER impact upon teaching and curriculum design, and how openness can be implemented to support particular teaching goals and learning outcomes. Thus, the aim of this research project was to go beyond a focus on pragmatic issues associated with the resources themselves—including technology and licensing—and explore the implications of OER for teaching and learning.

Specifically, the study examined why, how, and to what ends a diverse group of art historians uses OER and related practices in their teaching. The study took place in the United States; semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve faculty who teach lower-level undergraduate art history courses at ten colleges across the country. Using constructivist grounded theory, six main motivators for using OER were identified, and are discussed below. In addition, faculty's responses to how they incorporate OER into their instruction, and how OER have impacted upon their teaching practices, are synthesized and presented. The study findings contribute to literature on OER and open pedagogy in the humanities, as well as literature concerned with the nature, meaning, and limits of "openness" in higher education more broadly. The study also complements the small but growing body of literature on discipline-specific OER usage and implementation. On a practical level, it aims to provide inspiration for art history instructors who are considering OER for their courses, as well as for instructional designers, librarians, and other OER support staff seeking to promote engagement with OER on their campuses, particularly in art history and related fields.

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

### FACULTY MOTIVATION AND OER

Motivation is defined as the inner urge that moves or prompts a person to action (Resnick 1996). Motives are the "whys" of behavior—the needs or wants that drive behavior and explain what we do (Strombach et al. 2016). Motivation arises from outside (extrinsic) or inside (intrinsic) the individual, and individuals can consider different factors as motivators or demotivators (Kusurkar et al. 2011). Rolfe (2012) has pointed out that "understanding the motivations and characteristics of potential users [of OER] is important to develop strong and sustainable strategies and practices" (2012: 10). Along those lines, Belikov and Bodily (2016) have argued that the future of OER depends on how these resources are perceived by individual faculty members.

In the North American context, studies often cite textbook cost as the primary motivation for faculty to adopt OER in order to reduce financial barriers for their students (Belikov & Bodily 2016; Lantrip & Ray 2020; Ozdemir & Hendricks 2017; Petrides et al. 2011). The financial benefits of OER dovetail nicely with broader goals concerning more equitable access to education, especially for minorities, working students, and single parents (Jhangiani & Biswas-Diener 2017; Conole 2012). However, little is known with regards to discipline-specific motivations for adopting and using OER. Different disciplines have different teaching approaches and methodologies, different discourses of academic inquiry, and different pedagogical goals and learning objectives. More research is thus required to understand how disciplinary context shapes engagement with OER, and how OER may be used to support innovation and pedagogical change in different disciplinary areas. By understanding faculty motivations and their experience of contextually adopting and using OER, we can better design and implement institutional OER initiatives and professional development services (Harley 2010).

Overall, awareness of the availability of OER has increased steadily over the past ten years (McKenzie 2020; Seaman & Seaman 2017). Until recently, however, research into OER has largely tended to focus on access, quality, and cost savings rather than the experiences and educational practices of students and educators (Hassler et al. 2014; Jung, Bauer & Heaps 2017; Knox 2013). Yet, there is a growing interest in the pedagogical affordances of OER and their impact on teaching and learning practices (Ehlers 2011; Paskevicius & Irvine 2019; Pulker & Kukulska-Hulme 2020; Stagg 2017). This recent turn to interest in open pedagogy<sup>1</sup> has generated an increase in discussion around how openness may support changes to teaching and learning.

Weller et al. (2015) found that use of OER tends to lead educators to critically reflect on their own teaching practice. In the study, about half of the educators surveyed reported that they used a broader range of teaching and learning methods and reflected more on the way that they teach as a result of their engagement with OER. They also noted that they more frequently compared their own teaching with others. Similarly, van Acker et al. (2013) argued that OER can allow educators to diversify teaching activities or to gain new insights into other teaching methods for a particular subject. In a study of post-secondary educators in British Columbia, Paskevicius and Irvine (2019) found that engagement with OER and open educational practices (OEP)<sup>2</sup> can support learner-centered educational designs that promote open and networked literacies. They also found that, for educators, openness as a pedagogical approach created channels for the sharing of pedagogical practice and increased discourses around teaching and learning on a broader scale.

Other authors concur about the role of OER in potentially improving teaching quality (Goodwin 2011; Misra 2014; West & Victor 2011); facilitating communities of teachers to collaborate, share, discuss, critique, use, reuse and continuously improve educational content and practice (Hegarty 2015; Jhangiani et al. 2016); and developing innovative approaches to teaching and learning (Camilleri, Ehlers & Pawlowski 2014; Lane 2010; Okada, Rabello & Ferreira 2014; Petrides et al. 2010). However, there is a further need to understand how exactly the affordances of OER impact educators' teaching practice in different domains. In further exposing discipline-specific practices, emergent pedagogies, and instructional changes afforded by OER, an opportunity exists for increased diffusion of these resources and associated practices among faculty members.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

### CURRENT CHALLENGES IN THE UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING OF ART HISTORY

A fairly recent discipline, art history formed as an academic field of study in the early twentieth century (equipped with established curriculum and standard aims and objectives), though it did not emerge properly as a separate discipline until after the Second World War (Harris 2006). Emphasizing the analysis of the formal aspects of an artwork (i.e., color, tone, composition, etc.) combined with an analysis of symbolism (iconography) and context (social, political, economic), art history has predominantly focused on a group of pre-selected art works and their creators, which are mainly studied chronologically (Harris 2006). This canon of artworks and artists<sup>3</sup>—that is, those items and producers deemed worthy of study as the “best” and “highest” according to certain criteria and values—has traditionally excluded many forms of creative human expression (e.g., indigenous, disabled, queer) that did not conform to the Modernistic and rigid definition of what “art” was presumed to be. For decades, women, non-European creators, and artists of color have been largely absent from art history courses and textbooks, creating the impression that seminal artwork is produced only by a certain type of artist and by certain accepted cultures (Brown 2019; Ellis-Petersen 2017; Tipton 2013). However, there are

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1 “Open pedagogy” refers to educational practices that utilize the unique freedoms offered by openly-licensed materials in order to more directly engage students in learning (Wiley 2013).

2 OEP have been defined as teaching and learning activities where both “resources are shared by making them openly available and pedagogical practices are employed which rely on social interaction, knowledge creation, peer learning, and shared learning practices” (Ehlers 2013: 94).

3 For an overview of the art historical canon, its history, conceptual basis and main critiques, see Langfeld (2018).

educators who are eager to create more expanded notions of what constitutes “important” art, and to challenge the ways in which canons can function as mechanisms of oppression and vehicles of exclusion through which structures of class, race, gender, and inequality are hidden.

Meanwhile, generating interest among college students in a field that is oftentimes perceived as elitist, paternalistic, denigrating, and, well, irrelevant within our current social media-infatuated society, has increasingly become a challenge. Art history courses, particularly at the survey level, have traditionally eschewed active learning practices, favoring instead a lecture-based, transfer-of-information model (Yavelberg 2014, 2016). At the same time, art history surveys frequently function as general education courses that teach a large student population that generally has a low level of engagement compared to art history majors. Moreover, survey classes often exclusively rely on textbooks, which are filled with high-quality art images, but written in a dry, matter-of-fact style that is unappealing to a general education population. Textbook-based knowledge, as well, encourages and actively contributes to the formation of canons (Feldman 2017; Grever 2007). Textbooks, like all books, have beginnings, middles, and ends; they are “bounded containers” of authoritative knowledge composed by singular experts; and they’re embedded with deep yet invisible epistemological assumptions about the grounds of art, of history, and of teaching (Friesen 2017). Intro-level art history textbooks, in particular, are too often reduced down to the most straightforward, comprehensible history, while upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate seminars tend to center on complex issues of power and representation in art.<sup>4</sup>

Concerns over how art history is taught, both in the classroom and outside it, are far from new. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century art historians have called for pedagogical change at the undergraduate level (Chalmers 1978; DeAngelis 1987; Dietrich & Smith-Hurd 1995; Donahue-Wallace, La Follette & Pappas 2009; Elsen 1954; Gasper-Hulvat 2017; Kerin & Lepage 2016; La Follette 2017; Erickson 1983; Olds 1986; Panofsky 1954; Yokley 1999). Meanwhile, since at least the 1980s, art historians have argued for revising, dismantling and, even, “firing” the canon based upon white, male, European, heteronormative artists and their masterpieces (Barzman 1994; Chandra et al. 2016; Camille et al. 1996; Mast 2019; Nochlin 1971; Pinder 2013; Pollock 1999).

Discussions around how to engage a large class, diversify the curriculum, foster scholarly interest in art history, and make the material relevant for today’s students are thus at the heart of scholarly conversations in art history pedagogy. As funding for the humanities dries up and liberal arts programs struggle to make a case for themselves (Cascone 2018; Dix 2018; Schmidt 2018), art historians are increasingly called to rethink the place of art history in the contemporary university, the importance of “canonicity,” and what they want to provide as educators, particularly in survey courses (Palace 2020; Phelan et al. 2005; Rubin 2011; Yavelberg 2014, 2016). What role technology and openness can play in this transformation is central to this conversation, and a driving factor behind this research project.

## DESIGN AND METHODS

In this qualitative research study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to investigate the motivations and practices of art history faculty who have adopted OER in their teaching. A qualitative approach was used to capture the experiences of faculty, to better understand how educational practices and patterns of meaning are created, and to discover themes among this population through a process of discovery (Corbin & Strauss 2014; Litchman 2006).

## TYPES OF ART HISTORY COURSES

The study focused on lower-level and general education (GE) undergraduate art history courses, which in most departments consist of some variant of the following: Art Appreciation, Art History I (Ancient through Medieval), and Art History II (Renaissance to Modern). In addition, two of the instructors were teaching lower-level (or lower division) courses on World Arts (e.g.,

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to acknowledge that many students still prefer textbooks over other types of educational materials. According to art historian David Little, students often seek from instructors “a body of knowledge and desire facts, landmarks, themes to hold together the complex histories of artistic practices, institutions, and aesthetics” (Phelan et al. 2005: 33).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In relation to the aim of the study, the research questions are as following:

1. What are faculty's motivations for using and/or creating OER in introductory-level art history?
2. How are faculty using OER in introductory-level art history and to what ends?
3. What is the perceived impact of OER on faculty's teaching practices?

## DATA COLLECTION: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A purposeful sample of 12 instructors was interviewed between January 2018 and May 2019. Purposive sampling was selected due to the specificity of the context and the need to recruit participants actively engaged with OER. Interview participants were identified via three mechanisms: (1) using personal/professional contacts of the researcher, (2) through contributions and comments to the websites Art History Teaching Resources (<https://arthistoryteachingresources.org>), a popular peer-populated platform for art history teachers, and Smarthistory (<https://smarthistory.org>), a leading open art history resource, and (3) using blogs, online news articles, press releases, digital professional networks (e.g., OER commons), and institutional websites (e.g., faculty OER showcases, institutional news). Participants were selected based on their situational ability to reflect on their motivations and experiences relating to their engagement with OER (Creswell 2013; Padilla-Díaz 2015). Five participants were working at community colleges, five at state universities, and two at private teaching colleges. Of the participants, five were tenured, four were adjuncts, and three were tenure-track faculty. All but two participants were female. Details of the participants in the study are presented in **Table 1**. Note that research-intensive institutions are not represented in this study.

TYPE	NO. OF FACULTY INTERVIEWED
Community colleges	5
Private teaching colleges	2
State universities	5

**Table 1** Types of higher-ed institutions represented in this study.

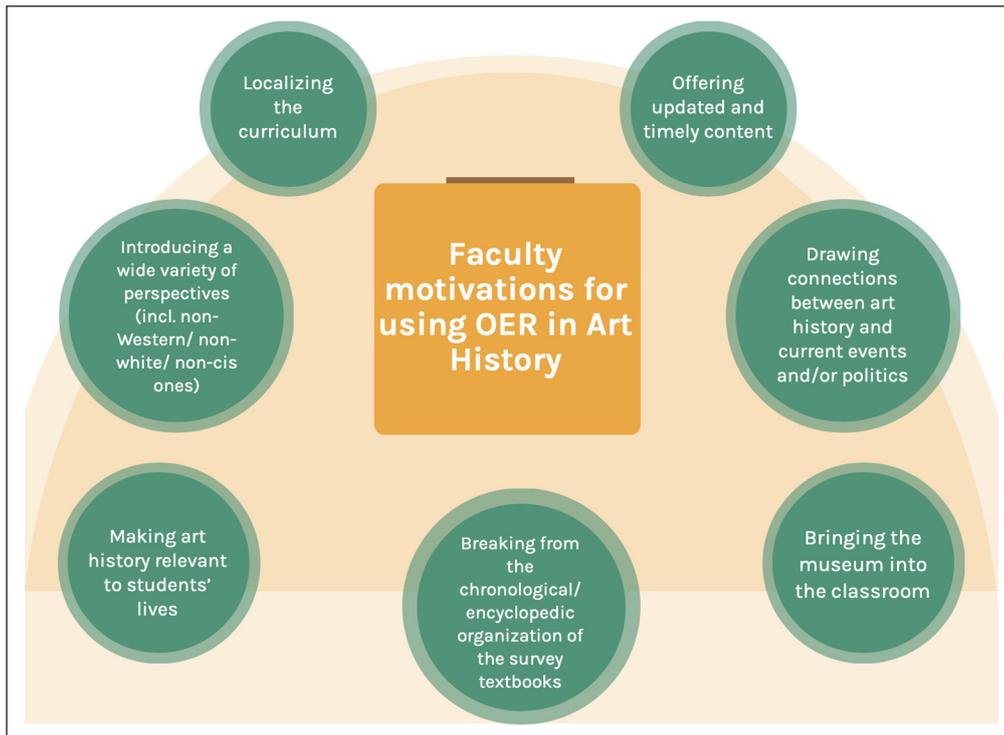
Interviews were conducted using Zoom and Skype, and lasted between 40 and 96 minutes. Participants were asked about their motivations for using OER in their course(s), the types of OER they use, how they integrate OER into their curriculum, and the impact OER have had on their teaching, among other questions. Some examples of interview questions can be seen in **Table 2**. Most instructors opted to remain anonymous. Pseudonyms are used where anonymity has been requested.

THEME	QUESTION
Awareness	How did you get to know about Open Educational Resources (OER)?
Awareness	How would you define OER?
Motivation	What are your reasons for adopting OER in your curriculum?
Practices/Usage	What types of OER are you using in your curriculum?
Practices/Usage	How are you using OER?
Perceived Benefits	What benefits do you see for using OER rather than commercial textbooks?
Barriers	What challenges or barriers did you face in adopting OER?
Impact on Teaching	Did your teaching change after adopting OER? How?
Student Response	How are students responding to OER? Are you measuring that?

**Table 2** Examples of interview questions.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA

Interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. They were coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser 1965) and a thematic analysis was performed on the transcripts (Ando, Cousins & Young 2014; Maguire & Delahunt 2017). Coding was guided by the research questions and the literature, but ultimately determined by themes identified within the data. The researcher analyzed each transcript twice to determine initial concepts, followed by more concrete codes. All coding was performed by the researcher without the use of any software. Coding was done by hand on the transcripts, details were extracted and summarized on A5 cards, and one card was used for each theme or sub-theme. The goal of the analysis was to systematically search for meaning in the collected data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie 2007). The main themes that emerged can be seen in **Figures 1** and **2** below (section “Findings and Discussion”).



**Figure 1** Motivations of faculty using OER. Note that only motivations that were identified by at least 1/4 of respondents were included in this illustration.



**Figure 2** Themes that emerged as faculty described how OER is impacting their pedagogy.

This section presents the findings of the analysis, grouped into three areas of focus: faculty motivations, practices with OER (including types of OER used), and perceived impact of openness on teaching practices.

## MOTIVATIONS

Six main motivations for using OER were identified (*Figure 1*). The most commonly discussed motivator was a desire to use OER as a means of “correcting” the art historical canon<sup>5</sup> by introducing students to a wider variety of voices and perspectives than is typically found in introductory art history textbooks, be it Neil McGregor’s *The History of the World in 100 Objects*, Marilyn Stokstad’s *Art History*, or Helen Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages*. Faculty particularly emphasized a desire to include art and analysis from women, as well as marginalized and oppressed groups, such as queer artists and art critics of color. Anna, a community college instructor in Southern California, said:

In looking at previous syllabi for these classes (that I teach), I saw textbooks and I thought ‘these are all kind of terrible for a variety of reasons. They reproduce the Western canon, they have a single male author droning on for 700 pages who’s probably a white person and, basically, I don’t want to use these documents to teach my classes [...] [Instead] what I wanted to do was design my classes so that they a) expose students to a maximum number of authors per semester and b), expose them to a variety of identities, as well. Essentially, my syllabus should reflect the individuals that are in my classroom.

An instructor in New York, who emphasizes feminist approaches and critiques in her art history curriculum, noted that she turned to OER because she was frustrated with how women’s art was presented in survey textbooks:

Survey textbooks are still so lazy when it comes to researching and presenting the work of female artists, especially if you go back to the Renaissance. Even before OER became “a thing” on our campus, I’d reached a point where I was using only about 50% of the assigned textbook and supplementing with essays from *Hyperallergic*, the Tate Museum website, the National Museum of Women in the Arts...I was testing the waters, in a sense, to see if students liked the online readings better, or at least just as much. And I think they do.

Along these lines, Julie,<sup>6</sup> an instructor in the Pacific Northwest, noted that OER and other internet resources allow her to bring in “different voices, different interpretations, and certainly different artists” than the standard textbook would have permitted her to. Julie went on to add that she works with a lot of Chicano and Latino students on her campus, and tries to teach with a Critical Race Studies lens, which she noted was “not really possible” when using any of the traditional art history survey textbooks. This notion of “localizing” the curriculum for students and their sociocultural/geographic context, was mentioned as a motivating factor by several of the faculty interviewed.

Participants in large metropolitan areas (e.g., Los Angeles, New York) also noted using free digital resources (though, not exclusively OER) as a means of drawing comparisons between historical and contemporary urban art movements, and/or introducing students to the work of local artists and art collectives.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, faculty in more rural areas, discussed how OER (in particular, *Smarthistory*<sup>8</sup> videos) and museum websites could be used to “bring the art museum into the classroom.” James,<sup>9</sup> a community college instructor in Idaho noted:

<sup>5</sup> The canon is defined as the established timeline of artists who are sometimes considered as old masters or great artists. It is a set of rules, principles, or standards accepted as fundamental in a field of study.

<sup>6</sup> Pseudonym used to protect participant’s anonymity.

<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, several participants draw distinctions between how they teach survey or other GE-level classes, versus how they teach upper-level, and graduate courses. They noted, for instance, that in more advanced classes they also use resources such as interviews with scholars and curators.

<sup>8</sup> *Smarthistory.org* is a website devoted to the study and teaching of art history, it promotes an experiential understanding of artworks using interactive videos and multiple images instead of a textbook-style single, cropped work.

<sup>9</sup> Pseudonym used to protect participant’s anonymity.

Our students don't live around the corner from the Met or the Whitney. They haven't seen Rome or the Louvre. Many of them have never been to *any* art museum, they don't know what it's like. And their used copy of [Marilyn Stockstad's *Art History*], isn't going to give them a feel for [what it's like to be in a museum.] But with Smarthistory, I can take them into Santo Spirito,<sup>10</sup> I can take them to see the Mona Lisa. They can get a feel for what it's like walking through a museum, looking at a piece of art that's displayed. I don't think you can teach art history purely from a textbook and projector, at least not where I live. And I've heard people complain that Smarthistory is too basic, but I think it's where it needs to be [for my students].<sup>11</sup>

The desire to offer updated and timely content to students was also mentioned as a motivator by several instructors and is in line with previous studies that examine faculty motivations for OER adoption (e.g., Alevizou, 2012). Anna, said that part of giving up her survey textbook was that she wanted to be “more nimble” in terms of responding to current cultural and political issues. Josh, who teaches at a community college outside Dallas, Texas, shared similar thoughts:

There were multiple reasons I was interested in [OER], [...] but for me, what I found really helpful was, it allows me to stay more current with materials. So as new writing comes out, I can wrap that in more seamlessly without having to wait for a book to update or added on as additional reading.

Furthermore, instructors discussed using OER as a means of “breaking” with the standard organization of the art history survey, which is centered around formal elements (tone, texture, pattern, color, etc.), media (e.g., clay, ink, pastel, wood) and chronology. One instructor, employed at the City University of New York, suggested this type of approach results in a “terribly watered down” history of art. “Instead of doing a chronological survey,” she added, “I do the whole thing focused on themes and really focus a lot of controversial topics and issues to get them to expand their horizons.” However, Miranda, who also teaches Art Appreciation in New York City, suggested that, although initially, she had turned to OER for the same reason, she ultimately felt a more conceptual (versus chronological) approach was too hard for her students to grasp. She still uses OER, but has returned to doing a chronological survey, which she feels “works better” for her students.

## FACULTY PRACTICES WITH OER

Faculty reported using a wide range of online resources created by third parties. These resources were obtained in a variety of ways: by “googling around,” through listservs, by searching specific collections, including museum websites, and by searching OER repositories and websites. Faculty reported using a variety of OER, including sections of courses available on Saylor Academy, essays and videos offered by [Smarthistory.org](https://www.smarthistory.org), and courses (essentially, digital textbooks) published by Boundless (now available through Lumen Learning).

They all reported using OER in conjunction with other resources that were free for students (but not “formally” OER), such as The British Museum's *History of the World in 100 Objects* podcast, the *Civilizations* documentary series from BBC/PBS and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, as well as extracts from anthologies and scholarly journal articles available through their university and college libraries. The two most commonly cited resources were Smarthistory (OER) and the Met's *Timeline of Art History* (not OER).

While the majority of faculty were able to differentiate between “open” and “free” resources when asked to do so, they nevertheless used the terms interchangeably when discussing curricular materials during the interviews. Instructors were also asked if the absence or existence of an open license influenced their selection process, to which all subjects but one responded that it didn't. One instructor suggested that “open was nice,” and another that it was “ideal,” but that ultimately licensing was not an important factor when selecting resources—as long as

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<sup>10</sup> The Basilica di Santo Spirito, usually referred to simply as Santo Spirito, is a church in Florence, Italy. The interior of the building—internal length 97 meters—is one of the preeminent examples of Renaissance architecture.

<sup>11</sup> Knowing that James teaches in a rural area, I followed up asking if his students had access to the internet, if they could watch these types of videos at home, or on their smartphones. He admitted that many didn't have internet at home, which is why he tried to show videos in class, instead of assigning them for reading/viewing at home.

those resources were reputable, of high quality, and free for students to access and use. This finding is in line with other studies suggesting that the open license, which is what distinguishes OER from other resources on the Web (also referred to as ‘stuff-on-the-Web’ by Philips, 2012, and ‘grey OERs’ by Brent, Gibbs and Gruszczynska, 2012), is not in itself a motivator to engage spontaneously with OER (e.g., Alevizou 2012; Weller et al. 2015).

Importantly, none of the instructors interviewed used *exclusively* OER in their curriculum. Six out of twelve instructors were teaching a “no textbook” (or “zero-textbook-cost”) course, which combined OER with a series of other resources, as outlined above. Two instructors listed traditional textbooks on their syllabus but noted that buying them was optional for students.<sup>12</sup> Three instructors said that they still required a traditional textbook in their courses, and used OER to supplement certain areas, such as West African, Native American, and Pacific Rim art. These instructors had overall concerns about the quality of existing OER and did not foresee moving away from traditional texts any time soon. In addition, one of the instructors who was currently teaching a global art survey with OER, noted:

I was using Gardner’s [*Art through the Ages: A Concise Global History*] but felt pressured from our administration to switch to OER. So now, I use Smarthistory, I use the Met’s timeline, I use museum websites, and some other OERs. But I’m looking for a reasonably priced global art survey [textbook], as I find students are not bothering to look at the assigned links the same way they might with a text.

When asked whether they could teach their class using strictly OER, all but two said they couldn’t, or shouldn’t.<sup>13</sup> Some looked confused during the interview, other bemused. One university instructor, who uses a textbook in conjunction with OER, suggested:

I mean, sure, you can teach a Western survey [class] using only Smarthistory. I think they even have syllabi on their website for instructors who are newer, or whatever. But that’s not a class I’d like to teach. I think Smarthistory is great for some things, but there are gaps in certain areas – in particular when it comes to the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century. I also just find the writing style too basic.

Along those lines, Rose, a community college instructor noted:

I love the idea of having multiple voices and multiple media types for the students to learn from. I worry about throwing the baby out with the bathwater, though. As much as [things like Smarthistory] are engaging, I find that the majority of my students are coming to class with no concept of European or world history. For all its faults, I think the textbook can provide a clear timeline and better continuity than multiple, mixed sources. At least in survey courses.

Vanessa,<sup>14</sup> who teaches within New York’s public university system, discovered after about two semesters of teaching with OER that she missed the structure that a textbook provides. Instead of returning to her survey textbook, she built a basic website with links to all the readings and videos she assigned, a sort of hybrid textbook:

I found that Smarthistory alone has gaps, and I missed the overarching narrative of a textbook, so the site [I built] brings together OER that I locate along with my own text and some selected primary sources, which I use for in-class close reading activities. There are also skeletal outlines at the bottom of each page that students can use to take notes along with my lectures.

Although some instructors suggested that they would switch to an open textbook if one were published that met their needs, the majority of instructors emphasized the value of curating a wide variety of learning resources. Instructors who emphasized curation and scaffolding, discussed their efforts to integrate exciting content, provide context, and create environments where students can meaningfully interact with works of art. Their answers highlighted the intellectual labor that goes into building courses that are OER-based, often describing their

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<sup>12</sup> They said that they would put the textbook on reserve at the library and typically distribute PDFs of individual chapters via their LMS.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the two who answered affirmatively self-identify as OER advocates and are active members of the OER community.

<sup>14</sup> Pseudonym used to protect participant’s anonymity.

reading lists and lesson plans as a sort of instructional exhibit. Talking about her course, Jane, who teaches at a 4-year state college, noted:

Art history is about ideas, more so than it is about specific people [meaning “great” artists] or objects [their works]. It is a lens to understand the human experience through. Textbooks, as good as they are, are too preoccupied with facts, dates, terms [...] I guess what I’m trying to say is, there are so many ways to tell the history of art. When you look at my syllabus, when you take my class, you see Jane Lynch’s<sup>15</sup> take on [the history of art]. I have painstakingly selected every reading to draw out concepts, events, artworks that I believe are important, that are worth talking about, and knowing about.

At the same time, most instructors acknowledged that standalone articles—whether OER, popular press, or journal articles—could be “challenging” for students to make sense of, and required additional time in terms of lesson planning to ensure the materials were meaningful, relevant, and well-integrated. In terms of revising and remixing content, the majority of instructors reported not engaging in those practices. This finding is in line with existing research, which suggests that faculty who reuse, redistribute, and retain OER (themselves a minority) continue to greatly outnumber those who revise and remix OER (e.g., Jhangiani et al. 2016). In terms of sharing practices, all but one instructor reported *not* sharing their own teaching materials (e.g., assignments, lecture notes, classroom activities) in OER repositories. Through the interviews, however, it became apparent that they did share in other contexts: some shared the resources with colleagues via their institutional LMS, listservs, or Facebook groups, some shared in the context of professional development activities, or when mentoring colleagues, and some shared via open online networks, such as Humanities Commons and Art History Teaching Resources ([arthistoryteachingresources.org](http://arthistoryteachingresources.org)).<sup>16</sup> Instructors, however, did not indicate that these practices were a direct result of engagement with OER.

## PERCEIVED IMPACT OF OPENNESS ON TEACHING PRACTICES

When asked to describe whether and how their teaching had changed as a result of using OER, many instructors struggled to identify concrete changes. Moreover, what they listed as their motivations for using OER and the perceived impact of OER on their teaching, often overlapped in their responses. For instance, when Julie,<sup>17</sup> who teaches in Oregon, was asked if she thought OER had brought about changes in how she teaches, she responded:

I think so [...] I don’t have to do the encyclopedic art history in the way that a textbook sort of forces you to do, or suggests that you do. So, for instance, I can omit certain things that I’m not into. And go into greater depth on others, basically. For instance, I’m teaching a Women in Art class, and I was able to bring in something that a textbook would never allow me to do, and that was a kind of a chapter on, or lecture on women in Oregon—women artists and activists, and arts administrators and photographers here in the Pacific Northwest, that I think [are] important for them to know. [...] So it’s just one example.

Another instructor, who teaches at a 4-year school in Southern California, said that OER has allowed her to teach a more “globalized” art survey, which she noted, was different from the typical undergraduate Survey of Global Art class, which examines art and architecture produced in Asia, Africa, Native America, Europe, and the Pacific Islands:

For me, it’s not about teaching a unit on Islamic Art one week, and then another about Asian Arts, you know, in this really disjointed manner. I think what’s really useful, what’s really valuable, is asking, “ok, how does something like Baroque Art sort of get translated and viewed through a different lens in a different part of the world?” [...] Can you show examples of Spanish colonial art, which, by the way, is everywhere [in Southern California], and discuss its relation to the European Baroque?

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<sup>15</sup> Pseudonym used to protect participant’s anonymity.

<sup>16</sup> Some of the interviewees had written for [Smarthistory.org](http://Smarthistory.org) and some had shared their experiences using OER through blogging, but given that the sampling was purposive and that the interview subjects were recruited for the study through these sites, the finding is not significant.

<sup>17</sup> Pseudonym used to protect participant’s anonymity.

And I think that [since switching away from a standard textbook], I have been able to do this more effectively.

Four instructors noted that OER had offered an opportunity to democratize the teaching and learning process. One instructor mentioned how in her third semester of teaching a no-textbook Art Appreciation class, she surveyed her students and asked them to vote on topics that *they* wanted to see covered in the last three weeks. She offered a list of potential topics, but also allowed them to make suggestions beyond what was presented. She said she didn't think it was appropriate to have students design the whole syllabus, and said she wasn't ready to flip the classroom, but she felt this was "a nice way" to give students agency without overwhelming them. She also noted it was an opportunity to see what students were interested in, overall, which she could use to design future classes. "That wouldn't have worked with a survey textbook," she added. Meanwhile Anna, in Southern California, regularly solicits student feedback on assigned readings, so as to improve the learning experience both for current and future students:

Every couple of weeks I'll ask them what they liked best, what worked and what didn't. And usually, I know already, I'll reread something and be like, "ugh, why did I even assign this?" [...] And that's another nice thing about things like OER, is that you can say "ok this one thing was terrible and obtuse and annoying, let's get rid of it next time." The other thing about checking in with [students] like that, is that you can sort of tailor readings to the set of students that you have in your class in a given semester.

About one-third of instructors also saw OER as an opportunity to teach students transferrable skills, such as online source evaluation skills. One instructor suggested:

Students need, today more than ever, to be able to analyze media and information online, and ask: "Is this true? How can I find out?" I think moving away from the singular, authoritative textbook toward a plethora of [information sources] that students are asked to evaluate is ultimately the right way to go, even if [students] complain it's too much work – and trust me, they do.

Another instructor, who still uses a traditional textbook but supplements with OER, mentioned that she was working with a librarian to design an assignment for next semester in which she will ask students to collect and evaluate OER to supplement the course textbook in future semesters.

Lastly, the majority of instructors noted that the process of curating, using, and adapting OER, as well as designing assignments around them, had been a good opportunity for self-assessment and reflection. Interviewees readily admitted the benefits of looking at teaching resources created by others that integrate OER (e.g., syllabi, assignments, classroom activities), since "seeing good examples of practice might inform your own [practice]," as one instructor noted. However, they largely rebutted suggestions that OER adoption had significantly altered their teaching, or triggered pedagogical innovation by virtue of being introduced to their classroom. An overview of the perceived impact of OER on their teaching practices can be seen in [Figure 2](#).

## CONCLUSION

Using twelve in-depth interviews conducted over nineteen months, this study investigated why, how, and to what ends a diverse group of art historians across the United States use OER and related practices in their teaching. What sets this study apart from previous research is its emphasis on the perceptions and practices of faculty within a particular academic domain. While slowly researchers are beginning to interrogate how OER are implemented in specific disciplines, existing literature overwhelmingly examines OER perceptions and practices across different fields. However, the findings presented here suggest that a more narrow lens may be needed to fully understand the full breadth of ideas, practices, and behaviors surrounding OER. This study also highlights the need for more qualitative research to excavate the nuances of OER adoption and use in different contexts and settings, broadly defined.

Overall, the study found that how instructors use OER in their courses is shaped less by the legal affordances (i.e., licensing) of OER, and more by the teaching norms and values of their

disciplinary area, as well as the learning needs of their particular student population. Their approach to finding and reusing resources created by others was primarily pragmatic and centered around a specific learning need of a particular group of students. The resource used for that purpose was sometimes “open,” and sometimes it wasn’t, depending on the availability of pedagogically appropriate OER, as well as the reusing instructor’s knowledge of and commitment to open licensing. In other words, the instructors who participated in this study viewed openness as a spectrum involving differing degrees and modes of “open,” rather than a “checkbox” focused on formal characteristics, like licensing. In addition, OER were mostly discussed as supplementary, rather than primary teaching materials. This finding might be related to the availability of quality OER in the area of introductory art history which, several instructors suggested, is limited. It is possible that perception and practices would change as more material becomes available.

Lastly, the study findings call into question the claim that engagement with OER entails radically new pedagogies. That is, no significant changes were reported in faculty’s use of instructional resources, their pedagogical thinking, and pedagogical practices as a result of adopting OER. Instead, OER were strategically utilized by instructors to address a series of concerns in art history pedagogy relating to perceived elitism, Western-centrism, and lack of diversity within the discipline, among others. Their responses also suggest that, rather than discovering “new” pedagogies directly as a result of OER, OER might instead have allowed instructors to “rediscover [...] the specificity of their disciplinary pedagogy through a new lens” (Beetham et al. 2012). The study findings probably come closest to Beetham and colleagues’ (2012) observation about teachers consciously “picking and choosing” those resources and elements of openness that best amplify their existing pedagogic practices, whether those practices be content-based, process-based, or passing on tacit knowledge (p. 8). The findings also suggest that it is not possible to disconnect OER from current pedagogic practices and models and that, in fact, it might not be wise doing so.

Successful OER implementation depends on numerous factors, including disciplinary values, cultures and practices, types of outputs, goals, and practical considerations. Studies like this one can help raise awareness on discipline-specific OER uses and needs, and offer guidance to librarians, instructional designers and faculty professional development administrators working to scale OER and/or OEP (open educational practices) at their institutions. While the results presented here are preliminary, they suggest that better understanding the teaching “cultures”, teaching goals and teaching needs of different disciplines may allow us to better support OER implementation within said disciplines.

## **LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Key limitations of the study include the sampling method and sample size. Purposive sampling potentially introduced recruitment bias towards participants with a strong interest in OER. Purposive sampling is also prone to researcher bias because it is anchored on a researcher’s judgment. As this is, to the best of the author’s knowledge, the first study to examine OER adoption and use in art history in the U.S. context, the results should be considered as preliminary. Further studies are needed to validate the conclusions presented here. One of the first recommendations for additional research is to build upon these initial findings in a more comprehensive and focused study that includes a larger number of participants. Comparative studies that examine motivations and practices across different disciplines could also prove fruitful for understanding how OER are implemented in different contexts. Lastly, examining the perspectives of faculty who are aware of OER but choose not to use them, or who may have “dabbled” in OER but chosen to return to their traditional publisher text, would be useful for developing more effective OER outreach programs both in art history and in other disciplines.

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