

Exposing Open Access (OA): In Support of OA Journals in Academic Libraries

By Robyn Hall

On May 28, 2008, the Canadian Library Association (CLA) Executive Council officially accepted a position statement drawn up by the CLA Task Force on Open Access.¹ Amid its recommendations, this statement asked that all Canadian libraries promote open access (OA) resources and create awareness about OA among library patrons.² This recent endorsement has come at a critically important time in academic librarianship, underlining the significant benefits librarians can bring to the education of university students by drawing more attention and greater awareness to OA journals.

A call for support

One of academic librarians' greatest commitments is to fostering information literacy skills in university students. To accomplish this, they compile instructional materials, teach classes, and provide one-on-one research help to make sure that students learn for themselves how to locate, evaluate and effectively use resources that meet their determined information needs. The acquisition and development of this particular skill set is considered a focal tenet of postsecondary education. As the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Web site states in addressing this topic: "By ensuring that individuals have the intellectual abilities of reasoning and critical thinking, and by helping them construct a framework for learning how to learn, colleges and universities provide the foundation for continued growth throughout their careers, as well as in their roles as informed citizens and members of communities."³

To this end, educating university students about the wide and prolific variety of OA journals available to them on the public Internet, and means of evaluating their reliability and usefulness, brings an additional attribute to their education. Alerting students to the hundreds of quality

controlled, scholarly OA journals listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (<http://www.doaj.org/>), for instance, can present them with a valuable supplement to the resources already available to them through library subscriptions and print materials. Meanwhile, many OA journals that are not peer reviewed, for example, present a unique and valuable teaching opportunity as well. Investigations of these resources during information literacy instruction sessions can motivate broader discussions with students about how to evaluate content on the Web and what defines scholarly publishing, thus encouraging students to think critically about what resources are and are not suitable dependant on their research needs. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, unlike the vast majority of academic resources available to students through library subscriptions, OA provides students with access to a wealth of scholarly research materials that will still be available to them after they have graduated.

Treated separately or as a whole, these points suggest an important and timely direction for academic librarians as effective instructors, whether their aim is to advocate on behalf of OA or to simply educate. Librarians creating awareness about OA journals encourages students' continued growth, critical thinking skills, and lifelong learning, which information literacy instruction and the very tenets of higher education inherently ascribe to.

A call for progress

While the call for librarians to support, promote and create awareness among students about OA is well-founded, the response has been less than overwhelming, particularly in regards to OA journals. Though many Canadian academic libraries list OA journals in their catalogues, a thorough search of library Web sites from across the country reveals that few make mention of such sources in subject-specific research guides, online information literacy tutorials, or library FAQs and "how-to-find" guides. This suggests that librarians are not doing all that they can to

teach students about OA. However, it is also important to acknowledge that reasons for this may have less to do with ignorance and more to do with uncertainty.

Particularly in disciplines outside of science, technology and medicine (where there is greater access to funding for OA initiatives and higher public demand for OA research), the quality and abundance of OA journals is not significant. At the same time, many initiatives to create and maintain scholarly, OA journals that contain reliable, peer-reviewed content are still in their infancy. While a variety of business models have been devised that suggest there is much hope for further evolution of OA publishing in the future, pressing questions remain regarding the long-term sustainable and practical collection, preservation, indexing, editing and vetting of OA content. I am therefore not suggesting that academic librarians direct students' attention to OA journals without caution or foresight. I am, however, suggesting that they do more to educate and create awareness about these resources and means of critically evaluating their varied usefulness in the same manner they approach other, often more typical research resources (e.g., books, newspapers, magazines, subscription journals, Web sites, and so on).

A few suggestions

In order to ensure that students are aware of OA journals and use them effectively, there are a number of things academic librarians might consider doing, which include the following:

- Stay informed. There are a number of great forums on the Internet that discuss current issues and developments in OA in Canada and more broadly. These include the OA Librarian blog (<http://oalibrarian.blogspot.com/>) and Peter Suber's widely read Open Access News blog (<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/fosblog.html>). Such resources can help librarians develop their own approaches and methods of educating students about OA resources (as well as university faculty and colleagues).

- Update online tutorials and help sheets on evaluating research resources to include specific information about OA journals. Nearly all Canadian university libraries offer online tutorials on information literacy that could serve to benefit students further with the addition of content about what OA is, where to find it, and how to evaluate it.
- Become acquainted with the variety of OA journals available. Explore OA content through the Directory of Open Access Journals, for instance, as well as through Google searches and the advanced search in Ulrichsweb.com.
- Where appropriate, include OA resources in library catalogues and subject guides.
- Develop a guide on how to find OA resources. A great example of this is Concordia University's OA research guide (<http://library.concordia.ca/research/openaccess/>).
- Create classroom activities that ask students to compare a variety of OA journals with those from subscription journals to create awareness and foster understanding and discussion about scholarly research processes and how to effectively evaluate resources.

In conclusion

When it comes to supporting OA, Canadian librarians have been leaders in a variety of ways. For example, many have worked on developing institutional repositories that allow authors to self-archive their articles and make them openly accessible.⁴ A number have also helped to develop OA journals at their institutions by offering to host such initiatives and by providing technical assistance.⁵ Clearly, the call for librarians to support and create awareness of OA has not gone unheeded. However, what remains is the need for a stronger commitment to drawing university students' attention to OA, especially given the rapidly emerging wealth of free, readily available, scholarly content OA journals have to offer students now and in the years to come.

¹ The CLA Task Force on Open Access has since been replaced with the CLA Open Access Interest Group. See <http://www.cla.ca/Content/NavigationMenu/CLAAatWork/InterestGroups/OpenAccessInterestGroup/default.htm>.

² For the complete position statement drawn up by the CLA Task Force on Open Access, refer here: http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Position_Statements&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=5306.

³ Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.” American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm> (accessed March 21, 2009).

⁴ See, for instance, the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Institutional Repository Program, which reports that over 80% of its members have implemented institutional repositories at their institutions since 2003 (many of which offer OA content), as indicated at:

http://www.carlabrc.ca/projects/institutional_repositories/canadian_projects-e.html

⁵ Academic Libraries currently hosting OA journals include the University of Alberta, the University of British Columbia, and Simon Fraser University. See http://hlwiki.slais.ubc.ca/index.php/Open_access_in_Canada