

# Reflections on my Foray into the Battle of Open Access

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## Abstract

The movement towards Open Access is an important one, yet it is fraught with challenges surrounding misinformation, lack of awareness, and a lack of institutionally-supported motivational initiatives. One new library and information science professional reflects on what it was like to support Open Access in her first job in an academic library, and her experience with wanting to implement more change than was realistically possible. This article also describes an example of an Open Access Escape Room as an Open Access initiative, and explores the benefits of the gamification of learning. Not letting go of the goal of information accessibility for all, this young professional finds value in the small wins while working towards large-scale positive change.

**Keywords:** Open Access, information accessibility, Open Access initiatives, gamification

**T**hroughout six years of post-secondary schooling, I took access to information for granted. Immersing myself in a world of writing essays and reading scholarly articles, I did not think twice about how fortunate I was to have such easy, consistent access to quality research by simply logging in to the library systems with my university account. Answers to my scholarly questions were rarely more than a few clicks away, until the day I attempted to do research outside of school. I was shocked at the amount of paywalls slammed in place that blocked my access to research. I had never realized how much of a struggle information accessibility was to those outside of academic institutions, and I did not think it was fair on an ethical level. This was my introduction to the Open Access movement, and the struggle it can be to advocate for it.

## **Student Idealism Meets Staff Reality**

I started my first role as a staff member in an academic library when I was still a student with two classes left in my Master of Library and Information Science degree. My official title was Public Services Assistant - Scholarship and Open Publishing, at Mount Royal University (MRU) Library. It was my job to work the front service desk and also support Open Access (OA) initiatives. OA is the “free, immediate, online availability of research” (SPARC, 2024) combined with the rights to utilize, adapt, and improve upon this research through Creative Commons licensing. OA also “ensures that anyone can access and use these results to turn ideas into industries and breakthroughs into better lives” (SPARC, 2024). Universal free access to research leads to improved citation, increases readership, gives authors the ability to retain more rights to their work, and allows publicly funded research to belong to the public (Willinsky, 2006).

I had a passion for improving the accessibility of information and a lot of ideas, but no real understanding of the challenges library staff face in implementing initiatives, especially in an academic institution. Despite working with an amazing team, I was not a faculty librarian, so I lacked direct connections to faculty members, and I was genuinely (and naively) surprised to discover part of the population at MRU was hesitant about contributing to OA and OA initiatives, and a larger portion did not even know what OA was. I had the idealism of a student who had learned everything in theory and very little in practice. Were the researchers not inclined to ensure greater accessibility to their work? Were the students unaware that Open Access entailed free access to research materials? I thought the whole point of libraries was to be one of the last public spaces left without commodification, even in academia. As I came to learn, these were not simple questions with simple answers.

### **Open Access: Challenging the Status Quo**

You say the word “free” to university students and they get excited; you say it to researchers and they get suspicious. The biggest challenges I faced in my role were the misconceptions around OA, a lack of awareness of OA, and an unwillingness to change from the “traditional ways” of publishing research. “Publish or perish” is the common refrain in academia, not “share and access.”

Why is there reluctance from researchers to make their work open? This was a question that constantly plagued me in my new job because in my mind, the rewards outweigh the challenges. OA combats the barriers of traditional journals such as the lack of research dissemination, high subscription costs, lack of author rights, and limiting public access to taxpayer funded research (Köster et. al, 2021). As I became more immersed in the academic library culture, I grew more aware of the “status quo” in research. Although many researchers may speak in favour of OA, not all of those in favour will actually publish OA (Köster et. al, 2021). At an institutional level, there can be a lack of support for adopting OA because traditional publications are often given more weight in the tenure process (Hilstob, 2017). The enormous pressure to publish in prestigious, paywalled journals for the sake of tenure will almost always outweigh a scholar’s personal beliefs or commitment to OA. If there is a choice between publishing in an OA journal, or a more “reputable” journal with higher impact metrics, it is no wonder that OA is not as popular—there is no “reward” for doing it, no career incentive.

As I learned, there are certain initiatives trying to combat this, such as the Declaration On Research Assessment (DORA) agreement. It advocates for improvement to “the ways in which the outputs of scholarly research are evaluated” in the tenure process, encouraging movement away from using journal as they are not a clear indication of the quality of research (DORA, 2024). Over 3100 universities and institutions around the world have signed this declaration. However, MRU is not yet one of them (DORA, 2024). I, like many other new library professionals, had to grapple with frustration in my job at the inability to make change at a high level. I strongly believed that Open Access was worth it and the traditional publishing models were negatively impacting everyone, but what could I do from the metaphorical bottom of the food chain? One library staff member cannot easily disrupt the status quo of an entire institution!

I also had to deal with the outdated and incorrect notion that OA journals are of lower quality than journals published behind a paywall. The whole notion of “you get what you pay for” is false; open resources undergo the same level of quality control utilizing the same peer review processes and editorial standards (SPARC, 2017).

Quality does not have to come at a cost; OA ensures that anyone, anytime, and anywhere can freely access research and resources (Ballantyne, 2022).

Unfortunately, predatory publishers do exist for OA journals and are often targeted, but it is a myth that every OA Journal is predatory (Herron, 2017). Publishing OA often means the researcher is the one to pay the article processing charges (APCs), and predatory publishers like to take advantage of this business model, profiting off of the pressures on researchers to “publish or perish”. However, there are numerous resources designed to help with this problem; the Directory of Open Access Journals, for example, has a directory of credible OA journals, and academic institutions often have checklists and guidelines available to help identify a predatory publisher. In terms of handling the cost of APCs, many universities have agreements with certain journals to offer discounts or even waived fees. Furthermore, university libraries often have funding available to grant to those looking to publish OA. OA publishing is doable, but as I learned, not enough people know about the process. I needed to find a creative way to spark interest in OA for both students and researchers. While I could not change support for OA on an institutional level, I could contribute my voice to changing the narrative. A perfect opportunity to do this was during the annual Open Access Week.

### ***Gamification of Learning, or, Have Fun at Work***

The International Open Access Week took place in October 2023 with the theme of “Community over Commercialization” (International Open Access Week, 2023). During this week, institutions were encouraged to host events that promoted prioritizing equitable, open scholarship for the benefit of both the public and academic community. It was the perfect opportunity to run a workshop to get the MRU community involved in OA.

As many library practitioners can agree, getting attendance for an informative workshop can be one of the most challenging parts of the job, as students can be notoriously hard to engage. It can be discouraging to plan what you believe to be an incredible hour of fun learning, only to see limited interest with minimal sign-ups. Luckily, I had some incredibly supportive, creative colleagues who also share a passion for OA: Taylor McPeak, Copyright Advisor, and Adam Cohen, Collection Services

Technician. When Taylor approached us with an unconventional workshop idea she discovered, guaranteed to intrigue, we were instantly on board.

### Figure 1

*Open Access Escape Room Promotional Poster*



From Mount Royal University Library (2023).

The plan was to run an Open Access Escape Room (Figure 1) targeted towards students and researchers. An escape room is a “physical, interactive adventure game where players use hints, clues, and strategy to solve a series of themed puzzles to ‘escape’ a room,” usually under a time limit (Sundsbo, 2018, p. 2). In this case, participants would find hidden clues, solve puzzles, and learn about OA publishing, while most importantly having fun. This workshop is an example of the gamification of learning, where games and competitive elements are strategically utilized to make a learning experience more approachable. We did not invent this brilliant workshop idea; it was invented by Katrine Sundsbø, current Community Manager at the Directory of Open Access Journals. It is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution which allowed us to adapt it—a great example of how OA works can be utilized by others, for free, to benefit learning. The basic premise was that the participants were a group of researchers trying to stop the evil Mr. Paywall from locking away all of MRU’s OA

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research, before it is too late! All of the interconnecting clues were themed around the process of publishing OA, and the participants worked in groups competing against each other to be the first ones to “unlock” the research to make it free again (with the prize of candy being an additional motivational factor).

This project was incredibly fun to work on. Adam, Taylor, and I collaborated to adapt the clues to be more relevant to the MRU community. A large portion of our time was spent crafting (cutting out paper, laminating materials, gluing together cypher wheels) and before launching the workshop we did a test-run with our colleagues to gather feedback and ensure it would run smoothly. We advertised the workshop through digital and physical signage on social media and in the library, crossing our fingers that it would be a success.

And it was! We had more than enough student and non-library staff participants sign up, and through the ending debrief and post-workshop survey sent out, I can confidently say participants loved the unconventional learning experience and left the workshop having learned more about the importance of OA. I left the workshop feeling accomplished, like I had finally started to make a difference. Learning can be *fun*, and hopefully students went on to tell their friends about it, spreading the word and continuing the learning cycle.

From this experience, I learned not to get discouraged as a young information professional. In the first post-graduate job, it is easy to get engrossed in big ideas for change without fully comprehending the gradual pace at which change occurs. I struggled with feeling frustrated as I felt a desire to take on additional responsibilities within my role while also maintaining professionalism and adhering to the job description. Connecting my formal education to the actual practice of working in a library was a surprisingly difficult gap to bridge. Outside the small world of the classroom, there are many more policies, personalities, and strategies to consider. The battle for OA is an uphill one, and advocacy for it rarely goes as smoothly as I planned. Change on an institutional level is a slow process, but the support for it is there. I have learned to have fun with the journey, celebrating wins with my colleagues, however small.

## ***Open Access Equals Equitable Academia***

Open Access is not a new idea, but neither is it a movement of the past. The internet has made it possible to disseminate research to the widest possible audience for free, yet traditional, expensive publishing strategies remain the standard. Encouraging scholars to adopt OA best practices can be a challenge as institutional pressure to publish in expensive subscription journals remains significant. As Björk (2017) explains, there is a lack of “competitive pressure in this industry, leading to such high profit levels of the leading publishers that they have not yet felt a strong need to change the way they operate... Intertwined with this is a moral argument. It simply seems wrong that knowledge produced primarily by public taxpayer money should be kept locked up behind paywalls” (p. 102). Publishing OA is ultimately a social justice issue (Gair et al, 2020). Restricting access to research restricts access to new knowledge, preventing others from building upon the research or incorporating it into their professional practices. Without OA, the circulation of knowledge is impeded, detracting from the mission of post-secondary institutions (Willinksy, 2006).

OA is a key part of making academia equitable, and I learned I needed to transform my idealism into more practical solutions to invoke change. I was frustrated by the inevitable blockades, or naysayers who did not believe in the importance of OA as I do. But with every challenge, a new opportunity presents itself. I have learned more from the unsuccessful initiatives at work than the theory I was taught in the classroom. I understand that optimism for a more accessible future is not a bad thing. The key is to not be burdened by impatience along the way; change does start small and there are excellent communities working towards positive change. It starts with one conversation with a professor interested in accessible textbooks, with one student looking to publish OA so their friends back home can read their thesis, with one workshop that prioritizes making education fun.

OA is a field in need of innovation, and changemakers who are willing to embrace initiatives for the sake of public good. Through these initiatives, new information professionals like myself can help pave the way to a more equitable future.

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