



Open Solutions: Creating an OER Writing Lab

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CASE STUDIES



ABSTRACT

As online learning continues to expand, new avenues are being identified to support graduate learners in this environment. Regent University, a private institution located in the southeastern region of the United States, investigated Open Educational Resources (OER) options for providing asynchronous learning experiences to master key competencies, such as writing. After evaluating the OER market and networking with state and national level OER library leadership, these educators sought to build an OER alternative to Pearson's *MyWritingLab* that would serve the needs of their developmental writing online graduate students. A small team of librarians and professors took steps to integrate this experience into the university's UNIV 500: Foundations of Graduate Success course, evaluate its effectiveness, and create multimodal options for supporting this open learning opportunity.

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KEYWORDS:

open educational resources (OER); open learning experiences; writing instruction; graduate learners; online learners; OER library

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Yaeger, Joy Lucille, Charles Jones, Hannah G. Covington. "Open Solutions: Creating an OER Writing Lab." *Virginia Libraries* 65, no. 1 (2021): 4, pp. 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/valib.v65i1.604>

INTRODUCTION

With online education becoming more competitive in today's market, integrating innovation and listening to the voices of students is paramount. To meet the needs of today's learners, librarians and educators are working together to investigate new opportunities available through Open Educational Resources (OER). In the past, OER has frequently been linked to increased engagement and perceived satisfaction in learning environments.¹ As OER has grown in popularity, students have indicated that they value the flexible learning options available to them.² In addition, with the growth of electronic resources and a shift in online education, students have often communicated that they view education as a free commodity.³

In the online graduate realm, there are many untouched avenues for educators and librarians to explore with OER for improving course quality.⁴ Educators have made initial progress by trying to understand graduate online learners' preferences regarding OER.⁵ However, given that OER has expanded beyond textbook substitution to include personalized learning options, virtual education, and other interactive approaches, librarians and educators needed to cooperate on a larger level to investigate additional instructional alternatives, specifically regarding OER writing labs.⁶ OER writing labs function as open learning platforms that allow students to work asynchronously through modules and learn key writing competencies while receiving immediate feedback. These experiences often incorporate personalized instructional approaches to allow for learning at all skill levels.

At Regent University, a private university in the southeastern region of the United States, librarians, staff, and faculty formed a partnership to support the UNIV 500 course. At the university, UNIV 500, Foundations for Graduate Success, serves as a gatekeeper course for all graduate programs and provides a solid information literacy and writing foundation that will help students succeed in master's and post-master's level work. Both faculty and librarians worked collaboratively to develop this course. The librarians incorporated content that linked information literacy to key writing concepts, and a librarian has served as a course representative each term to answer student questions. As this partnership evolved, the librarians were asked to work on a task force with the staff and faculty to create an open writing lab solution for the course. The goals of this task force were to reduce barriers related to course material expenses, streamline the learning experience, and reduce technical and navigation issues for both students and faculty. The task force approached the project with an innovation mindset and the goal of creating an open alternative to Pearson's *MyWritingLab*.

PROBLEMS

MyWritingLab is an online learning program that allows students to progress through materials, exercises, and tests focused on grammar, punctuation, and sentence construction. The university had been using Pearson's *MyWritingLab* during the third week of the UNIV 500 course to help students develop strong writing competencies before their first essay assignment. Students would complete their modules in Pearson's *MyWritingLab* and receive credit entered by the instructor in the Blackboard learning management system that allowed them to move on to writing their essay. However, there were issues that Pearson's *MyWritingLab* presented to the UNIV 500 courses. The first was the time constraints it placed on the students. If a student had a strong grasp on English writing mechanics, they could test out and complete the entire course within an hour or two. However, if students had significant struggles, they could be assigned over 20-30 hours of practice work and tests for the week, which was unreasonable for the student to complete in the allotted time. Even when students could successfully rush through this large amount of work, they often did not show measurable improvement in their final exams because they did not have enough time to absorb and master the material.

Other issues were cost and accessibility. In previous semesters, *MyWritingLab* cost students \$40-\$50, which students expressed was excessive for material only required for a single week of their course. Often students struggled to access *MyWritingLab* using the codes purchased through the bookstore. While they were provided with instructions from both the bookstore and their instructors, switching between Blackboard and *MyWritingLab* was difficult for technologically challenged students. Finally, if technical issues arose with *MyWritingLab*, students had trouble getting them resolved because the university IT department did not have access to or experience with *MyWritingLab*. While students could work with Pearson's technical support, the UNIV Coordinator often personally had to step in to get issues resolved.

The final issue was grading. *MyWritingLab* does have Blackboard integration, but setting it up for multiple courses every session was not ideal for how *MyWritingLab* was being utilized. *MyWritingLab* was used only as a refresher module during a one week period and was not entirely integrated into the Blackboard learning management system. Because of this setup, it made the most sense to manually export final *MyWritingLab* grades into Blackboard after students finished their work. However, students disliked not immediately seeing their grades in the Blackboard gradebook, so the instructors often had to reassure anxious students that grades were forthcoming.

SOLUTIONS

Going into this project, the UNIV Coordinator researched open source educational platforms. While the university utilized Blackboard as a learning management system, Blackboard's platform presented issues related to sharing. The main goal was to have a free platform that allowed for easily maintaining the course content. Moodle, an open-source learning management system or alternative to Blackboard, was used to create the initial draft of the open writing lab because of its analytics, look, and free cost. A mockup of the course was built in Moodle using the advanced adaptive release features.

After pursuing Moodle as an open learning option, campus IT communicated that server space could not be designated for supporting this project. Therefore, the team returned to the planning phase, and considered new platforms that would provide a third-party server for the content. Because of previous user experience, ease of use, and content design capabilities, the team chose Wix as the technology platform for this open learning opportunity, which was formally coined *RUwrite*. Graphics and text content were directly uploaded to the Wix Content Management System, and assessments were embedded through Google Drive. The Wix links were inserted into the current Blackboard learning management system, and adaptive release (i.e., items are released for student view in Blackboard based on certain completion criteria) was integrated to create personalized learning with various competency levels. The framework of the Wix pages allowed for mobile learning use, and the navigation provided easy access for students. An added benefit of this method was that not only were students in the UNIV 500 course able to utilize *RUwrite*, but students who wanted to take the course as an optional Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) to strengthen their grammar and mechanics could freely participate. The large-scale enrollment features and flexible timeframes of MOOCs would allow students taking other courseloads to strengthen their writing skills independently.

DESIGN PLAN

The design plan for creating *RUwrite* came from a process of collaboration. Through previous connections in the national Open Education Conference circuit and Virginia Library Association, state and national library associates were consulted based on expertise in OER and the availability of current resources in specialized areas. Some open options

related to writing support existed, such as *Excelsior's Online Writing Lab*⁷ and *Writing Commons*.⁸ However, an OER option with content comparable to Pearson's learning outcomes had not yet been created.

The design process for *RUwrite* centered around the university's current Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) regarding writing improvement. The QEP included core competencies in the areas of style, voice, grammar, mechanics, and organization. *RUwrite's* module components were based on the framework of this evaluation system to align with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) progress report plans and to establish a standard method of teaching and evaluating writing. The final content organization focused on the following: parts of speech, structuring sentences, polishing punctuation, and scholarly voice. Once the basic modules and course outline were solidified, current OER pieces were selected that aligned with the outcomes of these modules, and the OER remixing and creation process began. Much of the OER content needed to be written, but some remixing components were integrated with appropriate acknowledgments and Creative Commons licensing adherence. Overall, the entire development period required three months.

IMPLEMENTATION

The rollout plan for initiating *RUwrite* focused on a soft launch approach that would allow for an improvement phase before a university-wide adoption. The university structure runs on eight-week course schedules with two main sessions. However, an in-between session is often run with lower enrollment in the middle of every fall and spring semester. This smaller fall session was chosen for the initial test of *RUwrite*, and the final version of the open learning writing lab was then offered the following spring.

After the soft launch stage, the user experience was analyzed from multiple viewpoints for improvement. First, Blackboard test data from the final exam was evaluated based on the students' overall performance for each question. Second, student evaluations were analyzed at the quantitative and qualitative levels to target areas for enhancement. Finally, an analysis phase of the open learning content was conducted. After these phases, several improvements were added, including a *RUwrite navigation video*⁹ for students. Also, wording changes were made for quiz questions to add additional clarity and provide more feedback, and teaching documents were created for *RUwrite* instructors. These final developments were integrated into the main launch in the spring.

STAKEHOLDER RESPONSE: STUDENT EVALUATIONS

Data was collected from the Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) for UNIV 500 in sessions C and D in spring semester 2019, sessions A and B of fall semester in 2019, and session C in spring 2020 to compare the overall student experience before and after *RUwrite* implementation. This information, specifically the open response portion of the SETs, was used to evaluate the improvement of UNIV 500 after the implementation of *RUwrite*.

The first collection of SETs for UNIV 500 from session C and D in spring 2019 was used for evaluating the experience prior to *RUwrite*. There were multiple benefits and criticisms found in this session of UNIV 500. The primary benefits were the helpful information and the preparation for graduate school. One specific comment from a student stated, “This was a great course for someone returning to school after 19 years. It was engaging, and I feel like it prepared me for what to expect.” However, despite the benefits, there were also some criticisms about the course material being too time consuming and the course being required at all.

The second collection of SETs for UNIV 500 was from sessions A and B in fall 2019. By focusing on the open response portion of the SETs, several benefits and criticisms could be identified. One prominent benefit was that the course was well organized and easy to navigate. The students who took this course frequently expressed that the course was “well described, and the objectives were clear.” Again, many students also indicated that the course was good preparation for the expectations in graduate school, as well as for the standards of the university. One SET response said, “This course has helped prepare me for completing work at the graduate level. It was taught effectively to provide for an understanding of what was expected.” While there were many benefits found in the courses, there were also criticisms similar to the first SET responses. One of the criticisms was the amount of work required in the course: “There was a lot of material to cover in a very short time.”

Next, the course experience was evaluated after *RUwrite* integration. In the UNIV 500 session C spring 2020 SETs, one of the most-often listed benefits of the course was that it was a good refresher course: “The grammar and writing refreshers were very helpful for my other courses and beginning my graduate program.” Another comment stated, “The course materials and workshops offered were extremely helpful.” One of the drawbacks was related to the assignments. Some students expressed that certain assignment instructions needed more detail. As this data is explored further, additional edits may be made to the introduction videos and prompts to create a more seamless learning experience.

STAKEHOLDER RESPONSE: SURVEY DATA

The students who completed *RUwrite* UNIV 500 were asked to participate in a survey towards the end of the class in order to determine their overall experience with *RUwrite*. A total of 490 students responded to the survey. The survey consisted of five Likert scale questions and one open response question. The feedback from the completed surveys was analyzed by evaluating the Likert scale questions and by examining the open response portion.

The five Likert scale questions on the survey regarding the *RUwrite* UNIV 500 course were analyzed by looking at the highest and lowest percentages. The first Likert scale question stated, “The delivery of the *RUwrite* content was well organized.” Out of the 490 students who responded, 287 students (58.6%) indicated that they strongly agreed that the delivery was organized (see [Figure 1](#)). Five students (1%) disagreed that the delivery was organized (see [Figure 1](#)). In addition to the highest and lowest scores, 11 students (2.2%) indicated that they strongly disagreed. 44 students (9%) indicated that they were neutral, and 143 students (29.2%) indicated that they agreed (see [Figure 1](#)).

The second Likert scale question stated, “The *RUwrite* learning outcomes were clear.” A total of 278 students (56.7%) strongly agreed that the learning outcomes were clear (see [Figure 2](#)). Ten students (2%) reported that they disagreed (see [Figure 2](#)). Beyond the highest and lowest scores, 15 students (3.1%) indicated that they strongly disagreed. 48 students (9.8%) indicated that they were neutral, and 139 students (28.4%) indicated that they agreed (see [Figure 2](#)).

The third Likert scale question read, “The *RUwrite* activities and assessments supported the learning outcomes.” A total of 271 students (55.3%) strongly agreed that the activities and assessments supported the learning outcomes (see [Figure 3](#)). In contrast, 12 students (2.4%) strongly disagreed with the statement, and 12 students (2.4%) disagreed (see [Figure 3](#)). In addition to these three scores, 43 students (8.8%) indicated that they were neutral, and 152 students (31%) indicated that they agreed (see [Figure 3](#)).

The fourth Likert scale question stated, “Reasonable *RUwrite* assessments were used to evaluate learning.” Of the 490 students, 279 students (56.9%) strongly agreed with this statement. Thirteen students (2.7%) strongly disagreed (see [Figure 4](#)). In addition to the highest and lowest scores, 18 students (3.7%) indicated that they disagreed; 36 students (7.3%) indicated that they were neutral; and 144 students (29.4%) indicated that they agreed (see [Figure 4](#)).

Finally, the last Likert scale question asked, “*RUwrite* was appropriately difficult for my level of education.” A total of

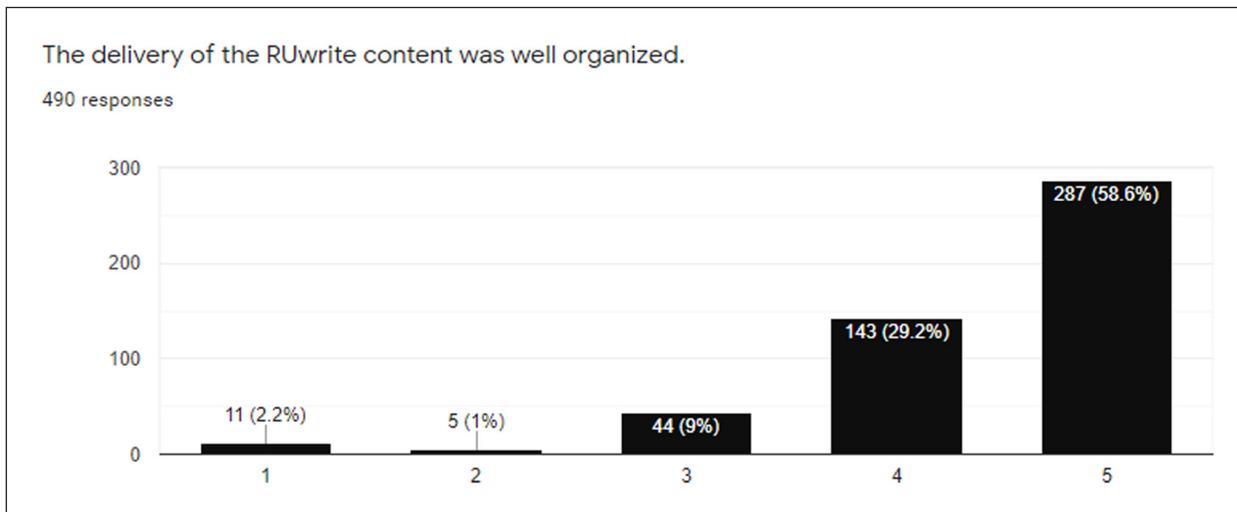


Figure 1 Question: The delivery of the RUwrite content was well organized.

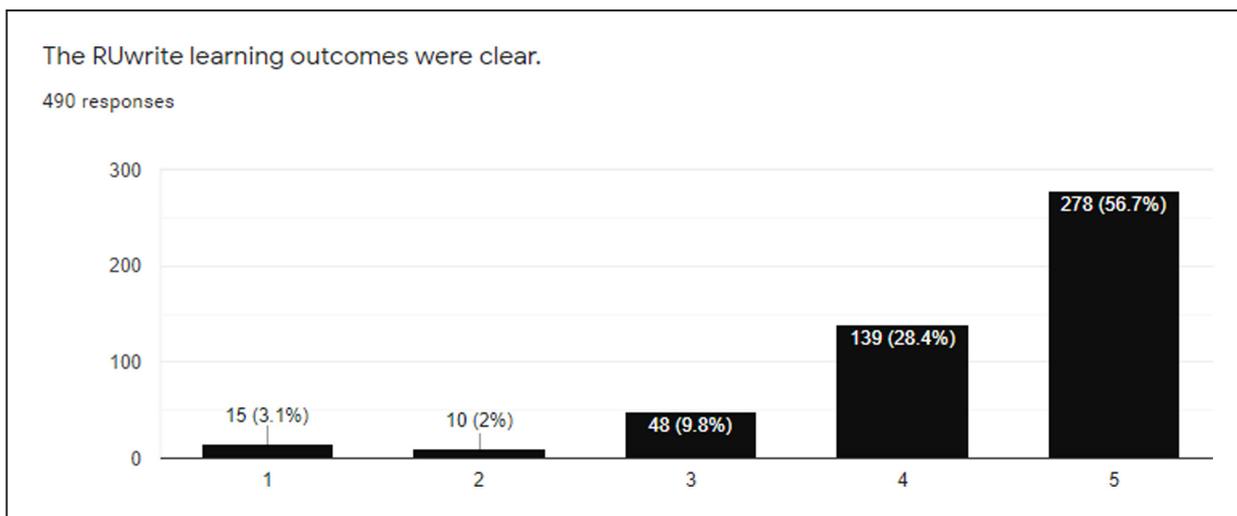


Figure 2 Question: The RUwrite learning outcomes were clear.

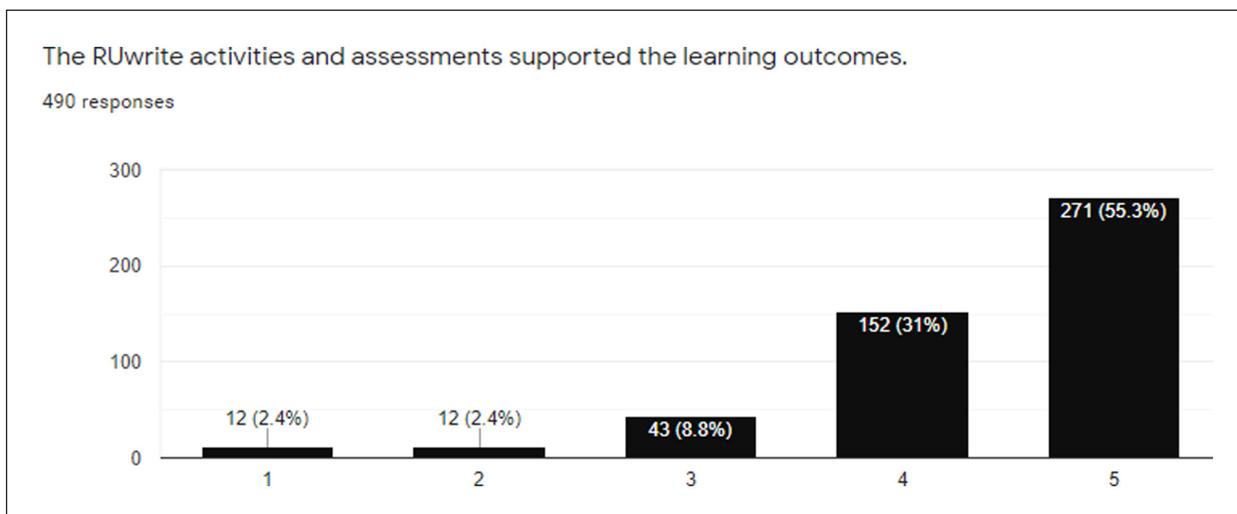


Figure 3 Question: The RUwrite activities and assessments supported the learning outcomes.

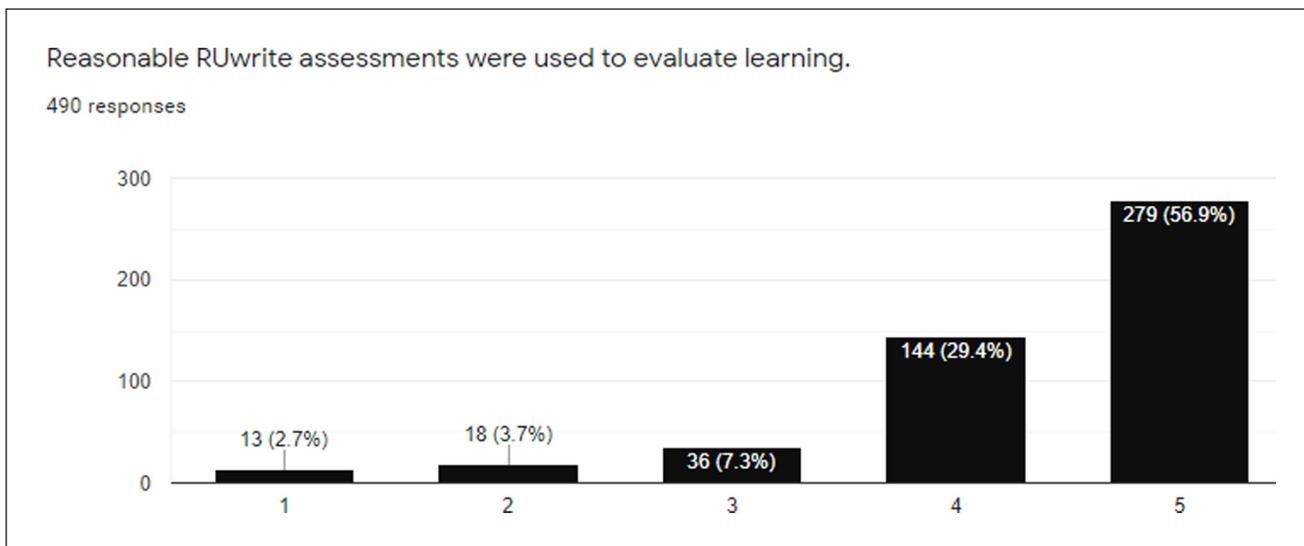


Figure 4 Question: Reasonable RUwrite assessments were used to evaluate learning.

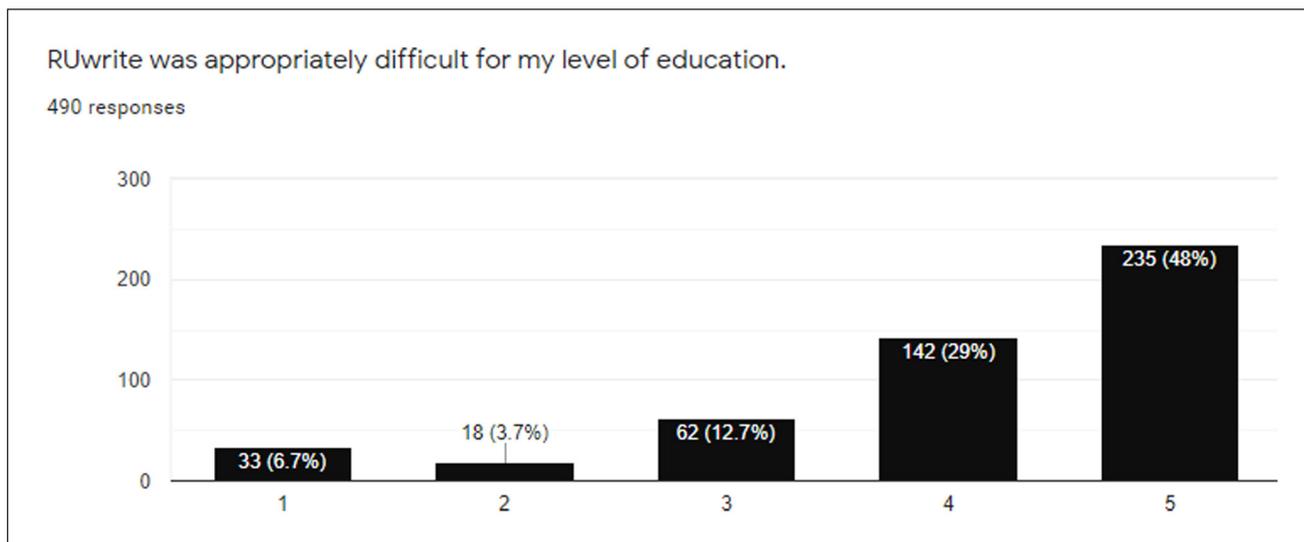


Figure 5 Question: RUwrite was appropriately difficult for my level of education.

235 students (48%) strongly agreed with this statement. In contrast, 18 students (3.7%) expressed that they disagreed with the statement (see [Figure 5](#)). Aside from the highest and lowest scores, 33 students (6.7%) indicated that they strongly disagreed. 62 students (12.7%) indicated that they were neutral, and 142 students (29%) indicated that they agreed (see [Figure 5](#)). Most of the students tended to strongly agree with all the Likert scale questions. However, beyond looking at the data from the Likert scale, the data must also be examined from the open response portion of the survey (see [Figure 5](#)).

The open response portion of the RUwrite UNIV 500 survey allowed students the opportunity to give any additional comments they had concerning the course. While 490 students took the survey, 4 students chose not

to give any additional comments in the open response portion. Of the 486 students who completed the survey, 149 students chose to fully respond to the open response portion. One of the benefits of the course was that many students felt that it was a good reintroduction into academic writing. One response stated, “RUwrite was effective in helping me understand quite a bit that I was rusty on or had not been taught properly in the past.” Furthermore, many students conveyed how beneficial the course was to them: “The activities and assessments were a great help. I appreciate that my writing skills will be 100% better than before, personally and academically.” While many students appreciated the course, there were some criticisms. One of the primary criticisms was that students wanted to see what questions they had gotten wrong and

what the correct answers were after completing an exam. They voiced that this would have helped them to learn from their mistakes: “Post-test feedback could have been better. When reviewing the answers, I would have liked to know why I got an answer wrong.” Given this open feedback, instructors will take steps in the future to enhance the feedback process in *RUwrite*.

NEXT STEPS

Future improvements to *RUWrite* will respond to stakeholders’ feedback. Much of the student evaluation data highlighted the need for better feedback on the mastery tests that not only guided students regarding competency issues but also provided examples and teaching moments. Future plans include building a stronger feedback bank for the quizzes and also expanding the questions types. Furthermore, based on the SET feedback, the instructions and videos will be analyzed to improve the navigation process.

During the evaluation process, the librarians, staff, and faculty discovered that students valued detailed and constructive feedback as one of the most important learning tools. While the survey feedback taught the team that the free and available aspect of an open writing lab was important to students in their course experience, students also wanted an instructional lab that went beyond the level of Pearson’s model of automated feedback. Digital assessment tools allow for individual feedback based on responses, branching, pop-up scenarios, and hints, and these features create more learning depth. In the future, the task force plans to implement these models for assessment.

In addition, the team will continue to make regular updates to the Wix learning site to address navigation or technical barriers students may encounter and integrate new OER into *RUwrite*. A significant benefit of choosing Wix is that the team can make changes independent of IT department approvals. However, the team will also have to handle any server errors or site issues without the benefit of the IT helpdesk. The team will routinely assess the effectiveness of this platform to meet the needs of the students and instructors.

Lastly, after integrating *RUwrite* successfully to eliminate the need for Pearson’s *MyWritingLab* and reduce student

fees, next steps included considering stakeholders outside of the UNIV 500 course. A freestanding open version of *RUwrite*¹⁰ that functions like a MOOC has been created. The goals for this version are to better support the *University Writing Lab* with asynchronous learning options and to continue to support the university’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for accreditation reports. As stakeholder feedback is continually evaluated each semester, regular improvements will be made to keep *RUwrite* relevant.

NOTES

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Yaeger, Joy Lucille, Charles Jones, Hannah G. Covington. "Open Solutions: Creating an OER Writing Lab." *Virginia Libraries* 65, no. 1 (2021): 4, pp. 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/valib.v65i1.604>

Submitted: 29 September 2020 Accepted: 16 November 2020 Published: 28 May 2021

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