

A case study on innovative education in scholarly communication and open research at the University of Essex

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Introduction

Innovative education has underlined the work of the research services team at the University of Essex since its earliest days. Since the team began in 2017, there has been a clear ambition to diversify the way training on the topics of scholarly communication and open research are delivered. This ambition began, and was initially driven, by [Katrine Sundsbø](#), who from 2017-2022 was the Scholarly Communications and Research Support Manager, leading the research services team. Since 2017, there have been two clear avenues whereby this ambition has brought clear outcomes: through gamification and through the Essex Student Journal.

Gamification

The team has used an innovative game-based approach when delivering training on the topics of scholarly communication and open research. In contrast to more typical slide-based presentations used for teaching, this approach aims to influence researchers' practice in a compelling way that resonates with the audience.

The first example of this is [The Open Access Escape Room](#). Devised by Katrine Sundsbø in 2018, *The Open Access Escape Room* immerses players in a collaborative puzzle-solving task weaved around a scenario whereby players must free the research from a villain who has 'locked away' this knowledge for the sake of profit. Only then can a utopian state of diamond open access (OA) for all be restored.

The game has been played with several groups of staff and research students at The University of Essex, and [has been translated into Spanish](#). A portable workshop version led to wider use, making it adaptable for events like away days. This version has featured on [conference](#) and events programmes by Young European Research Universities Network



Figure 1 Photos taken during the open access escape room.

(YERUN) in both London and Madrid, amongst others. The openly licensed online materials for the game have been viewed over 21,000 times.

With the COVID-19 pandemic coming into effect in 2020, it was no longer possible to play the game in-person. In response, [Hannah Crago](#) developed [the Puzzling Hunt for Open Access](#). This asynchronous experience allows individuals to work at their own pace, learning about the core themes and benefits of open access. The game enabled the active learning concept to continue even when researchers were forced to work in isolation and provided a break from the monotony of zoom-based lectures which were the norm during the early stages of the pandemic. It also brought new levels of accessibility as the game meets [WCAG](#) standards. It has been completed by over 50 individual researchers and staff, and was included as part of the University of Glasgow's [Research Support Games Day](#) in February 2022.

Whilst *the Puzzling Hunt for Open Access* was developed as a response to the pandemic, it allows the concept of playful learning to be transferred to a wider audience in a more inclusive way. This approach therefore extends the reach of the gamification of open research teaching to new and expanding audiences.

[The Open Science Files](#), by Hannah Crago and [Thomas O'Toole-Mills](#), continues this principle, but this time in exploring wider concepts of open research beyond open access. The game, whose original concept was inspired by an idea of Katrine Sundsbø's, was created for the Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) Transforming Research and Innovation through Europe-wide Knowledge Transfer (YUFERING) project. Through a series of puzzles, the *Open Science Files* teaches players about open science principles and practices such as FAIR data, open licences and research visibility.

Open licences can be a dry topic to teach, and sessions dedicated to copyright may struggle to draw in broad audiences. [Copyright Dough](#) by Hannah and Katrine brings fun and creativity to the subject and engages researchers – who benefit from understanding how their work can be re-purposed and built upon. Here, individuals act as either teachers, researchers, creators or students, and imagine themselves within these scenarios. Through

encouraging this role-play technique, researchers taking part gain more confidence talking about potentially problematic and complicated scenarios in ways that they may not feel comfortable were they speaking specifically about themselves.

Copyright Dough has been played several times at the University of Essex, with library staff, at professional services away days, and with a variety of researchers. The open materials have been shared widely with educators (leading to almost 8, 000 views on Figshare), and to broaden dissemination Hannah wrote a post for the influential [Copyright Literacy blog](#). She



Figure 2 Three of the playing cards used within *Copyright Dough*.

has also developed and run an online version of *Copyright Dough*, most notably at the [2021 FestivIL](#).

The Essex Student Journal

An additional innovative approach to education around scholarly communication and open research has been the running of the [Essex Student Journal](#).

Managed by the research services team, this diamond open access journal is an online multi-disciplinary academic publication, run by and for University of Essex students. It publishes high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate writing, and creates accessible, engaging content for a non-specialist readership. It encourages and celebrates student research by offering valuable, early experiences of academic publishing, editorial work and the peer-review process. To date, 163 articles have been published by the Essex Student Journal and its predecessor, ESTRO.

A key value of the Journal is modelling diamond open access for the student community. Authors are typically publishing for the first time, and the editor is a PhD student working to a 12-month contract. These individuals emerge from the process as strong open research champions, as can be seen in this [editorial by Aisyah Shamshum](#). The Journal demonstrates and normalises open access workflows and principles at the onset of these individuals'

academic careers, before they are exposed to 'traditional' publishing. Peer reviewers are PhD students, who benefit from similar exposure.



Figure 3 A Tweet / X post shared by the University of Essex Library showing some of the promotion the Essex Student Journal team do.

The Journal has proven to be a very effective learning tool, with authors gaining greater confidence in the potential of their work and often reporting that they feel proud of how the impact and visibility of it has been expanded. Furthermore, it allows the team to work closer with academic staff supporting their students through the authorship process. These colleagues become familiar with the principle-driven model which may be quite novel if they have only worked with commercial publishers in the past. In this way, the Essex Student Journal is able to demonstrate the benefits of diamond open access across the

University of Essex and beyond, as discussed in a recent case study written by Hannah Crago.

Conclusion

Through the innovative approaches to increasing awareness and understanding of open research and scholarly communication, the research services team at the University of Essex have demonstrated that investing time in non-traditional methods of engaging your audience can bring benefits for both the learner and the teacher. What's more, the sharing of these approaches openly online allows the reach and impact of these developments to be wide, and as an increasing number of training providers share their resources in these ways the wealth of content available to us all grows.

Developing gamified approaches can be time intensive, and while the research services team at the University of Essex have found this time to be a worthwhile commitment, it is of course the case that we cannot all develop new and innovative approaches for all topics. The importance then of sharing and taking the time to find open educational resources in these topics is therefore clear.

Additionally, in the case of the Essex Student Journal, this first-hand experience of publishing to 'learn while you do' has, and continues to be, fundamental in raising the profile of publishing amongst students at the University of Essex and is an approach that would be recommended across higher education institutions. Student journals are of course not unique to Essex, and the growth at other universities in recent years is very much welcomed.

What becomes clear then is that taking the time to be imaginative and innovative when it comes to delivering training for researchers allows the fundamentals of scholarly communication and open research to be explored in a different, and perhaps more memorable, way. While these approaches alone cannot deliver all the intricacies and finer points on these topics, they serve as a beneficial way to introduce researchers to key topics and provide a less intense route into what can become quite heavy topics.

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Hannah Crago is the Open Research Development Librarian at the University of Essex, where she leads the Research Services team. Hannah's role includes promoting open research practices across the university, advocating for alternative models of open access publication, and providing training for researchers on publishing, research visibility, and copyright. Hannah's role also involves management of the institutional open access fund and the [Essex Student Journal](#).

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