

# Open Pedagogy: The Importance of Getting it in the Air

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## The Parable of the Restrictive Roads

Once upon a time there was a pastoral country of beautiful fields and rolling hills. The simple people there enjoyed a relaxed pace of life, part of which included a good deal of walking.



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One day, a young lady announced a remarkable invention. She called it an automobile. The people had never seen anything like it, and everyone was immediately smitten with the speed and comfort of travel it provided. Trucks soon followed these first cars, as did motorcycles, and then four-wheelers. But before long, these remarkable inventions began to take their toll on the country's beloved landscape.

The people proposed a novel solution to this novel problem. They created "roads." And with the creation of these roads a new law was made requiring "all the different motorized vehicles to remain upon the roads." As the roads were built and the law enforced, people were able to simultaneously travel great distances in comfort and enjoy the scenic beauty of their homeland.



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Decades later, a young man announced another new invention – the airplane. It could *fly* – opening up countless new possibilities for travel and commerce. However, as the young man began selling his inventions to the excited populace, the government reminded them that the law requires “all the different motorized vehicles to remain upon the roads.” People could buy this “airplane” if they wished, but the law required them to drive it on the road – they would not be allowed to fly them. Of course, a few renegades got their airplanes briefly off the ground, but they were prosecuted swiftly and harshly, and made examples of.

Despite the inventor’s impassioned explanations of the new technology’s incredible potential, and protests by large groups of people, it seemed as if the antiquated law would prevent the new technology’s potential from ever being realized. How would they ever get their planes in the air?

## Another Old Law Meets a New Technology

Centuries ago, in response to a new technology called the printing press, copyright laws were created. Among other things, these laws prohibited people from making copies of books and other creative works and distributing those copies.

Centuries later, a new technology was invented called the internet. The internet made it possible to produce copies of creative works and send those copies around the world both instantaneously and for free. These new capabilities enabled completely unimagined possibilities in multiple domains, but immediately the antiquated (and now far overreaching) copyright law reared its head. It looked as if the rules that governed the internet would be the same laws that governed the 500 year old printing press. Internet users would be required to drive their airplanes on the road.

## Open Content Meets the Internet

Traditionally copyrighted creative works are “immune” to the incredible capabilities of the internet because what the internet makes *technologically possible* their copyright makes *legally impossible*. Long before the internet was a gleam in an engineer’s eye, copyright law had already prohibited much of what the internet would make possible.



CC BY photo by [Michael Bentley](#).

However, when creative works are distributed under open licenses that provide people with [5R permissions](#) (like the [Creative Commons licenses](#) do), those works becomes “susceptible” to the power of the internet. What the internet makes *technologically possible* their open licenses make *legally possible*.

## The Importance of Getting In the Air

When an educator makes the choice to adopt traditionally copyrighted textbooks and other materials, they are choosing to drive their airplane on the road. They are choosing to ignore the incredible potential afforded by the internet.

When an educator makes the choice to adopt open educational resources they are choosing an airplane that can actually be flown. They are putting themselves in a position where the entire, unbounded possibility of the internet lies open before them.

HOWEVER.

Simply adopting open educational resources will not make one's pedagogy magically change to take advantage of the capabilities of the internet. Adding legal permission to technological capacity only creates possibilities – we must choose to actively take advantage of them. There is nothing about OER adoption that forces innovative teaching practices on educators. *Sadly, many of the educators who choose OER end up driving them on the road, anyway.*

## Open Pedagogy



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“Open pedagogy” is the universe of teaching and learning practices that are possible when you adopt OER but are impossible when you adopt traditionally copyrighted materials. Earlier than infancy, this field is still embryonic in its development. This is largely due to the fact that copyright is so universal in its overreaching that it has become ubiquitous, pervasive, ambient. The restrictions of copyright shackle and direct our behavior as invisibly but constantly as the proverbial water the proverbial fish is incapable of seeing. As I’ve written before:

*At its core, the question of open pedagogy is “what can I do in the context of open that I couldn’t do before?” This turns out to be terribly difficult, because of the ubiquity (even ambience?) of copyright in our lives. An educator asking the question “what can I do pedagogically if I don’t have to worry about copyright?” is a bit like an aerospace engineer asking, “what could I do in rocket design if I no longer had to worry about gravity?” or a politician asking “what could I do if I no longer had to worry about the party system?” or a researcher asking “what could I do if funding were no longer a constraint?” ([Evolving Open Pedagogy](#))*

People continue to confuse free with open because they underconceptualize “open.” In this impoverished view they think the only – or primary – benefit of open educational resources is their impact on affordability. To some degree it’s understandable that people focus on OER’s affordability because each and every time someone adopts OER we immediately see that financial impact. However, I believe the potential impact of open pedagogy on learning is even greater than affordability-through-open’s impact on learning.

The field *desperately* needs more work focused in this area. Our current collection of examples of open pedagogy, things like [Murder, Madness and Mayhem](#) or [Project Management for Instructional Designers](#), is pathetically small. These and a tiny handful of other examples are simultaneously groundbreakingly innovative (compared to current practice) and sadly unimaginative (compared to what could be). Mike Caufield’s work with [federated wikis](#) is a more radical example of teaching practices that are possible *only* in the context of open content. But we need at least 15 – 20 more examples that are as different from current practice as Mike’s fedwiki work is, before we can have a substantive conversation about open pedagogy.

## Looking Ahead: Open Pedagogy and OER Adoption

Making progress in open pedagogy is also critically important to winning the long-term OER adoption battle. The current best arguments for OER adoption focus on benefits to students – things like improved academic outcomes and cost savings. But it is faculty who must make the OER adoption choice, often with no incentive more direct than “doing what’s right for students.” Powerful examples of open pedagogy will give faculty a specific, direct, even selfish reason to adopt OER. As faculty come to understand that OER give them orders of magnitude more academic freedom than traditionally copyrighted materials do, we will significantly accelerate the adoption of OER.

This accelerated adoption of OER will, in turn, significantly increase the quality (through open pedagogy) and affordability (through cost savings) of education for learners everywhere. And that is, after all, what we are trying to do.

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