

# My Open Textbook: Pedagogy and Practice

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## Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Robin DeRosa's blog \[https://edtechbooks.org/re\]](https://edtechbooks.org/re) on May 18, 2016.

I've spent some time [talking about open pedagogy \[https://edtechbooks.org/jsD\]](https://edtechbooks.org/jsD) at several universities this Spring, and in each of those presentations and workshops, I have usually mentioned [The Open Anthology of Earlier American Literature, \[https://edtechbooks.org/pkk\]](https://edtechbooks.org/pkk) an OER anthology that my students and I produced last year for an American literature survey course I taught. When I talk about the anthology, it's usually to make a point about open pedagogy. I began the project with the simple desire to save my students about \$85 US, which is how much they were (ostensibly) paying for the [Heath Anthology of American Literature Volume A \[https://edtechbooks.org/RQk\]](https://edtechbooks.org/RQk). Most of the actual texts in the Heath were [public domain \[https://edtechbooks.org-MZx\]](https://edtechbooks.org-MZx) texts, freely available and not under any copyright restrictions. As the Heath produced new editions (of literature from roughly 1400-1800!), forcing students to buy new textbooks or be irritatingly out of sync with page numbers, and as students turned to rental markets that necessitated them giving their books back at the end of the semester, I began to look in earnest for an alternative.

I launched the open textbook project over a summer, and because I teach at a public university where I had no easy access to graduate assistants or funding, I hired a bunch of undergrad students and recent alums, and paid them out of my own pocket to assist me. Turns out, most of them were willing to work for free (I didn't let them, though what I paid was low because it was all I could spare), and turns out the whole endeavor of building the work turned out to be transformative to my own pedagogy and to the course that followed. I want to share here the nuts and bolts of how we built the textbook, and reflect on how it affected the pedagogy that surrounded the book.

## Building the Book

I have basic WordPress experience, and since I am too busy with teaching to explore every cool new thing I'd like to, I wanted to stick with an easy tool to build the book. I settled on [Pressbooks \[http://pressbooks.com/\]](http://pressbooks.com/), which is a very simple, WordPress-based platform. If you are somewhat tech-savvy and comfortable playing around with things, you could definitely teach yourself the basics in an hour or so. I opened a free account and set up a framework for the book. Every section would feature a primary-source public domain document from the period, as well as an introductory context-setting piece.



scholarship. I started working on the book last year in my courses by asking students to blog about different topics we covered. They [assimilated ideas from outside readings](https://edtechbooks.org/-zPW) [https://edtechbooks.org/-zPW] (all properly cited), from my lectures, and from active learning projects that we did. They also wrote about their own [customized majors](https://edtechbooks.org/-ktU) [https://edtechbooks.org/-ktU] and [applied capstone projects](https://edtechbooks.org/-Hyq) [https://edtechbooks.org/-Hyq] (service-learning/experiential/partnership-based) and how it all tied in with the foundational theories of the field.

I just received a small grant from the University System of New Hampshire to develop this textbook. This summer, the plan is to take the student-created content (all of which is cc-licensed) and drop it into a Pressbooks shell much the way we did with the public domain literature in the anthology project. And in the Fall, students in the Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) intro course will edit that material, create glossaries and short introductions, add assignments and writing prompts, and in-load multimedia supplements. In the Spring, the capstone students will augment the sections that relate to the practice of IDS in their field experiences, and link [their own websites](https://edtechbooks.org/-Rsm) [https://edtechbooks.org/-Rsm] (we call them “ePorts”) into the book to demonstrate how different principles get applied in their curricula and practica. Students will also help me curate resource links for further reading, and locate other openly-licensed articles to import into the book.

People often ask me how students can create textbooks when they are only just beginning to learn about the topics that the textbooks cover. My answer to this is that unlike many other scholarly materials, textbooks are primarily designed to be accessible to students- to new scholars in a particular academic area or sub-specialty. Students are the perfect people to help create textbooks, since they are the most keenly tuned in to what other students will need in order to engage with the material in meaningful ways. By taking the foundational principles of a field- most of which are not “owned” by any prior textbook publisher- and refiguring them through their own lens, student textbook creators can easily tap their market. They can access and learn about these principles in multiple ways (conventional or open textbooks, faculty lecture and guidance, reading current work in the field, conversations with related networks, videos and webinars, etc.), and they are quite capable, in my opinion, of designing engaging ways to reframe those principles in ways that will be more helpful to students than anything that has come before.

In other words, whether your subject matter will be made up of public domain literature or not, your students can help you create a textbook in most any field. Here are some practical reminders that might be helpful:

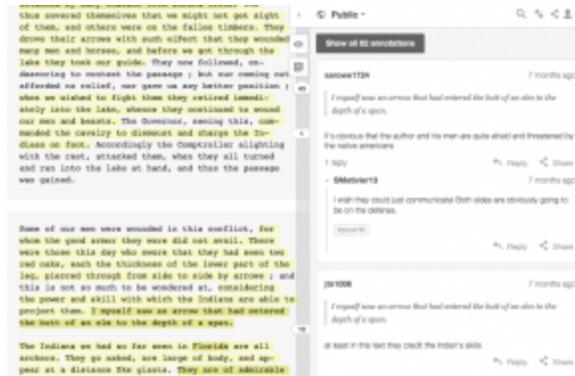
1. There is no rush! Don’t worry about producing a beautiful, flawless textbook. Build it in stages across multiple years, and let different cohorts of students contribute in different, layered ways. Make no claims to perfection. Your textbook is a work-in-progress, and it will continually improve as learners engage with it.
2. Academic labor is labor. Students can help build the textbook if it’s a meaningful part of the learning process in a class. Outside of that, find funding sources to support students or instructors who want to assist with the development of the project.
3. You don’t need to be a tech guru to do this. Learn [how to openly license your book](https://edtechbooks.org/-iP) [https://edtechbooks.org/-iP] and learn how to get it online so folks can access and share it. Make sure you understand copyright issues so you can assure that everything in your book is freely available for you to use. The library is probably your best first stop for licensing questions, and your academic technology folks can assist you with getting a Pressbooks or website set up to host your textbook.

## The Effects on Pedagogy

Ok, so now that stuff is out of the way, let's talk pedagogy. The \$85 dollars that I saved for each of my students seemed to be the least of what was exciting to me about the open anthology (and that was pretty exciting, given that many of my students struggled to afford our previous book- to the point that it often took them weeks to raise enough funds to get their own copy). Let me start by telling you that no student in any of my classes ever told me that they loved our Heath anthology back when I was using it. In sixteen years of teaching the course, no student every remarked on a course evaluation that our anthology was the best part of the class. They tolerated it, often liked the helpful glosses, and sometimes loved the literature itself. But a textbook is a textbook, and they saw it as neutral at best, uninspiring or frustrating at worst. I didn't really set out to make a better textbook. I was just looking to replace a textbook and save some cash for strapped students. Boy, did I underestimate the power of the open textbook.

As students and alums worked with me over the summer to create that first skeletal text, it was clear something amazing was happening. The students immediately seemed invested in the project- almost like they were, well, writing a book with me. To me, the work seemed sort of second nature, since I often write for publication. But for my students, the idea that they were creating something that would be read/used by a different cohort of students a few months later was a truly novel and thrilling concept. They repeatedly volunteered to work for free (I resisted this), and they still sometimes inquire about whether there are roles they can play now that the book is at its next stage of development. When the students in the class started working with and contributing to the book, they often made comments about liking our textbook! But by getting to contribute to the book, make curatorial decisions about the kinds of texts to include, and frame the work in their own words, they seemed more connected to the textbook itself, more willing to engage with it. Here's a [short video \[https://edtechbooks.org/-VIF\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-VIF) featuring several of my students, which explores their experience of using OER and engaging in open pedagogy-based learning.

I also did something else that I think made a big impact on the class. I was sensitive to the fact that our new textbook would be digital, and that most students would not want to use up their print quotas by printing it out. I had read all the same stuff you have probably read about how [READING OFF A SCREEN IS BAD \[https://edtechbooks.org/-ZoVB\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-ZoVB) and [TAKING NOTES ON A LAPTOP IS BAD \[https://edtechbooks.org/-Xcm\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-Xcm), but it occurred to me that both of these things have to do with the fact that we spend so little time parsing the differences between reading off a screen and reading print, and so little time examining how digital notetaking differs from handwriting our notes. My hunch is that it's not that screen reading or digital notetaking are worse for learning, but that we don't talk enough about what the digital texts enable that might be quite different from what is enabled by print. So I started the class with [a consideration of the problems \[https://edtechbooks.org/-gXH\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-gXH) and potential of moving to digital texts, and with a challenge to the class to try to produce our own work- even our notes on the text- digitally, even if that felt awkward. We would assess at the end of the course which digital tools we would continue to work with and which we would jettison in favor of a return to the analog.



Annotated with Hypothes.is

So I added an app called “Hypothesis” [<https://hypothes.is/about/>] to the course, which allows readers to take notes on the text digitally. Because we set our notes to “public,” students in my course (and in other courses at other colleges!) could see [each others’ annotations and comment on them.](https://edtechbooks.org/-RTc) [<https://edtechbooks.org/-RTc>] Almost immediately, we all realized that it wasn’t the *digital* quality of the notes that was engaging; it was the *social* quality of the notes. Suddenly, our student-created textbook was turning into a cacophonous, heteroglossic tapestry of voices talking to each other about the literature. While it may very well be true that taking notes longhand can help students recall specific detail more effectively than taking notes on a laptop, the question of how digital annotation of a text differs from hand-written annotation seems distinct, and there is no question that there were certain dimensions that opened up when we allowed the annotations-allowed ourselves- to talk to one another within the context of the close reading.

When I finally had time to sit down and take stock of what was happening, I realized a few things.

- The open textbook allowed for student contribution to the “master text” of the course, which seemed to change the whole dynamic of the course from a banking model (I download info from the textbook into their brains) to an inquiry-based model (they converse with me and with the text, altering both my thinking and the text itself with their contributions).
- The digital textbook meant they all had the book on Day 1 and nobody was behind, which seemed to level the playing field so we were all contributing more evenly than I had seen in the past.
- The fact that there were no limits on the kinds of things we could add into the textbook seemed to engender creativity in students, and allowed them to play to their strengths in figuring out what they brought to the table. This looked more like a real-world group project, in which team members would be asked to bring their talents to bear on some task.

As all of this became more evident to me, I began to be more concerted about playing up the open pedagogy that was developing. I became more reliant on Twitter as a tool in our class, and worked to develop the class community on our course hashtag, with the idea that letting students feel connected to each other outside of class would help them begin to engage with the work more as scholars and less as students. I opened Twitter chats with working scholars, tweeted links to their own student blogs when they interested me (we worked mostly outside of the LMS), and encouraged them to share their own work across whatever social media platforms they enjoyed using.



Student Blog About Hypothes.is

I also realized that my course was basically functioning as a MOOC (minus the “massive”–maybe it was a PMOOC: “Potentially Massive Open Online Course”). The text was free online. The syllabus and all assignments were online. The annotation system was publicly accessible, and the students were mostly all blogging on public websites that they built. Many class discussions had Twitter chats embedded inside of them, and any of the lectures I gave were livetweeted (pre-Periscope!). While we still had a sense of intimacy and trust in our classroom, it seemed to live everything up to connect our work as scholars of history and literature to larger communities outside of that classroom.

Now I want to pause for a second and get off the hype-mobile that I have been riding so far in this post. While it’s true that the creation of the open textbook absolutely transformed my teaching and my pedagogy, and while it is true that an open textbook has much more to offer faculty and students than cost-savings, it is not true that the open textbook is magic. For every affordance it offered, my open textbook also revealed serious pitfalls, barriers, and challenges that I am still working out. Here are a few of them, which I hope to tease out more thoroughly in my work over the next year or so:

- If OER is free, what hidden costs exist in using it that still hinder student access to education? For example, at my institution, 94% of students come to school with a laptop, which mostly means that my university wasn’t too worried about providing laptops for students because (as one colleague told me) “they all have them.” But *all* meant that in my 25-student classes, there were regularly 1-2 student(s) who didn’t have a machine. In order to do what I wanted to do with the digital textbook and the connected learning, I had to first work to get a laptop rental program installed in my library to ensure that my students all had access to hardware. I also had to spend a LOT of time going through each step of basic tech set-up. Because the “[digital native](https://edtechbooks.org/-qxb)” [https://edtechbooks.org/-qxb] concept is (still a) [https://edtechbooks.org/-SpE] fallacy, and because my institution does not fully cover basic [electracy](https://edtechbooks.org/-nzka) [https://edtechbooks.org/-nzka] (I just learned that word from [Gardner Campbell](https://edtechbooks.org/-sLN) [https://edtechbooks.org/-sLN] and [Alex Reid](https://edtechbooks.org/-ESI) [https://edtechbooks.org/-ESI]) or digital literacy skills at the introductory level, I couldn’t shorthand things like “create a Hypothesis login” without immediately leaving some students behind. While I am all for letting students find their own way through the acquisition of specific tech skills, this self-directed approach to tech learning is something that has to be modeled and facilitated to ensure that students who are newer to technology can participate fully. Bottom line, opening one line of access to a free eBook doesn’t erase about a zillion

other access issues that you will want to acknowledge honestly and assertively.

- If OER is free, what hidden costs exist in its production? Making these textbooks is taking me a chunk of time in the off-season. Thanks to my salaried position, I feel ok about putting in the overtime, but it's a privilege my colleagues who teach under year-to-year part-time non-contracts can't afford. Who should be funding OER creation? Institutions? Students? For-profit start-ups? How will you invest time in this project without obscuring the true costs of academic labor? Right now, we pass the corruptly high cost of academic publishing onto the backs of academia's most vulnerable members: students. But as OER gains steam, we need to come up with funding models that don't land us back in the same quagmire of exploitation that we were trying to get out of.
- Working in public is exciting and enriching, and I have seen my students thrilled by the connections they have made and engaged by the ability to produce work for a larger academic commons. That being said, working in public, and asking students to work in public, is fraught with dangers and challenges. Students need to understand privacy and safety issues (and so do we; in case you haven't had [FERPA \[https://edtechbooks.org/-KbF\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-KbF) waved in your face recently let me do that for you now). They may not know about trolling or how to respond to it (seriously, we can't even say there is a universally agreed-upon best practice for handling trolling). They may (will) face vicious harassment, racism, sexism, homophobia, and all of the other things that we do a reasonably good job at regulating in our classrooms (maybe?), depending on the kind of work they do or the kind of digital profiles they put forward, purposefully or otherwise. They will put crappy work online sometimes (sometimes they will know it's crappy and sometimes they won't); is that ok? Will it come back to haunt them when they look for a job (we need to take this concern seriously, given the debt they incur to study with us)? What professional risks do I assume when my pedagogy is so fully exposed? And who in the academy can afford to take those risks...and who cannot?

So yeah, that's only three bullet points, but there are so many threads embedded in each of those, I think I will stop there.

Here's the takeaways, for those of you who are first and last paragraph readers:

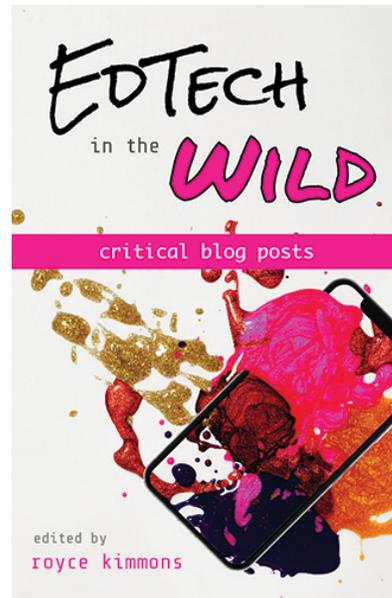


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Open textbooks save money, which matters deeply to our students. But they can also create a new relationship between learners and course content, and if teachers choose to acknowledge and enable this, it can have a profound effect on the whole fabric of the course. Jumping into the “open” part of the open textbook means opening our eyes to the real hazards and challenges of connecting our

courses to a wider public. I am no expert on any of this, and I welcome feedback and thoughts (and suggestions for further reading) as I start to pick my way through this kind of teaching. My best advice is just to share your experiences and roadblocks with others. Lots of people are promising that “open” is a panacea for everything that ails us in education, and lots of people are rejecting “open” for its failures to deliver on that promise. Both of those positions seem reductive to me. So maybe I’ll leave with two questions aimed at opening, rather than closing, the conversation:

- Do you use an open textbook? If so, what’s that “open” part doing to/for your course?
- If you want to try incorporating an open textbook into your course but haven’t yet, what questions do you have before you’d want to give it a go?



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