

Into the Open

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Karen Cangialosi's blog](#) on August 5, 2016.



The Seawall in Vancouver by K. Cangialosi

My 2016 summer session biology course, Evolution and Human Behavior, finished up a few weeks ago. I had asked my students to write a final blog post reflecting on their experiences in the course and figured it is about time that I do the same.

As I began to think about the summer course itself, I found that I needed to go back a little further and review how I got to this point. My decision to dramatically transform my teaching of this course came about as a result of a series of events and interactions. Last year, I spearheaded a complete overhaul of one of our two main Introductory (1st year) biology courses, BIO 110 Molecules and Cells, using a blended design. Since most of the content was to be delivered online, we searched for an online textbook. Who knew that the journey into looking for free online readings and resources for our biology students would be the beginning of my journey into understanding the meaning and power of open education? We decided to use OpenStax Biology, an OER (Open Educational Resource). I thought it was great to be able to provide links to just those chapters that we wanted our students to learn, put them in whatever order we liked, and that there were practice quizzes and links to animations. At the time, because we also used a lot of other freely available stuff like YouTube videos, material from the [Genetics Learning Science Center](#) and other sites; the distinction between 'free' and 'open' was lost on me. We were saving our students money and that seemed like a big deal.

Then a few things happened that really opened (pun intended) my eyes and my world to the possibilities of Open Education. First of all, I was invited by our Keene State College Academic Technology director, Jenny Darrow, to attend the 2015 Open Education Conference in Vancouver last November. What a difference a conference can make! As I listened to numerous speakers, and had discussions with participants, it all started to become a little clearer. Open was about so much more than 'free stuff'. In my quest to understand more, during the conference, I began typing a list of things in my notes that I titled: "Possible things that people mean when they say Open". I shared my list with Jenny, and we kept discussing and going back and forth about what Open is and the potential that it held, not just for KSC, but for revolutionizing Higher Ed. The real turning point for me was realizing the incredible fortune (a great stroke of luck really!) that I had in having [Robin DeRosa](#) from Plymouth State University as a USNH (University System of New Hampshire colleague)! If you don't already know, Robin is a superstar in the Open Ed movement. There was a 'light bulb' moment (or two or three...) during some conversations with Robin when I realized that the true power and potential of Open Ed wasn't OER, but Open Pedagogy. Robin, and the colleagues that she connected with, were talking about revolutionary transformation in how we teach, and in how students could learn. This was powerful stuff and I wanted to know more.

Jenny and I wasted no time in inviting Robin to speak at Keene State College in January 2016. I've been in academia a long time, and I have had more than my share of cynicism and eye-rolling at Higher Ed jargon and slogans like 'student-centered' and 'putting learners first' and 'innovation'. But Robin was actually *doing it* -and being wildly successful at it. Robin talked about making students the 'architects of the course' and having no 'disposable assignments' and emphasizing 'community and collaboration over content'. She asked us to consider 'what is the shelf-life of the content in your discipline?' And even more powerfully- the crux of **open** pedagogy- that students need to be connected to a larger world outside of their classroom, their institution of higher learning, their instructor and their peers. "To bring the students into the community of scholars, you need to engage students in their professional and scholarly communities- in their own institutions with other professors, with professors and scholars and workers at other institutions, with students outside of their classroom, with students at other institutions, and with community stakeholders – so they can enter the knowledge economy that is turning over so much faster than ever before" (Robin DeRosa January 2016). And how better to do that than through the use of the internet and digital tools? But this was about so much more than technology.

"...networked learning is not about digital tools, but about the dream of the public commons. And that's not about new high-tech modes of connection but about community-driven communication and the empowerment of diverse public voices." [Robin DeRosa 2015, Working In/At Public](#)

When technology itself is presented as the central force driving change in education, it is often seen for the falsehood that it is by many a wise faculty member. Academic technology is just a set of tools, maybe a really awesome set of tools, but still a set of tools that have no skills and creativity of their own (like a set of high-end power tools, useless in the wrong hands). I have heard many faculty members say things like, 'I'd like to use educational technology, but I don't have time to learn it well enough to teach it to my students'. But the tools are NOT the point. In fact, Robin points to her own lack of familiarity (when she started) about how to use some of the technological tools, and how this actually improved her pedagogy because students going out and trying to learn things on their own *IS* the point. Inspire

students, shake their foundations, teach them how to ask good questions, motivate them to seek answers and make connections- this is what we have always striven for as good educators. So why keep using a screwdriver to do this work when you have access to set of power tools?

Following Robin ([@actualham](#)) on Twitter, reading nearly everything she has written about Open Ed, and reading and listening to other experts in Open Education and Educational Technology, led me eventually to listen to a [Future Trends Forum](#) hosted by Bryan Alexander and his guest for the day, Gardner Campbell. Gardner said many brilliant things that day, and I really encourage you to listen for yourself to the recording at Bryan's website. But the one thing that he said, that stuck in my mind and wouldn't leave, was that his most important learning outcome for his students was that they have "an increased capacity for interest, both in breadth and in depth". When I heard this, I thought- that is exactly the learning outcome I want for my students- and the only learning outcome that is necessary.

I went to the notes that I had been making for a while about changes that I wanted to make in my online course, Evolution and Human Behavior, and wrote in all caps to myself: 'SCRAP THE WHOLE F...ING COURSE AS IT IS!'

When Gardner Campbell talked about students not just contributing to the digital commons, but to that *"larger commons that we call civilization"*, and Robin wrote *"...what I think we could work for is the slow and deliberate carving out of a public digital space...one that insists on the critical naming and challenging of silencing, exclusive, cruel, and oppressive structures"*, I was moved in a way that I had not felt since reading [bell hooks](#). Education could truly be about the practice of freedom, about real transgression, and the tools of Open Education could help get us there in a way that we have not experienced before. For those of us that believe that our job is to help students become agents that can transform the society we live in, not just replicate it, the potential of Open Ed was like breathing fresh air after living for a long time in a dark, moldy basement. But Robin also reminds us that Open is not a panacea, it is up to us to thoughtfully implement it in ways that make student learning truly transgressive.

So, my summer Evolution and Human Behavior course became my learning space and my first baby steps towards trying to do this.

INBIO 300 Evolution and Human Behavior is an upper-level, non-majors biology course that 'counts' as a requirement in the integrated studies (general education) program at Keene State College. So students don't necessarily have a lot of background in the subject area, but they are not first-year students either so they've learned a thing or two about how to navigate a college course. I used Canvas (the LMS for Keene State) as a place to provide 'nuts and bolts' information, but mostly the course took place via students blogs and twitter. I thought hard how to get rid of my usual managerial style of teaching which is often too controlling. In the spirit of Gardner Campbell, I wanted to create a 'swirling madness' that allowed to students to explore whatever ideas were interesting to them and help them avoid their tendency to be compliant as a means of getting a good grade. (The canvas course is publicly visible and you can access most of the material [here](#) if you like.)

Because human behavior is inherently interesting to most people, and offers such a broad range of possibilities for investigation, it seemed like the perfect course to do this experiment.

Also, as the understanding of evolution is fundamental to the study of every sub-field within biology, I wanted students to figure out its importance through their own self-driven interest and discovery. Students were asked to explore whatever questions or topics interested them within the context of the evolution of human behavior. I gave them questions to begin with, but they were free to explore questions not on my list if they wanted to. I also gave them a vocabulary list and asked them to incorporate the terms into their blog posts. (I guess I wasn't ready to entirely give up all my instructional influence on what they were doing, and I am not sure this is a bad thing. I welcome any suggestions or comments about this or anything else). I also provided several readings, articles, videos and other content to help get them started if they wanted to use it. But everything was optional.

I barely provided any instructions on how to set up a blog (using wordpress) and all of them seemed to figure it out without major problems. Along the way, I answered a few questions and gave them some feedback via screencasts, but they mostly used wordpress help or other resources to set up and modify their sites. I am especially grateful to Laura

Gogia ([@GoogleGuacamole](#)) for her incredibly well-constructed resources for how to do proper and effective hyperlinking, embedding and attributing. I basically copied and pasted her stuff into my canvas course- it is so excellent and anyone considering using student blogs for their courses needs to read her work at [The Integration of Web Culture into Higher Education](#). Check out especially the drop-down menu for students. And no course like this would be worthwhile without explanation and a link to [Creative Commons](#).

Summer sessions are different in many ways, the time goes very quickly (only 7 weeks), and having only 9 students in the class makes it a different experience as well. It allowed me to read every blog and tweet and comment that any of them had written through the whole course- and to respond. I am still figuring out how to strike that balance between wanting them to feel my presence and input, but not wanting them to feel like they were always under surveillance or just writing for me. Most of them did a great job commenting on the blog posts of their peers (another requirement).

I think twitter worked extremely well for discussion, reminders, links to blog posts, articles and any interesting stuff. (You can explore #evolhumbehav on twitter if you are interested). It took some arm-twisting for some students to tweet, but most of them got it quickly and liked using it. There was resistance by one student who hated it. How much did they tweet just because I 'made them'? I'm not sure I can answer this but a couple of them are still tweeting now that the class is over which is very gratifying to see. Towards the end of the course, I organized a synchronous Twitter chat with my students. It worked really well and next time I will organize one of these much sooner and do a few more.

My efforts to engage them in the larger community outside of the class were only somewhat successful. I think the short session time and summer vacations contributed, but I what I need to do mostly is to keep building my own online PLN (personal learning network). But it was so great to see blog post comments and tweets from my wonderful colleagues and tweeps (especially @actualham, @googleguacamole, @susanwhitemore) and from some people with whom I had no previous connections. My students mentioned that they really liked hearing from others outside of our class, and again, the whole point of blogging and communicating outside of an LMS.

For grading, I used only self-evaluation forms where I asked them to give a grade for various things and to explain why they should have that grade (there were a total of 3 self-evaluation forms for them to complete- at 2 weeks, 4 weeks and 7 weeks. My hope was to get them thinking about their efforts and to see what might need improvement. At the end, I asked them to give an overall grade for themselves for the class. Surprisingly, they almost all gave themselves the same grade that I would have given them without their input. I also asked them whether they planned to keep blogging in the future and saw potential in their site for other uses. Most of them said yes and I will keep an eye out for their work! One student already made significant progress towards making her site into a professional e-portfolio.

In closing, I want to say that I really enjoyed this class much more than I usually do! I was so very impressed with my students and I learned many new things. It definitely increased my interest in continuing to learn how to be an educator in the Open.

"Holy shit, bigger world!" (quote from Gardner Campbell, June 2016, USNH Academic Technology Institute).



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