

Being the Unbook, Being the Change: The Transformative Power of Open Sources

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It's an emergent property of connected human minds that they create things for one another's pleasure and to conquer their uneasy sense of being too alone The social condition of global interconnection that we call the Internet makes it possible for all of us to be creative in new and previously undreamed-of ways. Unless we allow 'ownership' to interfere.

Eben Moglen (1999)

[T]eachers need to develop a discourse and set of assumptions that allow them to function more specifically as transformative intellectuals.

Henry A. Giroux (1985)

Be the change you want to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi

In the summer of 2000, I began working in K-12 reading and writing curriculum development. My job came with a copy of Jeffrey Wilhelm's book on the shelf, *"You Gotta Be the Book": Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents* (1996). I read it, most of the time with my jaw on the floor. Wilhelm's book was both transformative, as I'd never read anything like this in graduate school for literature or rhetoric/composition, and it was wholly supportive of what I'd done the previous year (which felt scattered and stressful at the time). I taught sixth grade writing, moving the students to engage with text, reading and writing, in ways I'd never tried before.

I remember wishing that Wilhelm's book had come to me sooner, to guide me and be a mentor text for that year. When I read of Wilhelm's own love of books and reading and the relationships he had with books, I thought, "Ah, here is someone I get." And the distance his students felt from text, I got that, too. I know I didn't explicitly teach students to "be the book," nor was I ever able to describe it that way before reading his work. But the passion I bring to teaching now is from that time, from that thinking, borne from the mistakes I made on that journey.

Wilhelm's not only a transformative teacher to the students he taught, he is a transformative intellectual who influenced the way I wrote and thought and created curriculum for struggling readers, especially boys. Wilhelm couldn't wait for others to help him. Indeed, he had to act to reach his students right then and try many methods before finding an arts-integrated curriculum that allowed his students to "be the book." His boon companions were his students on his journey—each took a hero's journey, each in his or her own way. Their story continues to influence and unfold.

Wilhelm demonstrates what it takes to help turn students into readers through sharing his journey and his teaching material. But each of us still needs to do this for our students. They have to be in it, be it, be the book. Somehow the book must be made real, alive, visceral, active, enchanting. Don't all educators want all writing students, no

matter their age, to see the texts they use as inspiration, to see the texts they are creating—really *see* these things and become them, live them?

Does it help if the text is free? We have the digital covered. Our world is digitized or getting there. But can we help students to see texts in different ways, by giving them “books” they can carry around on their phones or listen to on their MP3 players that link with art, film, speeches, monuments, maps? By making these things free for them to own and interact with—giving them a place to explore and find other texts and images that might work for them—do we turn them into engaged readers and engaged writers? The “unbooks,” the texts that are free and open, can be a smorgasbord of information from which students may pick to satisfy themselves, to bring themselves the pleasure of learning. The “unbook” is already the best book yet for students to learn how to “be the book.”

This essay is about a learning/teaching journey that will attempt to explain something of what you just read. I have recently transformed as a writing program administrator, as a writing professor, as a literature professor because I began working in a commons-based group to create open educational resources (OER).

Yochai Benkler generalizes his definition of commons-based peer production (CBPP), based on the phenomenon of how free software is developed. He defines this commons as a large group of individuals who share resources and work together to create something that continues to be improved and changed by participation (see Drupal.org, or Wikipedia). Other ways people have named this model include mass collaboration, peer production, crowdsourcing. “Open education resources” is a term coined in 2002 the Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries (UNESCO). OER are “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge” (Atkins, et.al.).

During this academic year (2010-11), I participated in *Writing Spaces: Readings for Writing* as an editor, then as a writer, now as an editor again, and I plan to continue in whatever capacity our community needs or wants me. I know what I’m about to say sounds like advertising, but it’s not that. It’s advocacy. Advocacy is okay. I’m promoting an *open* educational resource. *Writing Spaces* is an OER—it’s open, free to any and all who want to use the contents of this online, *open* textbook series. Download either of the two volumes or individual chapters anytime you feel like it. Do it more than once. No kidding—it’s free—essays about writing by writing teachers for writing students (and writers), peer-edited and peer-reviewed by writing teachers. Send copies to your friends. Most essays in the collection are licensed by Creative Commons for ripping, remixing, and re-using.

It’s not like exactly like software development. It’s academic publishing with the *feel* of open-source software development, and it’s modeled on that process to create open materials free to all who want or need them. It’s created freely, too. I know. I’m not paid. Nor are the other editors, nor the co-founding editors, nor are the authors. But the essays are peer-reviewed by an editorial board of impressive scholar/writers and peer-edited by professional writers and teachers who work at universities in Michigan, Virginia, Min-

nesota, Alabama, and California—with two more folks: a specialist in Texas handling graphics, and a professor in South Carolina, who is our production editor.

Because this project was built on a model of open-source software production (and traditional academic publishing with peer-review and peer-editing *and* supported by partnerships with Parlor Press and the WAC Clearinghouse), I was led to explore what all *that* means.

Eben Moglen points to all the good that comes of togetherness in production: new ways of working, new ways of communicating made possible by instant everything, all those infinite connections that can alleviate our “uneasy sense of being too alone.” I certainly lost a large part of my uneasy sense of being too alone through participation in producing OER with a group of brilliant, interesting, creative, kind and generous colleagues—from whom I still learn constantly. I learn from the work they write for the project, the work I do with them as editors, the work itself, the process of working together. The act of writing this OER isn’t about the pleasure of ownership—that’s too industrial age for me now. It’s about sharing, as immediately as I can, notions about OER created with peers, and hearing what peers think.

By my very participation in an OER development project, I began to feel like a transformative intellectual. As a writing program administrator, I help teachers in our writing program learn about OER—so they can have more resources to help them teach and learn about writing. And they love it. So do my students who don’t teach, who are writers, but who may want to teach writing one day. In the last few weeks, as I have been crafting and re-crafting this essay (and hoping serendipity will inform what I do), a former student of mine, Katie, and I have been working on a project using *Writing Spaces*. She told me she was nervous about getting feedback for a story she’s written for a short fiction class. After it was her turn to go before the class and receive response, she wrote to me about finding an essay in *Writing Spaces* that helped her:

Have you read all the articles on WS [*Writing Spaces*]? I came across one titled “The Inspired Writer vs. the Real Writer” by Sarah Allen. I read this Tuesday night and found it relevant to my situation.... I was so worried about my story because it wasn’t something that just came to me. I had to work really hard on it—deleting, re-writing, cutting and pasting paragraphs in other places—it was crazy. It was nice to hear that even writing professors don’t love writing all the time!

About a week later, Katie started attending an open meeting for a course revision in our basic writing program and wants to be involved somehow in this project of openness. She’s taking the essay that helped her understand her own writing situation by Sarah Allen and pairing that with Elizabeth Gilbert’s talk on Ted.com in which Gilbert argues against the idea that artists and writers *are* geniuses. Instead, we should eschew that horrific burden and embrace the idea that we can be open to genius moments if we show up and do our work—and in Gilbert’s case (as ours), that work is writing. Katie is going to write a short reflective piece about how she really began to understand the writing process as doggedly-determined work and not as inspiration alone, by reading Allen’s essay in *Writing Spaces* (Volume 1) and watching this short speech. We’ll make

Katie's piece part of our course, with a link to the video in the Ted.com archives and with a link to the wide-open essay.

A Basic Writing Course and Commons-Based Peer Production (CBPP)

This semester, a group of us at my institution are creating an entirely open basic writing course that uses only open educational resources (like essays in *Writing Spaces*) and is supported by open source software for building and managing web sites, like Drupalgardens.com.¹ The course will be a gift back to the commons that gave us the content that we'll be re-mixing to meet the needs of a student population who require us (though they know it or not) to give them instruction in writing, reading, information literacy, computer literacy, critical thinking, and more. And we can do more with open than we can with one or two static textbooks that don't move around as we need to move around.

While textbook publishers may be working to re-create who they are and what they offer in book publishing, I doubt that much of what they do will be free. But I want free because we'll be contributing to the free. Free is good. Free is open. It's easy to use free things and make them into what we need them to be. When everything is open, nothing seems insurmountable, and everything can be done with a lot of us involved.

We don't know if what we propose to do with our basic writing course is particularly innovative (none of us would call ourselves cutting-edge techno-ninjas). But this project must be done for our students right now. Is there a basic writing course somewhere out on the web for the program I direct—with readings and curriculum we can use and modify? Actually, I've found some fine open educational resources for writing instruction. But they are not all put together in the way our program would want it, for our students, at our school, taking into consideration the newly published *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, as well as the *Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*. And they don't have the resources we want to use. It's our deepest hope that what we do with our basic writing course will be meaningful to others, to anyone who wants to share in our journey of thinking and writing instruction—students, teachers, parents, friends—anywhere in our state of Alabama, our country, our world.

We inspire each other, we teach each other, we learn together, we take on only the tasks we can handle in small free moments of our lives. The course might otherwise take hundreds of hours of an individual's life and then only reflect one person's thinking. Together we are spending an hour here, a few hours there, and seeing where there are difficulties, anticipating what might be needed, all bringing different vision and energy to the development of this OER.

¹ Drupal is an open source content management platform developed through a commons. On their web site, you'll see that as of 27 February 2011, "550,999 people in 228 countries speaking 182 languages power Drupal." If you watch the map at the bottom of the page, you can see the commons working live all over the world, together. It's thrilling.

When Eric S. Raymond wrote about the process of developing Linux, he named a principle of development “Linus’ Law,”² which is: “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” (“Cathedral”). If there’s a bug in the software, and fifty people are looking at it, two might immediately identify the bug, and another one or two might find a solution. Same for curriculum or OER development, same for our basic writing course development—we need lots of eyeballs. If something is not working, one of us will find what’s wrong; one of us will find a solution. What one of us can’t figure out, a lot of us can figure out.

Our basic-course “commons” includes a WPA, full-time writing instructors, adjuncts, our library archivist who’s on our WAC committee, community members, and graduate students. All of us come from mixed academic backgrounds—not exclusively writing studies by any means. And we are certainly not coding-capable. In fact, a couple of us are downright computer inefficient. What we know, though, is this way of working together is possible. What we know is that we can handle the software angle with others helping us (and thanks to the Drupal community who makes it available in ways we *can* handle). What we know is that we can rip, remix, and reuse, legally with OER, to the greater good of our community with existing open stuff: software, writing, images, videos, and more. What we know is that other people in various communities can help us make it better.

When we are finished with the first iteration of the course, we’ll release it with the expectation that everyone who wants to will use it, revise it, make it better, and share their insights and changes with the group—the whole group—through the course site or wherever any one might want *their* versions to exist. We’ll keep working, too. We know it will never be finished. What matters is that everybody gets the course, everybody has a chance to play with it, everybody shares back with everybody. It’s the only way a commons works. If you take from the commons, and remake something from the commons, you need to give back to the commons.

A Commons: More than Meets the Eye

So we have learned that a commons can rock. I learned that first from my personal experience with *Writing Spaces*.³ And next, I have learned from Yochai Benkler and Helen Nissenbaum about the motivation behind Cyber-Based Peer Production (CBPP) and its end result—virtue. Focusing on Wikipedia, Slashdot, Clickworkers, SETI@home, they posit that virtue is wrapped up in the commons’ production and commons’ goals:

² This “law” is named after Linus Torvalds, Finnish software developer, who created the Linux kernel in 1991, which has become an example of successful open-source, or free, software—it’s licensed under the GNU General Public License. It came from the GNU Project, which was about free software and collaboration, started in 1983 by Richard Stallman at MIT. MIT is a leader in OER opening all their courses for public consumption and learning: <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>. That all this is connected so deeply—not a surprise.

³ What *Writing Spaces* does is something like academic peer production more than a whole and large CBPP, such as Wikipedia, but it’s the same basic idea of peers making things better because they are all in the production process together—lots of eyeballs on the same bugs.

[W]e argue that the remarkable social and technical phenomenon of commons-based peer production fosters virtue by creating a context or setting that is conducive to virtuous engagement and practice, thereby offering a medium for inducing virtue itself in its participants. (414)

They conclude that being part of CBPP “is an instance of an activity that not only enables the expression of virtuous character but serves as a training ground for virtue” (414). The process and the goal of CBPP are informed by virtue. They use Aristotle for understanding virtue (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and refer to many other philosophers, modern and ancient, Western and Eastern, to talk about motivation and virtue and conclude that being part of CBPP “is an instance of an activity that one only enables the expression of virtuous character but serves as a training ground for virtue” (414). The process *and* the goal of CBPP are informed by virtue.

What they don’t talk about explicitly is the essence of Aristotle’s notion of virtue as a quest for human flourishing: *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is created from two Greek words—*eu*, meaning well-being, and *daimon*, meaning spirit. The life of a professional academic should be about creating the conditions which foster human flourishing. Aristotle declared that “the virtues arise in us neither by nature or against nature, and we are completed through habit,” virtuous by acting virtuously (Aristotle 19).⁴ Our job as teachers is to do the things that enable human flourishing in our students (and ourselves), including moving students along a path to find civic virtue. We acquire virtue because we are trying to create the circumstances by which others may develop the same kinds of virtues, as part of a community.

Or to put it in other terms, virtue begins when we heed a call to participate in Cyber-Based Peer Production. We’re inward-focused on things that could be seen as all about ourselves: autonomy, independence, liberation. But as we engage in further participation, our inward focus moves to an outward focus on things that are all about ourselves, but which might also give others pleasure: creativity, productivity, industry. As we continue to participate in CBPP, we feel good about helping others who are participating. We become focused on outward things that are still about ourselves, but which will definitely give others something worthwhile as well: benevolence, charity, generosity, altruism. Finally, we find that doing good by participating keeps us participating. Our outward focus moves to an inward focus again—and again it’s all about us. But this time, it’s about us as a community, and it cycles back because we’re being supported, others are being supported, and we all flourish in the sustainability of a commons.

Trying to pin it down even more specifically, in a blog post from 27 February 2011, “Emergence vs. Community-Based Development for OER Commons Growth,” Charles E. Lowe, a writing professor at Grand Valley State University, suggests there are several reasons for embracing a proven way of working with “open” as a commons’ goal to create OER for writing studies:

Based on what open source development has demonstrated, we might better grow the commons [for writing studies] if we prioritize community-based development. Here are some lessons we might take from open source:

⁴ Matthew Jordan, philosophy professor at Auburn University Montgomery, has helped me think about this concept in relation to what Benkler and Nissenbaum write about CBPP.

- We can generally create better resources collaboratively than we can individually.
- People like to “belong” and are more likely to engage in creating resources and/or put in more effort by joining with others than when working alone.
- The synergy we gain through collaboration will not only influence the creation of resources, but the synergy will also help us to feel more strongly a part of a community with similar ideals.
- Educators can learn more about specific disciplinary knowledge and/or pedagogy from collaborating with each other.
- We can learn more from each other about useful resources that can aid in the creation of resources; we might avoid duplication of effort.
- People new to creating resources can learn strategies for the effective creation of resources from more experienced members of the open education community.
- Through collaboration, we are more likely to create resources that suit a wider context beyond our individual needs or resources that are more adaptable. Better usability will result.
- When we collaborate to produce resources, we have more people aware of what was created and promoting its use.

He’s right. We should all be talking about these points. Open-source software developers are an undisputed force in computing. I’m an advocate of working together like they do to produce anything free for education: lessons, syllabi, courses, essays, unbooks. Think what we could do with writing studies if we adapted something like the commons-based way of producing text—for learning, for readers, for ourselves, for our peers, for our students. Think what we’d get in return. Lowe is onto something here.

We should pay attention.



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