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READING BRITISH MODERNIST TEXTS: A CASE IN OPEN PEDAGOGY

Mantra Roy, Joe Easterly, and Bette London

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Project Overview

Institution: University of Rochester
Institution Type: private, research, undergraduate, graduate
Project Discipline: English Literature
Project Outcome: Annotated Online Texts
Tools Used: WordPress, CommentPress, Reclaim Hosting
Resources Included in Chapter:
  - Images
In this paper we discuss the application of open pedagogical strategies in a library session for undergraduate students. I, Mantra Roy, was then the humanities librarian at the River Campus Libraries at the University of Rochester. Dr. Bette London of the English department was teaching the course Making Modernism New Again in Spring 2017. My colleague, Joe Easterly, the digital humanities librarian, worked with the platform, CommentPress, that enabled our implementation of open pedagogical practices. By enabling students to gain agency in their own learning and by using literary texts in the public domain, we adopted open pedagogy in praxis.

**Background: Critical Pedagogy and library instruction**

Open pedagogy, variously defined, comprises a number of core tenets: agency of students in their own learning, creative or innovative ways of learning, and participatory technological tools that enable community learner-generated outcomes (Hegarty, 2015; Reale, 2012; Wiley, 2013). Based on the above tenets, I argue that open pedagogy is inspired by critical pedagogy. As espoused by Paulo Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critical pedagogy emphasizes the breakdown of barriers in the power dynamic of learning. When students recognize that they are active contributors in their own learning, even if it is a single lesson in a library session, they pay attention and are encouraged to embrace the content as their own. Their shared power in the process of transmission of knowledge gives them autonomy in their own learning process (Reale, 2012, pp. 83-86). Librarians often employ active learning methods to engage students in learning about library resources. The power shifts from the library instructor to the students who, feeling more empowered, take the lead in their own learning. When, as a librarian-instructor, I have created a scavenger hunt for students to explore the library building and find artefacts that fascinated them, I have made possible critical thinking and reflection among students, who have been spared my individual perspective on what the physical library has to offer. As students report back in class about the rare pens or diaries they spotted in the Rare Books and Special Collections or the quiet study corners tucked away from most eyes, I have helped to “liberate the[ir] consciousness” (Freire, 1970, pp. 52-53). The state of being “oppressed” may be understood as students being compelled to receive information from multiple sources and from predetermined perspectives, each source convincing them of its absolute authority. In other words, as Jesse Stommel described in a 2018 online post, *Textbooks, OER, and the Need for Open Pedagogy*, open pedagogy enables students to “co-construct their own educations.” Students are in full control of how they want to locate information, a critical skill librarians want them to learn in library sessions. Such an untethered class activity, especially in a class of first-year students for whom the library session

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1. Although Mantra will use the first-person “I” through the paper, “we” will be used whenever Joe and Mantra’s collaboration is referred to. Joe contributed the particulars about the technical platform and Bette reflected on her assignment objectives and students’ learning via email.
is often the very first time they enter the building after orientation, demonstrates students taking responsibility for their own learning when instructors practice open pedagogy.

Similarly, when I pose questions for students to find articles or bits of information by exploring the library website, the multiple ways they employ to locate a digital object have often surprised me, and I have learned about pathways to find a LibGuide that I had not explored yet. Effectively, as Freire (1970) insisted, education should dissolve the distinction between teacher and student so that both are “simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 59; italicized in the original). As Freire (1970) wrote, one cannot learn “for” the students; they have to learn by themselves (p. 54). Moreover, Freire’s concept of praxis—thought and action—becomes evident when students engage critically with the objects they encounter, whether in the physical library or the digital portal, and assume control of how they demonstrate their learning (action) about the library resources (Swanson, 2005, p. 67).

Introduction

Drawing on Freire’s (1970) theory of empowering students in their learning process, it is arguable that designing tasks for students in order to learn actively leads to a pedagogic style that is open and flexible. It is more impactful than pursuing a rigid lesson plan in which students are expected to learn a carefully curated number of ideas, a pedagogic style that allows for no agency among students. The flexible pedagogic style often involves peer-to-peer learning and sharing, both of which are identified by Bronwyn Hegarty (2015) as two attributes of open pedagogy. Open pedagogy enables instructors to practice “co-intentional education” (italicized in the original) in which teachers and students, as subjects, come to know or learn about a problem critically, and engage in the “task of re-creating that knowledge” (Freire, 1970, p. 56). Per Freire, such pedagogy focuses on student-centered learning that helps students create new knowledge, a characteristic Hegarty (2015) calls “learner generated.”

As Rajiv Jhangiani (2017) wrote in Definitions vs Foundational Values, open pedagogy “values access, agency, transparency, and quality” (n.p.). The process of learning must be transparent and it is possible with the use of technologies that provide sharing or community access to learning platforms. Finally, the quality of knowledge or content produced must be determined by the instructor who designs open assignments. Most importantly, students must have access to sources of learning and that is where open texts or open educational resources (OER) come in.

If the definition of open is founded upon access, agency, and transparency, as Jhangiani noted above, then the use of OER, which are zero or low-cost learning resources that can be retained, reused, revised, remixed, and redistributed (See Clarifying the 5th R; Wiley, 2014), is, in my view, a critical characteristic of open pedagogy. The movement to adopt, adapt, and create OER is being embraced by several campuses today, primarily in response to the debilitating costs of textbooks. According to “College Textbook Costs & Open Educational Resources,” an article posted by the Robert W. Van Houten Library of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, costs of textbooks rose by 82% between 2002 and 2012, and two out of three students skipped buying required
textbooks because they were too expensive. Another critical aspect of open pedagogy, as David Wiley (2013) famously wrote, is to do away with disposable assignments. Open assignments, in which the end product is anticipated but not confirmed, enable students to learn critical issues, problems, and contexts actively from their own perspectives. They are different from ‘disposable assignments’ that are developed by instructors and which are forgotten by students after submitting them although they may have put in several hours to produce them. Disposable assignments, such as term papers, do not contribute any value to the world, argues Wiley, and I agree because students are expected to demonstrate what they have learned in the course from the instructor’s perspective which will then earn them a grade.

David Wiley and John Hilton (2018) add another layer to the understanding of open pedagogy by broaching the concept of “OER-enabled pedagogy” which is best demonstrated by “renewable assignments”. Such assignments are identified by the following criteria:

1. Are students asked to create new artifacts (essays, poems, videos, songs, etc.) or revise / remix existing OER?
2. Does the new artifact have value beyond supporting the learning of its author?
3. Are students invited to publicly share their new artifacts or revised / remixed OER?
4. Are students invited to openly license their new artifacts or revised / remixed OER? (p. 137)

In the following section, where I describe the library session and assignment, we must note that the work developed by the students was not technically an OER as access to the work was limited solely to the University of Rochester campus Internet, and thus was not freely accessible to the public for reusing, remixing, and revision. But firstly, the free texts from Project Gutenberg were in the public domain and enabled live commentary in the CommentPress environment. Secondly, students contributed to the commentary on texts that can be read as student-produced OER. Per Hegarty’s (2015) attributes, students used participatory technologies and trusted the openness of the online community where they collaboratively learned (pp. 5-6). They did not work in silos while interpreting literary texts but instead applied their knowledge as a community of peer-learners and created new meaning out of seminal passages. Like renewable assignments, the new artifacts had value for all learners (Wiley & Hilton). The result was open pedagogy in praxis.

Making Modernism New Again and Open Pedagogy

At the University of Rochester in Spring 2017, Dr. Bette London, professor in the department of English, taught a course entitled Making Modernism New Again. In re-examining iconic texts of modernism, Bette introduced contemporary artists who have reimagined and recast canonical novels through digital as well as traditional media. For example, students learned about multimedia artist Kabe Wilson’s reworking of Virginia Woolf’s seminal text *A Room of One’s Own*, in which Wilson rearranged all of the 37,971 words of Woolf’s text to create a new novella. In addition to guiding students to engage with the dynamism and potential for novelty
of modernist texts, Bette approached two librarians, Joe Easterly and me, to develop an assignment that would introduce students to the act of making new meaning of modernism by engaging with primary texts in a digital medium. Bette wrote in an email correspondence:

After I incorporated some digital “remaking” projects into my syllabus, however, the experiential component of such an assignment became an increasingly important objective. Students had been especially intrigued by Kabe Wilson’s artwork, both for its inventiveness and its deep engagement with Woolf’s writing. As a result, I wanted the library assignment to give students the experience of actually “making” something new themselves out of modernist materials – not just reading about or viewing what the digital could do but actively engaging it. B. London (personal communication, July 15, 2019).

In other words, Bette wanted new knowledge that Hegarty (2015) identified as “learner generated”, an attribute of open pedagogy, in which students generate content and “reconfigure” prior knowledge (p. 8).

In a few meetings with Bette, we decided that Joe would provide access to the digital texts of five selected modernist works and Mantra would develop an assignment that helps students apply their understanding of modernism and its tenets. Joe located the five selected texts of modernism in their public domain version, free of copyright restrictions, in Project Gutenberg and incorporated them into the CommentPress platform available through the subscription service, Reclaim Hosting. Joe explains,

Reclaim Hosting, branded at the University of Rochester as Digital Scholar, is a platform for students and faculty to create web-based personal portfolios, CVs, or use tools such as WordPress, Omeka, Mediawiki, and others in pursuit of digital scholarship. In the years since it has been implemented, hundreds of members of the UR community have created projects using it. J. Easterly (personal communication, October 31, 2019).

Moreover, writes Joe, “Reclaim Hosting is by default open, but professors may want to limit access to websites to either protect student privacy, or because they feel that the content being created isn’t yet ready for public dissemination.” J. Easterly (personal communication, October 31, 2019).

In our case, Bette did not want to make the platform open to public comments in the very first pilot of the assignment.

CommentPress is a plugin for WordPress developed by the Institute for the Future of the Book. While WordPress has always supported comments at the bottom of any page of text, CommentPress positions comments next to their associated passages. This makes it more natural for students to see the text and commentary as a conversation and encourages them to engage with it. Joe created user accounts for the four modernist authors and then distributed them to the students, so they could engage with peers as their online personas. The assignment was conducted over three class sessions and students met in a library instruction room that was equipped with big monitors for students and featured a large LED-TV screen that helped Joe demonstrate the different features of the CommentPress interface.
Workflow

In order to prepare Bette’s students for the digital assignment, Joe and Mantra shared “Reading the Database: Narrative, Database, and Stream of Consciousness” from Jessica Pressman’s (2014) Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media and Lev Manovich’s essay on “Database as a Genre of New Media” with Bette. Bette posted them on Blackboard. Digital Modernism was available as an eBook through the library catalog.

In the weeks leading up to the library sessions, Joe built accounts in CommentPress and created five pages for the five modernist texts—Heart of Darkness, Howards End, Ulysses (“Telemachus” and “Calypso”), A Room of One’s Own, and Mrs. Dalloway. Mantra designed the lesson plan such that students would work in pairs or groups of three and each group would elect to assume the name of one of the four authors. So, one group became James Joyce, another group became E. M. Forster, another one became Joseph Conrad, and yet another group became Virginia Woolf. Each author-group would select a modernist text by one of the remaining authors. On the page featuring the text, the author-group would select a couple of seminal passages and comment on them using phrases written by their chosen author. For example, Conrad would comment on Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway by using phrases from Heart of Darkness. Students would have to use appropriate citation guidelines within their comments. Students would thus practice rearranging modernist language to respond to modernist texts in a digital medium (see Figures 1 and 2 for examples of how the assignment will look).

Figure 1

Screenshot of the CommentPress interface in Reclaim Hosting
Figure 2

Screenshot of another version of the assignment in the same interface
By assuming the voices of the four modernist authors and by using their words to comment on literary texts written by peer-modernists, students were encouraged to refashion the meaning of texts. They applied what they had learned about the core tenets of modernism, such as “making it new” with innovative use of language and voices, and rediscovered new ways of commenting on the texts. They drew upon their rigorous learning about the movement and engaged in student-owned learning with full accountability, all recognized as strategies of open pedagogy.

Conclusion

We exercised open pedagogy in the library session through our pedagogic style. Bette reflects on what she learned through the assignment:

It was an opportunity for me to reflect on my own pedagogy by ceding and sharing pedagogical authority more than in my normal teaching practice, both in the design of the assignment and its implementation. B. London (personal communication, July 15, 2019).
Hegarty (2015) wrote when instructors reflect on their pedagogies and begin to share with peers and learn about innovative ways to approach pedagogy, open pedagogy ensues because pedagogy stands transformed. The critical responses about assigned course texts were innovative and helped produce an open assignment in which outcomes were not confirmed. Bette writes:

Because I had been unsure what I could reasonably expect from the assignment, and because I lacked clear criteria for its assessment, I had decided not to formally grade it. I still have some of these same concerns and questions. I believe, however, that the assignment’s value lies more in the experience than in the product. B. London (personal communication, July 15, 2019).

Within the scope of the lesson, considering that the public domain texts were zero-cost, that students took responsibility for their own learning, and that there was minimum mediation by either Bette or the librarians (in fact, Bette was not present for two of the sessions), this library session was a successful experiment with open pedagogy.

In the spirit of open pedagogy, Bette’s reflection, on how the assignment could be more integrated in her course the next time she offers it, highlights the role openness plays in textual analysis and annotation:

Digital annotation and commentary projects could be linked to already-existing class time sessions, like those devoted to Ulysses, for example. Projects of this sort might include: Ulysses Versioned; the Joyce Project: The Year of Ulysses, including Twitter Chats (#yearofulysses). All of these things would provide a deeper context for the assignment and help students think about how to rigorously and thoughtfully engage in a process of annotation and how to think through the relationship between creation and commentary. B. London (personal communication, July 15, 2019).

The overall experience with open pedagogy was liberating because it was experimental for all instructors as well as students and we came away learning a newer pedagogic approach.

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