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# Open Facilitator Stories: What is this all about? The 2014 Collection

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Carol Yeager and Chrissi Nerantzi

## Introduction to the collection

Learning has always been a magic lamp. Now, however, it's open for all-- and there's not much chance of putting the genie back. Publicly and freely available digital educational offers, including open educational resources (OER) and open educational practices (OEP), are penetrating higher education and professional learning more generally, and change and transform how we learn and develop as individuals, professionals, and a collective. Professor Martin Weller (2014) talks about mainstreamed open educational practices. While this might not be the reality everywhere at this point, there is no way back -- or is there? The social web, digital technologies and their ease of use, with their relative low cost and availability, are changing everything around us, including who we are, how we live, how we interact, create, share, how we learn, and the ways in which we develop. The landscape of engagement, learning, and development opportunities is much more diverse, distributed, and connected than ever before. Our appetite to create and share with a wider audience has increased (Gauntlett, 2011): We now share resources, information, ideas, and we co-create artifacts and knowledge in vast networks and communities that stretch around the globe through personal connections and collaborations that we would probably never make otherwise. How this all happens fascinates us.

Higher education today is in a period of constant change. Many of the assumptions we have accepted about teaching and learning are now being challenged. For example, we used to connect what we called formal learning with a location, such as a school, college, or university, and a pre-defined timetable of activities. Now, formal learning is acknowledged as also occurring in virtual spaces, across distributed communities and networks often without any set location; it happens across multiple institutions and multiple platforms while

often formal and informal learning and development are blending (Conole, 2013). The parameters of place, time, and pace are much more flexible today when we think about creating new opportunities for growth. However, learning and developing in these complex and interconnected spaces and communities is not always easy for all. We think it requires scaffolding and support. There is often an assumption that peer support is the answer to it all and that the educator or facilitator is no longer needed. Not true. Facilitators play a vital role in bringing people together to form learning communities. This applies to classroom learning and development as well as blended, online, and open educational offers. We admit that facilitation can be challenging, but it is also very rewarding.

We were keen to explore the stories of those individuals who have experienced open facilitation, facilitator presence and input in openly licensed courses. This would help us better understand and recognise specific features of effective facilitation in open learning communities. The literature suggests that there is a gap in research linked to facilitation in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) while increasingly there is recognition that the model of the “absent facilitator” doesn’t work for all and new models of facilitator support are needed for open educational offers (Lane, 2009; McAuley, 2010; Kop & Carroll, 2011; Bayne & Ross, 2014; Weller, 2014). What can we learn from facilitation and facilitators in open educational courses that sit outside MOOCs that might also be useful in other open educational offers?

Author, educator, and activist P.J. Palmer (2007) noted that teachers need to speak out more about teaching. The same applies to facilitators about their work. Perhaps speaking about facilitation in open settings is easier, and more natural even, as there are no doors or walls. The classroom is open, and learning and facilitation form a shared and transparent process with learners, co-facilitators, if there are any, and silent or invisible observers. This apparent transparency makes us wonder about the impact open facilitation could potentially have on face-to-face teaching and the observation of teaching in these settings. As facilitators, we learn through sharing observations, reflections, and experiences. We see this part of enhancing our own practice and being a reflective practitioner. This is both enjoyable and fascinating, and it helps us gather new information and insights about our practices as we develop and refine pedagogical approaches that we are using to help us grow as practitioners. We see the same

experiences through a kaleidoscope of perspectives. The collaboration and ability to recognize and adapt new modalities is vital as the learning landscape is in a state of constant flux and growth.

There are as many approaches to learning as there are learning facilitators, and each has an individual perspective on the learning environment and how to implement the tools and ideas that inspire and sustain learning best. The learning process has no real beginning or end; it is a lifelong and lifewide process. The same could be said of professional development.

In some countries, the focus is still on individual learning and demonstrating what one knows. Elsewhere, collaborative learning is being recognized as not only important but an essential component of learning and development. As we examine the learning that goes beyond the self, we form new networks and build upon prior pedagogies, creating an extended community of learners with ever-expanding repositories of connected and specialized information as well as platforms for interaction and collaboration. These connections enable us to learn and develop further, which is vitally important.

We are both open educators, have been involved in and led open courses, create and use OERs in our practice. We are passionate about creating stimulating development opportunities that motivate learners, boost confidence and help us all grow as individuals and the collective. However, we need to acknowledge that the new open practices, while they do create opportunities, can also bring challenges with them, for all of us learners, designers and facilitators. We were keen to explore these from the perspective of the open facilitator and felt that a collection of authentic stories that capture their experiences and reflections would be valuable for others, gain a deeper insight and also generate a resource that would be useful who are embarking for the first time to become an open facilitator but also researchers who are interested in related inquiry.

The open facilitator stories presented here were all collected in 2014. The majority of them are from colleagues with whom the editors had worked in specific openly licensed courses; many of the initiatives were collaborative and cross-institutional, and, therefore, this present collection is focused around specific courses. The stories are arranged in three main clusters linked to specific open initiatives they relate to: Bring your Own Devices for Learning, Assessment in

Higher Education and Introduction to Open Education. The remaining contributions follow and conclude this collection.

The stories are all personal accounts, written in the style of the author, and they vary in length and structure. They have been written using a collaborative folder in Google Drive and openly peer reviewed by the editors and contributors, so the review has been transparent and social. The stories illuminate aspects of the experience that stood out for the facilitators, and that in itself provides a valuable source of information while highlighting specific themes linked to the open facilitator experience. This will be of value also to the wider community. Colleagues who are engaged in similar and other types of open educational practices and MOOCs for example, might find this collection useful for their practice. We hope that the collection will encourage further research into this important aspect of open educational practice and help us to identify drivers, opportunities and challenges but also conditions that can enhance the experience further and design more effective facilitation models that will enable and empower learners.

In collaboration, the [Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching](#) and the Open Knowledge Foundation have initiated the [Open Facilitator Project](#). Within this, there is now a special place for open facilitators' experiences and reflections to be shared. This project will enable the wider community to contribute to the collection. Stories from facilitators in similar and different open offers, such as MOOCs for example are all very welcome as we feel bringing diverse voices and practices together will help us gain a deeper insight into the lived facilitator experience.

In this endeavour we would like to pose a few questions that we hope will encourage others to add their thoughts and reflections. How can these ideas help us develop engaging learning experiences for new generations of learners and facilitators? And how can we create new models for learning and facilitation based on these ideas?

We hope you will enjoy reading these stories as much as we did.

Carol Yeager and Chrissi Nerantzi

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**Carol Yeager** has been a mentor, lecturer, course developer and learning facilitator for more than 20 years with SUNY-Empire State College. During that time she has been primarily involved in innovative online, open and international education. She co-developed SUNY's first initiative in cMOOCs with a course in Creativity and Multicultural Communication. She followed with open online courses in math and metaliteracy. Innovation, communication and critical thinking on a global scale have been Carol's primary foci. She has travelled extensively for educational purposes as well as for personal and educational advancement of visual and deliberate creativity concepts.

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**Open Education Working Group** [<http://education.okfn.org/>] has been established by Open Knowledge [<https://okfn.org/>] to bring together people and groups interested in open education. Its goal is to initiate global cross-sector and cross-domain activity that encompasses the various facets of open education. The working group has collaboratively written an Open Education Handbook [<http://education.okfn.org/handbook/>], a living web document targeting educational practitioners and the education community at large.