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Open Digital Pedagogy = Critical Pedagogy

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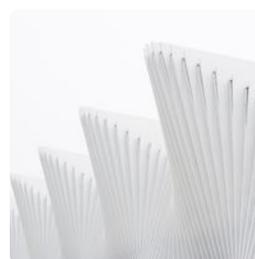
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Open Digital Pedagogy = Critical Pedagogy

JODY R. ROSEN · MAURA A. SMALE · 06 JANUARY 2015 · EDITORS' PICKS

There seems too often to be an explicit agreement that instructors lead and students respond, that instructors advise as students seek guidance, that when instructors talk about their pedagogy, it should be outside of earshot of the students they instruct. Open digital platforms can break these implicit rules to make spaces for joint inquiry among all

About the Authors

members of the college community in the spirit of Freirian ideals of critical pedagogy. Using open digital tools creates space for productive dialogue within and across courses and departments, allowing for critical co-investigation not just within a single course but in the college community. An open learning space in which everyone can work together enables browsing and viewing each other's work, and empowers students to participate more fully in their education.

Open digital pedagogy is the use of cost-free, publicly available online tools and platforms by instructors and students for teaching, learning, and communicating in support of educational goals, can, as [Kris Shaffer](#) has argued, "facilitate student access to existing knowledge, and empower them to critique it, dismantle it, and create new knowledge." This approach can bring critical digital pedagogy to higher education and equip students to actively participate in their education. [Jim Groom and Brian Lamb](#) describe innovative customizations of open digital tools in use at various colleges and universities, including the University of Mary Washington, the University of British Columbia, and other CUNY campuses like Baruch College. At our college — New York City College of Technology, CUNY (City Tech) — a grant has allowed us to develop the [City Tech OpenLab](#), an open digital platform for teaching, learning, and collaborating. Also built with open source software, the OpenLab enables the entire City Tech community to [take advantage of open digital practices in courses, projects,](#)



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[Read more articles](#) by Jody R. Rosen.



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[clubs, and eportfolios](#). Our examples here are drawn from the work that members of our college's community have contributed via the OpenLab.

Students are empowered as learners if encouraged to act as co-creators of the platforms and learning spaces they use for their college work. Jason T. Hilton addresses this approach in [his article on digital critical dialogue](#). Open platforms such as WordPress, Google Sites, Tumblr, and wiki software allow multiple users — students and faculty — to create and customize the online space used by a class or group. Used for individual eportfolios, these platforms allow students complete control over a site to document and showcase their college work, both for their own satisfaction as well as to show potential employers. When developing the OpenLab, our team involved City Tech students, who created our logo and initial design. Open platforms, as opposed to proprietary platforms, can provide these opportunities for customization as students participate in the construction of their own knowledge, and constructing the college.

An open system fosters opportunities for flattening hierarchies within a college community and enable students and faculty members to become critical co-investigators. Many open digital tools allow for non-hierarchical arrangements of students and faculty. For example, students and faculty can edit a Google Doc together, eliminating restrictive permissions built into other systems that could

privilege the faculty member's voice over student voices. On the OpenLab there are four member types: student, faculty, staff, and alumni, and although only faculty can create courses, that one content type is the exception, as all members can create projects, clubs, and portfolios. These non-hierarchical approaches allow all members to share their investment in what becomes necessarily collaborative work.

College spaces typically keep students, instructors, and administration in separate silos, without information and ideas passing easily among them. Virtual environments can replicate this separation, or they can invite permeability of their spaces through openness and visibility. The OpenLab's homepage, for example, features the most recent activity from all areas of the platform, broadcasting various groups' content for all members and visitors of the site. In one space for faculty fellows in a professional development program focusing on general education, the program's facilitator prompted an online [discussion](#) with the questions "What makes you curious? What do YOU do in your classroom to inspire learning among our students?" Several faculty members from a variety of departments reflected on sharing their passion for their subjects with students — and since the site was visible and open for anyone on the Internet to read and comment on, a City Tech student joined the conversation. He offered participating faculty members advice, encouraging them to share their reflections with their

students as a way of showing that the syllabus is constructed for meaningful reasons. He wrote: “Until now, I thought you all just pick it because you KNOW it and you KNOW that it fits into your planned reading. Its good to know that you guys look forward to something when picking reads for us.” Here, the open space provides the opportunity for a student to take on the role of teacher-student, advising instructors based on his lived experience as a student.

With the ability to work against the banking method of education by involving students and faculty as critical co-investigators, an open system facilitates engagement in a problem-posing education. As [Liz Clark](#) notes in a personal reflection in her collaboration with Emily Drabinski and Sarah T. Roberts, this use can lead to “self-education in the world of teaching with technology, learning alongside my students as we explore new technologies.” Open digital tools encourage opportunities for students and faculty to interrogate these systems — their construction, architecture, and intent — as they use them.

An open system can afford opportunities for members of the community to work not just on the site but also to develop it. This can be especially useful for students, who may gain valuable professional experience in website design and development during their work on these platforms, none of which is possible in a conventional, corporate LMS. If organized into group work for a course or internship, or a

work-study job, students can apply the knowledge they have developed through hands-on experience — in collaborating with a team, conducting themselves in a professional environment, and presenting their work — as they pursue jobs in the field. City Tech students have worked with developer [early-adopter](#) to transfer what they have learned in their courses into work that builds the OpenLab, such as designing site maps to track and shape the site's information architecture.

In a First-Year Learning Community at our college, assignments for English and Hospitality Management courses took advantage of the public nature of the site and were developed with an actual audience in mind: fellow students. Students wrote about the transition to college, resources available on campus, and places to visit and foods to taste in the surrounding neighborhood. These students wrote not merely to fulfill their course requirements, but also to fill gaps in information they considered vital to new students. Near the end of the semester, students felt empowered to organize an event to publicize the launch of the site, which helped them introduce their project, [#TheGuide](#), an online compilation of written materials that serve the college's community as a guide for a range of academic, support, and neighborhood resources and opportunities. Other courses have expressed interest in expanding the materials featured on #TheGuide, and the site has the potential to involve students from different courses,

with different interests and expertise, and to exist far beyond the academic careers of the students who first contributed to it.

Using open digital tools in the college classroom allows students to bring in their lived experiences and prior knowledge more readily, working against the banking concept of education. Open digital pedagogy moves the expertise away from the front of the classroom, with what [Pete Rorabaugh and Jesse Stommel](#) call “its roomful of desks in factory-like face-front rows,” and distributes it among the students and instructors. Students and faculty have opportunities to interact with the world beyond an individual classroom, course, or college, and to more easily learn from and have an impact on it.

Last year, in my (Jody’s) Introduction to Fiction course, I experimented with a new assignment when teaching Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that would take advantage of the benefits of open digital tools. Students selected what they felt were pivotal passages from the text and created a [digital gallery](#) on the course website of their visual interpretations of the text. Those who chose low-tech options such as sketches or watercolor paintings still needed to challenge themselves to photograph, upload, and embed the image of their creation; those who chose higher-tech options such as creating a YouTube video needed to learn to embed the video. Class time was set aside for students to ask each other questions

and share their expertise both through conversation and ad hoc peer training. Once the projects were completed, students presented their visual interpretations to the class which, when posted on the course website, were each a contribution to the permanent online gallery. My students and I were pleased with the results of this assignment, which emphasized the importance of pedagogy that makes space in the classroom for both students' existing experience and their ability to collaborate to acquire new skills. This project and others like it on the OpenLab or other open digital platforms encourage the use of tools that can be added to or used alongside our system to facilitate the *bricolage* that [Larry Hanley](#) advocates for, drawing on the features of many tools and using them in a mash-up to facilitate learning and sharing knowledge. In using the various tools available to create this multimedia representation of *Beloved*, students became *bricoleurs*.

Open digital pedagogical tools can enter the classroom or its adjoining virtual spaces both by introduction from the students or from the instructors. When students bring technologies to the class they make visible their expertise, which they share with instructors and students alike, as the Introduction to Fiction students did with their *Beloved* digital gallery. This not only expands the group's knowledge, it offers the presenters of the information opportunities to practice effective communication, either in writing or speech. When instructors bring technologies to the

classroom, it can come from industry expertise that they can share with students, who can themselves experiment with the newly acquired tools.

Supporting and encouraging critical digital pedagogy necessitates professional development that bolsters the innovative efforts instructors make to move away from the banking model. For instructors, learning about new technologies for use in and around the classroom can come from students in classroom or online discussion, or via professional development opportunities that shift instructors into the role of student and that highlight best practices and community-building. This support for open digital pedagogy — through hands-on training and interactive discussion — asks instructors to reevaluate their practices, and challenges them to experiment with innovative classroom models.

Open digital platforms and tools are built, enriched, and experienced by students and instructors working together. Instructors continue to develop opportunities for problem-posing educational opportunities, and students continue to accept those challenges and work along with instructors to seek solutions. It is not enough to encourage instructors to move toward open-ended, problem-posing assignments to realize Freire's co-collaborator dynamics and to foster the flexibility for students to bring in and develop other expertise. Students need to know that they are empowered

in these actions. Very often, students do not realize what working within an open system means, and do not understand that they have the authority – and the responsibility – to develop content for the platform, and the platform itself, to shape their college community. Open digital pedagogy can highlight these paths for students to learn as co-investigators so that they realize a model beyond the banking paradigm for their education.

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