

Arley Cruthers Keynote Transcript

Wicked Problems and Open Remedies: A Student-Centred Approach

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Keynote Transcript

Thank you for having me. I'm so thrilled to be here to learn from these wonderful students. I was asked to give a few remarks to frame some of the issues we'll be discussing. As I do so, I want to cite students as often as possible. Throughout my career, every time I've listened to students, good things follow.

Before I begin, I'd like to note that the transcript for these remarks will be in the chat. Or, you can access them at:

I will also be providing verbal image descriptions for any photos.

Image description: A screenshot of a video from last year's Open Ed Week. Arley stands, with a forearm crutch, and speaks into a microphone. Three students sit on chairs beside her. A projector screen gives the names of the students: Twinkle Arora, Sharndeeep Jhutti, Jasmine Marahar and Varsha Mannar.

Open Education Week feels like a strange milestone to me, since last year's event was the final thing I did before the COVID-19 shut down. In fact, I also hosted a student panel. The event was held in the beautiful Wilson School of Design building, with huge windows that looked out over the mountains. There was coffee and refreshments (it seems astounding to me that we ever used to all just hover over the same fruit plate or sit elbow to elbow). I met new people and caught up with colleagues. That evening, I had dinner with some open education champions I deeply admire. And I got into my car to drive home feeling buoyed by optimism, having no idea what was ahead.

In many ways, last year's Open Ed Week feels very far away, but through this difficult year I've often thought back to that student panel. The students spoke of not being able to afford access codes, of struggling with e-books that you couldn't highlight or access offline, of buying textbooks and finding them useless, of feeling like their instructors didn't understand what they were going through.

Today, we're thinking about wicked problems and open remedies, and I'm struck by how COVID-19 both highlighted and exacerbated the trends that last year's students identified. We're still talking about access and the disconnect between faculty and students, but now we're also talking about remote proctoring and Zoom fatigue. I'm also struck about how last

year's students echoed the trends articulated by my students from two years ago, who wrote a large group report on textbook barriers.

When students selected the topic of textbook barriers for our big group report, I assumed that they would reach the same conclusion that I did, which was that price was the biggest problem, and that open was the solution. Give students access to textbooks and they would use them. Done. The picture that emerged, however, was a lot more complicated. Often, it was complicated because of students' beliefs and how they conflicted with instructors' beliefs. The problem was a lot more wicked than I imagined.

I'd like to read a few quotes and statistics that the students gathered.

Sapna found that only 20% of students said that their textbooks were valuable. Augustin Beauchamp showed that 73% of students said that Powerpoint slides were an accurate replacement for the textbook. Raviraj Gill found that 94% of international students said that textbooks were a medium to high source of stress and that up to 70% did not buy any textbooks.

Jasmine Marahar surveyed her peers about their textbook use. And my apologies: there may be some cursing. One student responded, "I buy them, but who the fuck has time to read them." Another said "We are already out here paying a sh*t ton for tuition and these b*stards expect us to cough up \$200-\$300 each semester for textbooks? I call bullsh*t on this entire post-secondary sh*t"

In an interview with Rakesh Narula, Sukhman said, "Sometimes, a student is not well enough to buy too expensive books and if he/she talk to his instructor about this then the instructor think this as an excuse and doesn't want to understand his/her situation. Because of all these reasons many students drop classes.."

I'll read a few more quotes

"Buying a \$200 textbook does not hurt as much as buying a \$200 textbook that proves to be useless."

"Textbook prices make students feel irrelevant and that teachers don't care, because there are other ways teachers could do it, but they don't."

"Textbooks are a helpful study guide when I am not in class. However, textbooks is not appreciated by the mind. When we read outside of class, we would never read textbooks for fun. Without appreciation of text, some useful info is not learned by the reader.

"Instructors test on lecture notes, so why do we need textbooks? Almost if not all teachers use Powerpoints to get the information to students and students are also told to buy the textbook. As I am studying computer information system here so I don't but textbook for courses which require practical work as they can be learned from youtube or online sites"-

Before the students wrote this report, I'd thought a lot about the cost of textbooks, about access to textbooks, but I had not considered: what is the purpose of the textbook? Is a textbook the best way to do things? Are students using the textbook in the way I expect? If students see textbooks as valuable only in their ability to help with tests, what does that say about their relationship to learning? How are they finding information? What do I believe about textbooks? What do my students believe? I assigned textbook chapters because I read textbooks when I was in school. But the students' reports caused me to think about how much learning conditions had changed since I was in school.

Image description: Arley at her high school graduation. Her dark curly hair has been aggressively tamed with hair gel and her eyebrows have been plucked within an inch of their lives as was the custom at the time.

I started university in the year 2000: the dawn of the new millennium. Y2K had been averted and the future looked bright, even if it was a terrible year for eyebrows and hair gel. I attended the University of Victoria.

Image description: A chart that plots the rise in internet usage and the milestones of different tech events. Arley enters university during the read/write web and leaves at the beginning of the social web.

In my first year, most of my professors didn't use email. Many didn't use the Internet, and spoke of it as mysterious and dangerous. Wikipedia didn't exist yet. Wifi wasn't yet common.

In my first year, you either met your professor in office hours or didn't talk to them at all. A few of my professors proudly claimed that they would never use email. But by the time I graduated in 2005, every professor responded to emails. In that short time, the orientation between student and teacher had shifted, which was good news for me. I had a lot of social anxiety, and I was terrified of office hours. My professors were intimidating. I'd write down my question and rehearse it, and then wait outside the office door with trembling hands and a pounding heart. Email made professors more accessible to me, lowering the barrier to entry. I could relate to my teachers in a different way.

During my first year of university, my anthropology professor held up the textbook at the beginning of class and talked about how important it was to keep your textbooks, so that you could reference them in later courses. How else could you remember the differences in the skulls of the australopithecus versus the homo erectus? The course material was locked up in the textbook, in the lectures (I don't even remember my professors having Powerpoint slides, though some had overhead projectors), or in the library. The professor took all this locked-up knowledge and brought it to us, sometimes using stories and anecdotes to bring the material to life. My first year exams required a lot of memorization, since I'd need to be able to draw on memorized facts in upper-level courses.

Sometimes I forget that before smart phones and robust search engines, you couldn't just do a quick search to refresh your memory if you forgot something. The Internet has changed so much of how we use information. Finding sources is a lot easier, but vetting those sources is more difficult. I teach business communication, and there's a lot of bad business communication advice out there.

Until I took creative writing classes that used the workshop model, a professor was someone who showed up a few times a week and lectured. A TA was someone who facilitated discussions. A textbook was the only place to find information. I was forbidden from using online sources in papers. Today, I can watch a professor at an institution across the world lecture on Youtube. I can watch a Ted talk. I can Google how to write a business email and get 1.83 million hits. Nearly every source I use is available online.

I've also gotten this far in my remarks without mentioning all of many ways privilege influenced my education. I had a full-ride scholarship and had an income from the wheelchair basketball national team. I'm white. Both of my parents attended university and were middle-class. I lived near my extended family and could stop by for meals or to do laundry. I had so many privileges that influenced how professors interacted with me and what opportunities I was given. And even with all that privilege, my learning materials sometimes caused me harm. Here's an example. During this same anthropology class, we had a chapter on human sexuality. At the top of the page was a discussion of sex and disability, which noted that disabled men were far more likely than disabled women to date or get married. At the bottom page was a discussion of height and how tall women were often rejected as sexual partners. So, within a page, my textbook had decided to tell me -- a 6 foot 2 disabled woman at the beginning of my university career, that I was undateable. What good are our learning materials if they spout harmful stereotypes?

The point is that by the time I started teaching, the whole environment of learning had shifted. Access had shifted. However, when I started teaching, I mostly replicated what my professors had done, without questioning it. It took talking to students to get me to rethink my beliefs.

I think the shift to remote learning shone a light on a lot of these questions, which had been brewing for decades. What is the role of the teacher? Is the teacher someone who lectures you on Zoom or in person? Is it someone who gives you feedback? Who connects with you and cares about your progress? Who designs experiences for you? Who helps you meet your goals? What does it mean to be taught? What does it mean to "teach yourself?" How do students use learning resources like textbooks? How do they evaluate them? How do we bridge the gap between what many instructors think of textbooks and the way students think of them? How do grades contribute to how we think about learning? What role can open play in all of this? How can we hold our beliefs up to the light and see which ones don't reflect our current reality, or maybe never reflected reality at all? How can we make resources that aren't just free but that meet the needs of all learners and don't cause harm?

I don't have good answers to these questions, but I suspect that we begin -- like most wicked problems -- but listening to those most impacted: the students. And with that, I am delighted to begin our panel.

1. **What is one of the biggest "wicked problems" that you have faced in the shift to online learning this year?**
2. **How have you experienced "open"?**
3. **How do you see open as a remedy to some of these "wicked problems"?**
4. **How can institutions centre student voices and empower students?**