An Open Letter to the Learners of This Planet

A Postscript to the Summer 2011 Paperback Edition of *The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education*

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When you went to sleep at night in the twentieth century, you were not likely dreaming about your next learning moves or adventures. Today, who can afford not to? Each day is a learning experience that can be enhanced by hundreds of freely shared online video sites, tens of thousands of open access journals, millions of books, and hundreds of millions of bloggers. Locating and checking out similar text, audio, or video resources would have taken days, weeks, or perhaps even months only a decade or two ago. Today they are can be accessed online in mere seconds at the click of a button. And a large percent have huge educational implications.

You may not see it each time you walk outside or drive down the street, but the educational world is in a state of rapid transition. Part of the reason is that millions of educational resources are being made freely available for the first time in the history of human civilization. Anyone who searches for information on the Web is quickly overwhelmed with free and open access to learning materials. Members of the media, politicians, educators, students, parents, and others are asking important questions about the quality of such content. Some want to know if personally selected content might lead to school or college credits or even degrees. Organizations, agencies, and institutions are also sorting out what should be free and what should cost money. Interesting ideas and solutions are just starting to emerge.

In the midst of this discussion and debate, human learning is transforming so rapidly that teachers do not know what to do. Schools and colleges are unsure how to react. Corporations are often left with the job of reskilling and testing new learning and evaluation approaches. Unfortunately, such training programs continue to rely too much on formalized training with prepackaged content and preset rooms, chairs, podiums, and times. Instead, they should be training employees with timely and on-demand podcasts, virtual conversations, and online brainstorming in a wiki or synchronous chat. Such tools can support and put into action new management processes and practices eons faster than can be accomplished in traditional classroom training. And when combined with face-to-face

meetings either during or after work in a blended learning approach, it is even more powerful. Traditional learning is integrated into the virtual and informal, and vice versa.

THE LEARNING CENTURY

Let's declare this the "Learning Century." To live up to the name, of course, we need on-demand access to teachers, mentors, tutors, and other learning facilitators. More than a couple of millennia ago, Plato was perhaps the first distance learning educator, as humans across the planet read his works years, decades, or millennia after his instruction had taken place. Today you can call up his books in Scribd, Google Books, and countless other sources. The same will likely be said for each of us millennia from now. Be careful what you say, write, or record.

In this millennium, everyone can be an educator as well as learner at any moment of the day or night. With Web technology and an abundance of open educational resources, we can learn just as effectively at 3 am as at 3 pm. We can be teaching others when on a Norwegian tanker breaking through whatever ice remains at the North Pole as well as when sipping tea or coffee in our study back home.

Without a doubt, new forms of teaching and learning will emerge in this century. One interesting trend will be the rise of super e-mentors, tutors, and coaches. Such people will understand counseling and human development, the various pathways to learn online, and one or more subject-area disciplines. Of course, more personalized and elevated forms of mentoring were always possible if you could afford it; now it will just be more apparent, accessible, accepted, and affordable.

By the close of the next decade, most learners will have experiences with one or more online mentors or tutors. And well before the close of the century, each learner on Planet Earth will be assigned a super mentor or coach. This will be a person to consult with at critical junctures in your learning process. Such individuals will be critical in helping sort out the myriad ways you can learn today as well as the interesting routes you might take to reach new learning milestones. As learning becomes increasingly essential in our lives, super mentors will continually provide the breath of life by leading us to relevant and meaningful learning paths.

Online environments free learners from the constraints of formal schooling and education while providing them with hundreds of formal learning venues where few or none previously existed. Jay Cross and others remind us that informal learning already comprises more than 80 percent of learning. We Google something. We casually check a fact in Wikipedia or the Encyclopedia of Life. We subscribe to the online writing of experts, such as Jay's insightful Internet Time or Informal Learning blogs. We listen to online audio files of conference keynote speakers months or years after they gave their talk. And we watch professors from Seoul National University, the University of Pretoria, or Stanford University present their lectures in biology, computer science, or business marketing even though we are not students in any of those classes or seeking credit. In this gigantic learning expedition, we are just hyperlinking to the next learning experience, one after another. And we are no longer tethered to a desktop computer. With laptops and devices such as the iPhone, iPod, and Kindle, learning can go where you go.

Heading further into this century, we will find that informal and more mobile learning will constitute an even greater percentage of our learning experience. That is not to discount formal learning venues. We will be learning longer, faster, and more efficiently than ever before. By 2070, formal education to age thirty will be commonly accepted. Why? Simple math. As knowledge within each discipline continues to explode and lifespans expand, a year will be added to educational requirements during each decade this century. On a yearly basis, such changes in learning milestones are subtle, but they are happening to you as well as all your friends and family members.

Despite formal learning to age thirty and beyond, informal and on-demand learning will dominate educational discussions and policy decisions during this century. When this happens, age may no longer matter. Soon you will be in work teams or committees in which centenarians will be helping you tackle huge global problems while others of this older age group will be in graduate school pursuing their master's and doctoral degrees as well as conducting research in post-graduate study. At the same time, some elementary and middle school youths will be online teachers and mentors to others or graduating from college. Current young phenoms like thirteen-year-old Adora Svitak illustrate how this is already happening.

As humans, we naturally learn. We learn every single day. Ideally, you are learning something right now. Although other creatures do learn, the capability to quickly respond to, reflect upon, and later refine new ways to learn is what distinguishes us from all the others.

YOU LEARN

This is your time to learn and to make a contribution to the evolving Web of Learning. You can generate or add to a Wikipedia entry. You can fashion and update a blog. You can have a weekly podcast about a topic of cultural or scientific significance. You can design and post a video to YouTube that benefits other learners of this planet. You can decide to join a group in social networking spaces such as Facebook, MySpace, or Ning. And you can subscribe to the blog, video, wiki, Twitter, and Facebook posts of others.

This is just a start. With each passing year, such ways to learn will become more integrated and personalized. Each of us will have customized the methods that accelerate and monitor our own learning. Earth will be a learning planet, not one known for industrialization, smog, or the endless mismanagement of resources. You need to help push ahead this journey today, not tomorrow. The only way to solve global problems is through thinking, education, discussion, and group collaboration.

Recheck your occupational goals and lifelong aspirations. Your standing as a productive member of the human race in the twenty-first century will not likely be measured by the firm you founded or the legal cases you have won. During the coming decades, learners as well as learning innovators, providers, and supporters will be celebrated. We will learn together as citizens of this more open planet. As we do, we will celebrate the ongoing learning accomplishments in each phase of one's life and perhaps reach new life vistas never before experienced or imagined.

LEARNER RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

This is your learning world. You have the right to learn where, when, what, and how you want as well as from the people who fit your learning needs. Throughout history, billions of humans have lived and died on this planet. None of those who left this world prior to the end of 1999 had the learning resources you now possess. Not a soul!

Keep in mind that you do not even need Internet access to benefit from the explosion of Web content and learning technologies. All that is required is for you to live in a community that has an organization or institution that is connected to or touched by the Internet. People from around the world can give their time, talents, and money to it; often making their contributions or commitments from a Web page or link. As this happens, we all learn.

Learner Rights

Learners of any century need rights, but this is especially true for learners of this century. As we push into the technology-rich twenty-first century, you—the learners of this planet—can see your rights crystallizing before your eyes. I suggest that we all have the following ten learner-related rights:

1. The right to learn when and how you want in a learning environment that is personally safe and comfortable.
2. The right to access any content you need at any time you need it.
3. The right to learn from the best educators and learning guides on the planet as well as from as many instructors as you so choose.
4. The right to help others learn.
5. The right to share your learning-related discoveries and ideas with others (such as experts, peers, instructors, friends, and family) for their prompt and candid feedback.
6. The right to self-monitor your learning progress as well as obtain feedback from others on that progress.
7. The right to share content that you create as well as comment on or evaluate the educational resources that you find.
8. The right to form groups of individuals or learning communities with similar learning interests and experiences to discuss, debate, and extend such ideas while finding personal learning identity and meaning.
9. The right to create new tools, materials, and resources to facilitate your own learning as well as that of others.
10. The right to teach, train, tutor, and mentor others using Web tools and resources.

These are the inalienable rights for learners in this century, a time period when we are inundated with seemingly limitless learning opportunities. Each of these rights is easier to visualize, support, and actualize with Web technologies. With these ten rights in place, cultures and people can advance in more harmonious ways and at a much quicker pace than

in the past. We can learn whatever we want with whomever we want at the times and places that we want.

Learner Responsibilities

Along with learner rights regarding Web technology, we also have responsibilities. Among these are the following ten learner-related ones:

1. The responsibility to take ownership for our own learning when and where appropriate to do so.
2. The responsibility to seek out the most accurate and credible information while questioning and examining online information and knowledge in a critical and reflective manner.
3. The responsibility to dialogue with children or any other unseasoned learner about how to evaluate the quality of the educational content found online.
4. The responsibility to contribute to the learning of others in a productive and humane way.
5. The responsibility to educate others about the learning potential of the Web—to show them how to contribute to the Web and how to receive learning from it.
6. The responsibility to seek help when online tools and resources are overwhelming or frustrating.
7. The responsibility to respect those who provide meaningful educational content and tools as well as all the teachers, trainers, tutors, mentors, and learning guides you encounter in your online learning quests and queries.
8. The responsibility to test and experiment with new learning resources and discuss and report on their utility with others.
9. The responsibility to report online educational resources that are inappropriate or potentially harmful (as well as the people who placed them there).
10. The responsibility to think about how online educational materials can benefit those beyond your household, neighborhood, community, or region of the world to your global brothers and sisters who have different educational and cultural backgrounds, needs, opportunities, and supports.

THE LEARNING WORLD IS OPEN

The Web has accelerated access to learning. There has never been a time in the history of this planet when so much learning was possible throughout our lifetime. Not only is learning access instantaneous, but you can also learn from global partners via technology that is increasingly social, ubiquitous, and inexpensive. Despite persistent complaints about the state of education today, when it comes to opportunities to learn outside as well as inside schools, these are auspicious times.

We can look back to preceding generations within our own families, cultures, and regions of the world. There is likely no other group of learners that has been so fortunate. Of course, billions still cannot afford direct access to the Web and a large percent of such individuals lack sufficient food, shelter, and clothing. With each passing day, however, tens of thousands of additional people have the chance to learn from mobile devices and local learning centers equipped with technology that did not exist for their parents and grandparents.

To explicitly demonstrate this open learning world, I continue to work on an e-book extension of *The World Is Open* with the same chapters, just different content (to be made available from http://worldisopen.com/). The e-book extension will be freely available for anyone to download, print, disseminate, and forward to others. At that site, you will also find the references and Web resources to both books as well as several book excerpts and book reviews.

Share any part of this that you want—the world is open to you. And as you do, please write to me about the innovative ways you are participating in the open education movement. I look forward to hearing from each of you.

Enjoy your adventures in this open learning world.

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This document is a postscript to the Summer 2011 paperback edition of:

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