

Nicole ([00:00](#)):

Welcome back to, into the open. In this episode, I wanted to examine open education, but with a digital lens, I'm still really curious as to how my, and really my students' digital skills or lack thereof allow us to, or help us participate in open education. Mostly, I'm really curious as to what it means to be digitally literate in this day and age. In this week's episode, I got the opportunity to sit down with the inspiring Canadian educator, Helen DeWaard. Helen has been teaching, learning, and really thriving in virtual worlds for years. Today, I get her take on what exactly it means to be digitally literate and how this affects open education.

Nicole ([00:47](#)):

If we can start, I would actually like you to just tell me your story of how you got involved in Open and Open education.

Helen ([00:54](#)):

Well, I'm going to probably say that I was open by nature, as a teacher, right from teaching kindergarten grade one and two students and looking for opportunities to go beyond the walls of the physical classroom. And I'm looking for open opportunities. And I was blessed with the presence of an educator who did an exchange from Australia and he, this is way before this type of web, abilities were available. He managed to work the technology to allow my students to speak to his students in Australia through voiceover, internet protocol (VOIP) stuff. Very basic early, I'm saying early nineties, we were doing this way before we had this whole idea that the internet was the internet. And it just really opened up the possibilities. And I think from there, I don't think I looked back. I always looked for ways to, not just for my students, but then, as I stepped into administrative roles in education, I looked for ways for teachers to connect with each other. So you're stuck in your classroom with your class and you don't have an opportunity to talk to people who may be teaching the same things you're teaching, maybe using the same resources you're using. So finding ways to build those connections. So I really looked at my role then as a catalyst,

Nicole ([02:33](#)):

Like a knowledge Building and not just like, here, I'll give you this, but like, let's get real.

Helen ([02:38](#)):

Yeah, very much this back and forth dialogue discourse. And I ended up connecting to a grassroots organization called [Virtually Connecting](#). If you do a search on the web, it still exists. It's since COVID has lost steam because there's no purpose to doing virtually connecting because everybody's virtually connecting. This was prior to online conferences prior to, you know, where everybody had traveled physically to conferences. Virtually Connecting allowed people to attend hallway conversations with keynote speakers and with people who were attending the conference. Literally we, whoever was onsite became the onsite buddy. I frequently was the virtual buddy and we pulled people from around the world into these conversations. We were limited to an attendance of 10, which made it very private, very personal, very conversational. So I, again, it was the ideas. I vividly remember a session with Audrey Watters and Jesse Stommel, who are huge names in the field of open education and educational technology and just, you know, listening and then going back to the recording and relistening, and then writing about what I'd heard the first time versus the second time.

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Helen (04:13):

And that really became the impetus for me to start the PhD program with an eye to looking at media and digital literacies, which tied what I was teaching in the faculty, to what I was doing as an open educator. So I was, you know, risking putting myself out there, making, you know, negotiating different things at different times. And then I was asking my students to start blogging, join Twitter, you know, look for other educators that they can then follow and read.

Nicole (04:52):

Pull them into kind of what you're playing with and experimenting at the same time.

Helen (04:57):

Exactly, exactly. And some, you know, really thrived on it. They made these real and honest open connections with some educators here in Ontario that kind of shaped their teaching practice, which is ultimately what I wanted.

Nicole (05:17):

Yeah.

Helen (05:18):

So that led me into the road of mentoring. And, one year later I actually within my course had a concrete mentoring program, not physical, but virtual mentoring. So my students were individually connected to educators in, most of them were in Ontario, but there were a few that were in other locations.

Nicole (05:47):

So these mentors were through your own connections?

Helen (05:48):

Through my own connections yeah. And an educator here in Ontario named Noa, Noa Daniels, was working on [OnEdMentors](#).

Nicole (05:59):

That's amazing. The idea, I think my first couple years teaching I would have benefited enormously from having a mentor, especially if that was someone not necessarily in my school, but maybe in the district or around that I could connect virtually we easy to, to check in and just bounce ideas off them.

Helen (06:18):

So that mentoring experience led me to my own mentoring experience with an organization. Again, um, this one is UNESCO funded, global in nature, and it's called [Open Education for a Better World](#). #OE4BW - it still exists.

Nicole (06:43):

Mentorship or support, is it it's more on, on the digital literacy skills that they need to be able to do that.

Helen ([06:49](#)):

And, and media literacy awareness of, of, you know, why even just simple things like the talking about the media triangle and, ***thinking about text, thinking about audience, thinking about the production and asking yourself those key questions on each angle of that***. And then looking at the cultural context under which you're doing that. So, that ***media triangle*** is what I use in my course, my instruction when I'm talking to students about media and digital literacies, you have to know the components that make up media, and you have to question who's presenting this and for what purpose, why did they create this? Whatever it is, piece of text, there's this podcast, there's a video, this Tik TOK, why did they make it and, who gains and who loses?

Nicole ([07:46](#)):

That's almost an, we did a course on the ethics of educational technology. And I can see that, and Farrow's framework being pulled into this, but several with media. So the intention behind it, the harm, the risk. And

Helen ([07:59](#)):

Yeah, and, and then ***looking at those core elements, like safety, security, privacy, and permission, and those are our four that, you know, if you're going into a classroom, you need to know those*** components and ***that becomes the underlying foundation to your digital literacies***. So you can't be literate if you're not considering the, you know, the purpose of the media and you have to consider in digital, you have to consider those four factors constantly as a teacher.

Nicole:

How important do you think that is to participate in Open?

Helen ([08:38](#)):

I think it has. I tell my students that I pushed myself into media and digital spaces for the purpose of my own teaching practice. I had to feel what it was like, what it felt like to send out my first tweet and how daunting that was. I had to find and figure out how to name my blog posts, my blog site, because I knew it was going to shape my digital persona. So if I don't have those experiences, I can't feel for my students as they struggle with these. And we talked about the constant struggle, the constant negotiations we make in everything we do when we want and need to share ourselves as professionals in a public forum. And because we're educators, we are in the public forum and we need to shape our public persona, our professional persona to be public. Right.

Nicole ([09:52](#)):

I'm wondering if you've had any students when you were introducing blogging or bringing in Twitter that were adamantly against it that were like, I'm not doing this. I'm not sharing. No, no.

Helen ([10:03](#)):

I have never had that, like that roadblock adamant. I'm not going to, but I have had students who have stepped cautiously and Verena and I have talked about this as well, at least that you have to provide permissions for the level of risk that people, students are willing to take. And for some students, you

know, depending on their own experiences and their own backgrounds, they are not ready to take that step to "I'm in the public space". I need a public presence in digital spaces, perhaps because of, you know sexual abuse, for example, and in those cases, then it's, you're sharing with, and you're leaving it closed and locked and, and password protected. You're sharing it with only me.

Nicole ([11:04](#)):

It's got a comfort level. It's almost scaffolded so that if they decide to go further and share more openly, they can that there's no we don't "have to".

Helen ([11:15](#)):

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's not, it's not contingent on the grade. They're going to receive in a course, for example, because this, their lives are at risk in some cases. Yeah. But, as a teacher, they also need to know that the parents of those students in their classroom are going to go to the web and search for them. And, I have my students do that activity in every course, I've taught search yourself on the web. And what do you find? And if you don't find what you want your parents to find about you, the student's parents, then you better make sure you fill the web with the stuff you are passionate about.

Nicole ([12:06](#)):

Do you think that grading, it sounds like you have used a lot of OEP or open educational practices as far as Twitter or blogging within some of your courses. Do you think this is how students are improving their digital skills? Like, is it about the knowledge building? Is it about improving our digital? Is it a combo?

Helen ([12:26](#)):

I think it has to be a combination and it has to be purpose driven. So it can't just be, I'm going to go on Twitter for going on Twitter sake. There has to be a purpose to it. And, I always talk about communication and relationships. You want to communicate something and you want to build a relationship with something, somebody, and ultimately this is wrapped around your purpose and passion. And my purpose and passion is to teach media and digital literacies to teacher candidates. Everything I do in social media to develop my digital literacies are wrapped around communicating. Yeah.

Nicole ([13:10](#)):

The other one that I'm kind of curious about, and I love your opinion on, because for me, I got really excited about open. I've worked internationally. I've worked predominantly in South America. And so I see the opportunity for kind of increasing accessibility to knowledge balancing or, or creating a more equal playing field if we will, but the whole realm of it. And I don't, I don't want to say that open only exists because of digital technologies, but it's definitely expanded and can reach more audiences and, and is more well-known because of our kind of movement into the virtual world. But what I'm concerned about, and like, you've got this whole movement that is pushing for equity and accessibility in education, but they don't necessarily have the computer skills to do that. They don't like access to the internet. If open is about accessibility, how do you navigate or work around the fact that you're a kind of dependent right now on these digital literacies digital skills and access to either. even Wifi.

Helen ([14:13](#)):

And it's funny, you mentioned that because I was dealing with this issue just last week. I work as a learning designer for the faculty of education at UBC. And one of the instructors that I'm working with is developing, designing and working on a high-flex course. And one of her students was still making the transition from Nigeria to Canada. Again, you know, delays because of pandemic issues and internet wifi was an issue. And this poor individual learner in this master's level course couldn't access the materials, the resources that were being provided for them in the course content. And then you think, okay, so how do you ensure that what you're providing can be, and I look at that again, that negotiated range of not just - I talk about skills, fluencies, competencies, and literacies, and usually this way around, I've got a, the beginning of this, this graphic diagram that I'm working on for my research that talks about these nested circles I see. So you start with those basic skills. I can use a mobile phone to access my email, two fluencies. I can easily access documents in Google drive from my mobile phone. So I've gained fluencies. I'm a competent Google drive user, Google user. And yet I will never quite feel totally literate in digital spaces because all I've got is Google experience.

Nicole ([16:15](#)):

I changed districts cause I'm very Google oriented because of the schools I've worked for.

Helen ([16:21](#)):

Yeah. So my literacies are still lacking because I haven't done anything in Microsoft teams and one drive and needs. So I see digital literacies as this unachievable ideal, I can taste and feel, and strive towards being literate, but I can never quite achieve it because there's always something more.

Nicole ([16:50](#)):

Right. I think that's what attracts me to educational technology though, is the fact that I'll never be, and even teaching you can't ever get the best teacher ever. There's always something new. There's always something you don't know,

Helen ([17:02](#)):

But it doesn't mean that I'm not competent. I'm a competent teacher. You know, I'm a master teacher and I use technology within my teaching practice and I use technology openly when I'm engaging in conversations and communicating, and sharing and building relationships with others around the world. So in some ways I'm digitally literate, but I don't ever feel fully digital. So when I read documents and saying, oh, they're digital literacy, they're not talking about digital literacy. They're talking about skills and fluencies.

Nicole ([17:36](#)):

Right. In some ways, digital skills only hold you back, depending on if you're trying to participate in only that specific way.

Helen ([17:45](#)):

Yeah. So, when you talk about OEP and the open educational movement, I can take steps to create some form of literacy by being very competent in using creative commons licensing for example. Knowing everything I can about how to apply creative commons licensing, um, to my own work and to understanding how others are using creative commons licensing and respect the licensing that others

use on their works. And it's, that's an element I put into the courses. At least be aware of what creative commons licensing is about. Because as a teacher, you're going to run afoul of copyright, if you aren't fully cognizant of where, and when you have fair use and fair dealing permissions - versus right.

Nicole ([18:44](#)):

Well, I'm hearing this a bit as if I take open just the open education. It has so many different access points that depend on how you can. So perhaps you don't have full access to every platform on the planet, but you can access it through Google or through creative commons. That's your access point. You can still get into it. You can still benefit from it, even though you might not be able to be completely fluent. Let's say they're quoting that in all of open education. Could you tell me a bit about your dissertation?

Helen ([19:16](#)):

So I'm doing what's called a post-intentional phenomenology. So the intent is I want to talk to teacher educators in Canada. Ones that I know are working openly. For example, Verena, and I haven't told Verena much about my research yet because I want her to be my first interview. So I want to talk to those people and say, tell me about your experiences, your lived experience of becoming media and digitally literate as an open educator. Because I think there's something there that hasn't been teased out yet. And we talk about open educators who are not teacher educators. They don't have, I don't think have the full sense of pedagogy that the inherent ability to think about their teaching. Because teacher educators have been teachers, have been educators, have been immersed in the field of education and pedagogy and assessment and you know, and then to take that step into the open adds that other layer that I think, okay, so how did you get there? What's your lived experience? Post-intentional phenomenology is talking about the lived experience of a phenomenon and the phenomenon I really want to tease out is this nebulous ball of whatever media and digital literacy. I mean, I have a map.

Helen ([21:05](#)):

I have a map of what it means to be a digital citizen, but I don't think any of the open educators I'm going to talk to have a map. I don't think they have a map. They didn't have a plan, they had an experience. I don't think they've become media and digital literacy. Like, like you said, by doing open educational practices,

Nicole ([21:31](#)):

It's the same. As you saying, if you don't blog yourself, you don't know the experience. And then it's harder to give that to your students. I remember during the course with Verena (Dr. Roberts), I was really hesitant to share. I was very hesitant at first. I was living in the middle east too, didn't know all the rules and like very hesitant to share. And then it hit a point and I'm big into, I was teaching grade five. So I'm big into writer's workshop. And I always get my kids to do [NaNoWriMo](#), which is national write a novel month. And we publish their novels. And I, it hit me halfway through the course with Dr. Roberts. I was like, oh, you're doing to me, what I do to my students. This is one big massive inquiry project, but I'm in class. And it was the same kind of thing with NaNoWriMo.

Nicole ([22:21](#)):

They write online, they have an online platform. They learn to navigate. There are chats they can get in, but like there's a whole set of digital literacy skills that go along with that program that, no, it wasn't my

intention when I was having the, I just wanted them to write and write something that they were authentically interested in and excited about. It was the exact same thing. I was like, oh, I get it. I'm fine. I'm safe. And then from there, it was like, here, I'll share. I get, I totally understand what's going on. So I agree with you. I think it's, once you move through that process, you develop those skills. But I don't think it's the intention to develop digital literacy that would get an open educator into open.

Helen ([23:04](#)):

So I'm, I'm going to throw Paulo Friere at you because that's exactly that conception of conscientization. So you become aware of your own thinking. You become, gain awareness of yourself as a learner.

Nicole ([23:25](#)):

You can you see that in your students? And I think as a teacher and I'm going out on a limb here, but I think if you understand that process and what they're going through, you can better facilitate it. And it's more a mutual relationship because they're going to bring in new skills that I've never seen before, or, or they're going to challenge me and say, well, how do I do this? And then I have to go down the rabbit hole and figure it out.

Helen ([23:49](#)):

Yeah, yeah. You have to gain the skills and fluencies in order to figure it out.

Nicole ([23:54](#)):

So as a teacher you're in a tricky position, but it challenges you and pushes you forward.

Helen ([24:02](#)):

And I think the challenge then is that a lot of educators are afraid of developing those skills and fluencies with their students. They feel they have to have that, you know, competency and, and did digital literacy, media literacy in order to do any of this with students. And I've seen and I share the experiences, the living, breathing experiences of educators who are blogging about their kindergarten classroom and how terrible this activity failed. They're, you know, tweeting images from their kindergarten classrooms that respect the safety, security, privacy, and permissions of the students in their classroom, by doing these images in a certain way.

Nicole ([24:55](#)):

They're cognizant of what they're doing. You're not just, yeah, there's a reason that we go back, we circle back to that intention. Like, why are you sharing? What are you doing? And being more aware of open and, and understanding where your information goes, I think is important in order to navigate it, to be like, okay, I'm comfortable sharing here. This is how I want to represent myself. This is how I want to grow.

Helen ([25:19](#)):

Yeah. And that intentionality that you talked about is part of what phenomenology is about. So, in my case, I'm really looking at the intentionality, that's occurring through the screen. So the computer becomes part of the equation. My relationship with you is only mediated because we have this

technology between us and how does this technology inform our relationship and how we communicate?

Nicole ([25:52](#)):

I did have one last question. If someone was really new to open education and was a little bit hesitant about dipping their toes in the water, what message would you have for them? Or what would you say to maybe convince them that this is worth giving it a shot?

Helen ([26:06](#)):

I would probably say look for one or two open educators that resonate with your thinking. And that you can, um, not to say model, but read their work. Alan Levine was someone I respected. And, when I, when I made the cognitive choice. When I, conscientiously decided to start blogging 2015'ish. My first post was, if you go to my blog site and go back to 2015. It's, about being seen - the Lord of the Rings was big then. And, I used the little video clip about the eye, the Dragon's eye opening [[Awaken the Dragon](#)]. And it was that you know, that image of the internet being this huge dragon, and it was little me, and I'm just waiting for this. And Alan wrote a blog post as a comment on my blog post that just gave me, still gives me chills to think about the power of commenting in blogs. And this is the type of thing I really want my students to experience is when somebody's voice who really matters to you, makes a difference and they see you and they see what you're going through and what you're struggling with. So, I will encourage my students to find that one or two people that they can connect with that will drive their passion into the open.

Nicole ([27:53](#)):

It's like by sharing, you're able to be seen. Yeah, that's quite moving and important.

Helen ([27:57](#)):

And from there, you find a network that again, will sustain and feed your passions for open or for whatever. And then, you know, if you're into sustainability, find people who are in that space, if you're into coding, find people who are in that space and find people who are in the school system, you're going to teach in that are open, are sharing their work on a blog site or sharing through Twitter or Instagram.

Nicole ([28:33](#)):

I'm hearing from you. And I'm realizing a little bit right now that open in some ways, facilitates that through networking, that sense of belonging, which is so important for humans. I think that having that community to lean into and to support you is transformational. And it's also that whole being seen for who you are. I think as humans, that's what we want. We just want to be recognized. And for, if we can share authentically, then you're seeing my authentic self. And that is a huge place. I come from a place of vulnerability when I share, but it's also very rewarding when someone sees me and sees my work and can help me grow and give me feedback positive or negative. But, but that whole being seen I think is what I'm realizing through the last chat I had with Verena actually, and this one is, that's a huge element that, that open allows and open encourages risk taking.

Helen ([29:26](#)):

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But it's such a risk and even though I'm at that point now where I'm putting my research proposal out on the open web I'm condensing it down into, you know, a series of blog posts that I'm going to post. I don't know who's going to see it.

Nicole ([29:53](#)):

I'm so excited to, I'm excited when you post your dissertation near your blog posts, I'll get on there for sure. And, and if you're okay, I'll link them into this podcast. I'm excited to see where your work goes in.

Helen ([30:07](#)):

It's a tricky space because it's kind of subdivided. As I said, the confluence of three areas - open education, teacher education, and media and digital literacy. And, I don't think anybody's put those puzzle pieces together before.

Nicole ([30:22](#)):

Thank you for sharing it and doing well, learn and benefit from it. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

Nicole ([30:33](#)):

Thank you for joining us for this episode of, into the open. I completely agree with Helen's statement is you're new to the open world. It's beneficial to find a network of like-minded people. #GO-GN has been just that organization for me. They sponsored this podcast and have been incredibly supportive in the process. They've also really helped me expand my understanding of the open educational world to keep this conversation going. You can follow Helen on Twitter at H J underscore Dewaard. I'd also suggest you check out her blog, five flames for learning I'll link all of the information in these show notes. So I think with that, I'm beginning to understand the difference between a digital skill, literacy, competency fluency, but I'm still left really curious about equity. If we don't have access to these basic technology tools to start with, then whom has open education really for? In the next episode, we'll dive a bit deeper into this until next time. We'll see you soon.