The LCC Open Learning Lab Project - Final Report

By Jim Luke, May 2017

Overview and Summary

A year and half ago, LCC embarked on a truly innovative project: the LCC Open Learning Lab, a first in any community college. The objective of this ambitious, experimental project was to answer the question: *Could Open Learning pedagogies using a Domains-of-One's-Own webserver be done and prove value at a community college?* Since 2013 nearly 60 universities, including MSU as of last August, have embarked on such projects with great success, yet no community college had attempted it. A community college brings many unique challenges to the open learning concept; challenges universities have not faced.

Now as the original experimental project phase comes to a close, we can say definitely that ***not only is it possible at a community college, but that the open learning pedagogies + student/faculty websites are a powerful and popular tool for achieving LCC's strategic commitments*** such as engaged learning, student success, equity, OER, inclusion, and most powerfully, integrated gen ed. The project has proven successful in the invention of new tools and pedagogies for teaching and learning. In the words of Gardner Campbell at the OpenEd9 conference, "we have a bag of gold!" We have also gained international recognition for our work.

While the technology is critical to the Open Learning Lab, the technology is only part of the success. Equally important has been the education of faculty on open learning concepts and pedagogies. The challenge now is to commit resources to the second phase which would see continued momentum in pushing the concept of open learning, development of a plan for institutionalizing and scaling up, and R&D to "systematize" the technology so that it takes less manual effort to create sites.

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Objective and Original Concept

In January 2016 LCC launched an experiment called the LCC Open Learning Lab. The objective of the project was to see if the kind of open learning and Domains-of-One's-Own (DoOO) projects proving so successful at major universities could be adapted to a community college environment, and if so, what might the possible benefits be for students and the school. It was a learning & research project as much as a project to produce things for existing classes.

Open learning & DoOO initiatives combine the use of OER with the public World Wide Web to foster integrated learning, improve equity, and help students develop the digital identity and skills necessary today. Technologically these initiatives involve providing students and faculty with the ability to create and edit their own public websites. In effect the school provides regular web hosting services to its scholarly community. No community college had ever attempted a DoOO project. A lot of questions had to be answered. Prior to the OLL coming into being, Jim Luke and Leslie Johnson had already experimented in their classes with having students "write in public" using WordPress blogs. Initially it was expected that this "write in public" concept in classes could improve writing and integrated education.

Jim Luke was given the responsibility for the project for the four semesters and given reassign time to work on it. A total of 21 credits of reassign time spread over the 4 semesters, averaging 0.3 FTE per semester were made available. In addition, ITS provided funding to contract with Reclaimhosting.com to provide a server that could be used to host the websites. Total out of pocket cost for the hosting has been approximately $7,000 per year – a bargain. Finally, the CTE provided support services and space to "incubate" the project.

Thus, the overall objective of the 16 month project has been to answer the questions:

- Can a public web-based, DoOO-style open learning project work in a community college environment?
- Does it deliver value? In other words, does it help LCC's strategic directions of Operation 100%, Equity & Inclusion, Integrated Gen Ed, and being a leader in Online?
- How would faculty and students respond?
- Would our experience in the experimental phase indicate that scaling up the initiative would be practical?

In other words, is it even possible to do in a community college and is it worthwhile? It's important to remember that while 30-50 major universities have done this, they have different academic situations and greater resources. The real question was, could we do this at a community college?

The answer to all four questions is affirmative, which will be explained later in the outcomes section.

Background and History of the Project

The LCC Open Learning Lab (OLL) project was conceived eighteen months ago in Oct 2015. It resulted from a long conversation between Jim Luke and Dr. Prystowsky following LCC's first OER Summit a few weeks earlier. The original vision of the OLL was for at least a four semester (counting summer) _experimental_ project to _explore_ open learning/open educational practices (OEP). OEP build upon OER efforts beyond just "free books" into improving student success, engagement, and learning outcomes. For more about the relationship between the resources, OER, and the pedagogy, OEP, please see my post What's Open? Are OER Necessary?. For a student's perspective on how Open Learning makes a difference in their education, please see What An Open Pedagogy Class Taught Me About Myself, by Miranda D., a student at Plymouth State University.

The inspirations for the OLL were the innovative open learning efforts taking place at leading major universities. These open pedagogy initiatives included the University of Mary Washington's DTLT/Domain of One's Own project, Virginia Commonwealth University's Rampages, and projects taking place at major universities such as UBC, CUNY, BYU, Penn State, Davidson, and elsewhere. At the time there were a core of maybe 30-40 universities involved in such innovative open learning projects. Now there are closer to 70-90 universities and elite liberal arts colleges engaged in these open education innovation efforts, including Michigan State (their HUB launched in Sept 2016) and the Univ of Michigan. At MSU, the target of many of LCC's transfer students, students are increasingly expected to engage in public digital work such as we do in openLCC.net in order to graduate.

The common feature of these diverse open learning projects is use of the possibilites of the public World Wide Web by students, faculty, student groups, and other campus members. Open Learning aims to develop integrated education, digital literacies and fluencies (also known as electracy in some circles), critical pedagogy, connections between ideas and people, and community via the open web.

When LCC began the project there were no community colleges engaged in such an innovative effort. There are quite a few CC's engaged in OER programs, but none focusing yet on open learning/OEP. LCC is the first community college to attempt this kind of program. Thus, the project's moniker as a "lab" was very appropriate. It was truly an experimental inventive laboratory, bound to make mistakes, learn from mistakes, and hopefully create something of value to LCC.

What We Did: Running Errands for Ideas

The Spring 2016 semester was used to acquire and setup initial infrastructure such as the server and to begin to introduce the open learning concept to faculty. Summer and Fall 2016 saw continued faculty professional development and creation of the first sites, including use in seven classes. Spring 2107 saw expansion into more classes, more faculty professional development, and more research. As we near the end of Spring 2017 and the end of the original project commitment, openLCC.net, the scholarly commons of websites developed as part of the OLL consists of:

- More than 150 students have "blog" websites that they manage and edit on voice.openlcc.net. These student sites have been used by students to complete "writing in public" assignments for nine classes, most of them science or composition classes.

- Over 38 faculty have sites on faculty.openlcc.net
- Another ten faculty have their own sub-domains (ex: megelias.openlcc.net). Most have multiple sites on their domain.
- The eLearning faculty and student help sites to support D2L are hosted at elearning.openlcc.net
- The CTE has several innovative sites at cte.openlcc.net including the CTE blog, the TLTT course's "400 Words" student essay site, and the innovative IdeasBank.
- The CTL has developed an innovative site for sharing OER materials useful in developmental education.
- PRISM, the LCC organization supporting LGBTQ employees has its own site.

In addition to these operating sites, numerous other sites are in discussion and development. We now call these different types of sites, each designed to meet specific learning/curricular/communication needs, "site packages". Each has the potential to become an easily repeatable, scaled "template".

- Virtual Lab Notebook
- student portfolios that they can keep after graduation
- interactive history timeline / digital humanities packages
- "Social"/community sites designed to further LCC's equity and inclusion initiatives.
- Program collaborative repositories of OER materials, videos, tutorials, and program resources
- Program-specific "social" sites to bring students, alumni, and prospective students together in mentoring relationships
- A free, open source replacement for the expensive proprietary ChemDraw molecule drawing software used in many chemistry classes
- Publication of service learning writings

The approach used in the project was deemed "Running errands for ideas", the phrase the great inventor Charles Kettering used to describe his inventing methodology. Specifically, Jim Luke functioned as the "idea errand runner". Initially Jim promoted open learning ideas to faculty in several CTE workshops. Then Jim would meet individually with faculty, often with the question "what do you wish you could do to help learning in the class?" At the same time, Jim was himself researching and learning about open learning from the other universities and leaders in the field. Then, Jim immersed himself in the WordPress community to learn how to build the kinds of innovative sites faculty described they wanted by combining various plugins and configurations. Finally, Jim would help manually create those initial sites and help faculty get started. In essence, the Reclaimhosting server and WordPress software provided a giant box of Legos that Jim, working with faculty, fashioned into tools to use in class.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the project have far exceeded our hopes. Frankly, we hoped that student blogs and writing-in-public assignments would work in a community college. We found that they could and we found a lot of other approaches and uses of the websites. We learned how they function to greatly accelerate and magnify our efforts at integrated gen ed, equity & inclusion, and student success. Finally

we learned enough to know that scaling up is definitely possible and inexpensive. We may not know exactly how to scale up or "institutionalize" it yet. There is more work to be done to analyze what we've learned, but we know it can be done and is tremendously cost-effective.

To paraphrase Gardner Campbell's keynote speech to the OpenEd09 conference, "we have a bag of gold here". Another indicator of the project's success is the national and international recognition it has received.

The best indicator of successful outcomes is what students have produced and what faculty/staff have produced. Among the many sites, here are just six of the more interesting. The first three are student sites created for a BIOL 125 class. When you look at them, remember this is an introductory biology class and these students had only a half-hour introduction to how create their site. Not only is the content theirs, but they created the look as well. As Meg Elias said of her students' essays in her openLCC.net based class in the fall, "the writing was thousands of percent better than ever before".

- http://voice.openlcc.net/belongt1/
- http://voice.openlcc.net/dearaujl/
- https://voice.openlcc.net/sturosn/2017/04/19/discoveries-in-a-small-world/

In addition the following sites show some of the useful sharing and creativity possibilities:

- The CTE's sites: https://cte.openlcc.net
- The CTL's OER database: http://ctl.openlcc.net
- The LCC Employee PRISM Alliance: http://prism.openlcc.net

These are only a sample of the more than 250 sites created by the OLL, faculty, and students in the openLCC.net scholarly commons in only ten months.

Recognition

LCC's Open Learn Lab and approach has received widespread recognition among several communities.

- In the general WordPress software community, both academic and non-academic, including

  - WPCampus Virtual Conference, Jan 23, 2017 view Jim Luke's session at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDq5S6txKTs
  - In November 2016, LCC Open Learn Lab was featured in WPRoundtable's weekly podcast see Jim Luke's interview: https://econproph.com/2016/11/07/talking-open-learning-on-wp-roundtable/
- In the general academic world,
  - Jim Luke was invited to present both at a plenary session and follow-up workshop with a team of two others from Capital Univ & VCU at the AAC&U Integrated Education conference, Feb 2016
  - Leslie Johnson and Jim Luke co-presented two different sessions on these topics at the League for Innovation in Community College Innovations conference, March 2016

- In the specifically OER-Open Education community, LCC's efforts have gained international praise and recognition.
- Amy Larson has presented at two conferences about the CTL's OER site
- Jim Luke presented an overview of the Open Learn Lab at OpenEd16 in November, 2016. That presentation gained international visibility and interest, which resulted in…
  - A request for Jim Luke to organize a panel discussion in London, UK, at OER17 in April 2017.
  - In addition, Jim's blog posts on the subject have gained global attention. A recent post for example was read by more 350 open education scholars from all six continents, with many of them quoting and Tweeting excerpts.

Faculty & Student Acceptance: Credit and Assistance

Obviously, Jim Luke had the original inspiration and has been the central character in the Open Learning Lab so far. However, the success of the Open Learn Lab has not been a one-man effort. The entire CTE staff led by Leslie Johnson, Alyssa Poirier, and Meg Elias have been enormously supportive and have played a key role. ITS, led by Kevin Bubb, has been the key enabler. ITS was the first and has consistently been the most supportive of the project and has generously provided budget for server and software as well as consulting resource.

The unsung heroes however are the faculty and academic staff who have eagerly and enthusiastically embraced open learning. The list is long, but special recognition is due to:

- Amy Larson
- Meg Elias
- Arthur Wohlwill
- Mark Kelland
- Regina Gong
- Robin McGuire
- Jill Reglin

- Nichole Biber
- Ed Bryant
- Bruce Farris
- Sarah Steinhour
- James Wortz
- Kirsten Robinson

- Suzanne Bernsten
- Jeff Janowick
- Anne Heutche
- Mindy Wilson
- Melissa Kaplan
- Susan Murphy

There were others and I offer apologies to all who I may have missed.

Overall, faculty have been enormously enthusiastic. If anything, their enthusiasm and creativity have swamped the time resource available in Spring 2017. Students have been equally interested.

Next Steps: Institutionalization

The feasibility and value of open learning, the openLCC.net scholarly commons websites, and the Open Learn Lab concept have been proven. The project succeeded. The question now is what comes next for the Open Learn Lab and LCC.

The Open Learning Lab and openLCC.net is clearly a highly cost-effective program. It has also been demonstrated to be popular with faculty and students. The faculty involved have said overwhelmingly that the Open Learn Lab provides the tools to accomplish the goals of LCC's strategic directions such as

integrated gen ed, improved student success, engaged learning, inclusion, and advanced online learning. (see attached comments from faculty below)

The challenge then is to "institutionalize" the project. The tasks involved in creating and supporting openLCC.net are somewhat fuzzy and unclear. We had to experiment first. To use an analogy from Henry Ford and illustrated below, we had to invent and build the first Ford Runabout first. That took us all 16 months and still has some work to do. We had to invent before we could plan, design, and staff an assembly line and factory to produce Model T's.

Flickr Photo by The Henry Ford - creative commons licensed (BY-NC-ND)

Flickr Photo by Jim Surkamp - creative commons licensed (BY-NC)

The next phase entails figuring out how to produce high-quality sites in volume to support the whole of LCC without a lot of manual effort or cost. It will involve defining the tasks required, documenting the process and workflow of creating each type of site, and then eventually automating the creation of sites and concurrently defining the skill sets/knowledge/experience needed to do the tasks. This second phase of figuring out the production process, the "institutionalization", will require substantial additional time, analysis, and creativity itself. Only then can we fit it into the LCC organization chart and staff it. This planning and analysis takes time. It cannot be accomplished in a meeting or two.

There are several reasons. This analysis is based on both the experience of the OLL project and the experience of the other universities that have led the way.

1. **There is truly no blueprint to follow or to even borrow from another school**. We are the first and that means having to do the analysis and planning ourselves. It is a very complex venture. The experience of the major universities is informative but does exactly fit our situation.
2. **The nature of this project is truly collaborative and spans across the role of multiple entities in LCC.**
3. **No existing entity in LCC presently has the necessary skill sets, experience, knowledge, or mission to become the sole "home" of the OLL**. Significant professional development and learning will be necessary to provide the capacity to support the OLL.
4. **The skill sets and knowledge needed to operate the Open Learning Lab's various activities are not widely available at LCC at present**. The technologies used, WHM-cPanel on server accounts and complex WordPress multi-site installs, have not previously been used at LCC.

5. **The OLL worked because Jim Luke had a unique background and had privately researched and worked with these technologies on his own for over a decade.** At the same time, Jim has taught using the technologies and understands the pedagogy and philosophy. That unique combination of background made OLL possible but also poses a challenge. We can't clone Jim (and who would want to?). Given the widespread lack of these specific knowledges on campus, it means learning and developing others.

6. **To collaboratively develop a plan means a larger group must learning what the tech is and learn more about the open learning pedagogy concepts.** We have a significant starting base of faculty who understand the open learning concept, are enthusiastic, and can help plan but at present we really only have one person (see #5) who understands the complete technology stack.

Nonetheless, an advisory team of 8-9 faculty and staff is being pulled together to function as sub-committee of the TAC (Technology Across Curriculum) committee under the guidance of Bruce Farris & Kevin Bubb. The advisory committee in conjunction with administration must decide the school's commitment and forward direction.

Open Learning and the OLL have proven to be an incredibly cost-effective, high-return approach to boosting LCC's strategic directions and commitments. While the OLL will prove much less expensive than many other initiatives, it cannot be done on the cheap. It will require some substantial commitment by LCC if the school chooses to move forward. It can continue to grow only if provided more than nominal resource.

Appendix A: Faculty Assessment and Recommendations

Lacking a formal assessment plan beyond the obvious, *Did the course projects work or blowup?*, faculty who were significantly involved in various Open Learn Lab activities were asked for their assessment in late March 2017. Six faculty responded with the written comments provided below. I believe these provide testimony to the value of the Open Learning Lab and its potential.

> **Anne Heutche**
> Since you are working with me on the AAC&U Equity WordPress site for the Open Learn Lab, I think you already know the gist of what we are doing there, but in part, I would argue that it is crucial in building a "beloved" community to be open and transparent by sharing the information with all. In addition, I would argue that it demonstrates a level of trust and value to actively engage/share information. Finally, for the Engagement and Resource Fair, we are asking people to provide us with "Tip Sheets" both hard copies, but also electronic copies which we will be placing on our site so all individuals have access to it whenever they need without having to navigate our complex website.
>
> Personally, I will be setting up my WordPress sites this summer for my courses and starting to incorporate different digital humanities elements into all my classes. Matt VanCleave uses a different terminology concerning hard and soft skills and value that I

think might be very helpful here. He is not in the office at the moment, but I will get the language to you.

Amy Larson (CTL)

The Open Learn Lab has been instrumental in organizing resources for the wide range of classes I teach. Instead of sifting through pages of links with no identifying information, I now have a database with annotated information. This database covers material in four categories: Developmental Reading, Developmental Writing, College Success, and ESOL. Its importance to me and a wider community is couched in the fact that for three of these areas, no such list exists.

This database provides a service not only to the professional teachers at Lansing Community College, it is available to other educators throughout the country. It has been presented at the local MITESOL conference and the national conference for the Association of Developmental Education. As an on-going project, it has the potential to bring in a wide range of educators as they contribute both their own resources and resources they use.

This project would not be possible without the support of the Open Learning Lab experimental project, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and teachers across this campus. My demonstrations and discussions of the database, along with a demonstration of how the library is using the same concept to create their own collection has sparked interest in many of my colleagues and PFCs as to how they could use the idea for their own classes and programs.

Robin McGuire

Thanks for soliciting feedback. Although I have not ended up actively using OpenLCC the way I had HOPED (best laid plans of mice and men) I still want to give feedback about the preliminary work, and my personal 2 goals.

1. Use our OpenLCC site(s) as departmental resource for sharing of ideas, concerns, and victories. We welcome in science (and within biology as a subdivision) the opportunity to have a sponsored platform allowing sharing between our full-time and over 100 adjunct faculty in science. Because of the nature of appointments, adjuncts are already disadvantaged in full participation in planning, curricular development, and departmental communication. Email helps, but we are looking to OpenLCC as our first real opportunity to develop a robust user-friendly practical interface for communication that allows ALL faculty to participate in an equitable fashion. Public sharing of ideas for ALL to see. Too often communication occurs between a few administrators, and a select few "go-to" overworked faculty, and talented adjunct faculty are left out.

2. Use our Open LCC sites for outreach efforts. I am the Outreach Faculty Chair for Science and Math, and one of our primary goals in SAM is to focus our outreach efforts specifically, whenever practical, to reach underserved students in an attempt to increase minority recruitment into STEM. Increasingly, we are finding that our reach is

not early enough.   For example, when we examine success rates in Science courses based on ethnicity, we cannot accurately calculate a success gap for African American students -- there ARE NO African American students. We need to reach back into our developmental ed programs, but that is not far enough. Evidence shows that students of color typically opt out of STEM as a viable career option as early as age 10. I recognize that "the college" has many marketing efforts and initiatives led by administrative staff that help to alleviate this. But to effectively recruit students into STEM specifically requires that STEM Faculty have an ability to communicate quickly and directly with the K12 community and put a face to science. One of the ways we are looking to do that is to use OpenLCC as an avenue to communicate our programs, advertise our outreach opportunities, and most importantly to connect and network with middle school and high school teachers, parents, and the kids in the Lansing and Waverly community -- and to allow THEM to communicate and network with one another in a public forum.
Thanks for all you do!

Mark Kelland

Two things:

First: Using a WordPress to offer my OERs to the world has a distinct advantage over the various OER websites out "there" in that it's easy to make a quick switch when updates have been made to the documents. Also, for the same reason, when people are interested in your OER, should it happen to be a longer document, they sometimes ask for the Word file (which is so commonly used, but not on the OER sites).

Second: I have plans to use either blogs or student pages to routinely update the most current research in the field (positive psychology in particular) as the student's writing assignments. These pages will then be available for future classes, who can work with them and/or update them as appropriate (creating ongoing assignments, as opposed to "throw-away" assignments).

Arthur Wohlwill
I have used the site for some "Internet Scavenger Hunts" in which students find resources that help them explain difficult material and/or find material that they find of interest. I Will give you a URL as soon as the bug is fixed which allows me to access it, but if you can find "Genetic Ancestry Questions" (wohlwillgenetics, I believe) you can use that one.

Suzanne Bernsten
One project made possible through the Open Learning Lab, the Ideas Bank, is an invaluable tool for LCC faculty. The Ideas Bank provides faculty with the opportunity to share class and assignment ideas about Ambient Learning, One Book One LCC, Performing Arts, and Integrated Learning. The website allows for dialogue among faculty from different areas of the college. Also, as faculty can contribute at any time online, it

provides a forum for part-time or online faculty who may not be on campus for meetings to participate. As a librarian, having the opportunity to view these ideas and assignments offers insight into what types of activities students are required to complete in classes and gives me ideas for how to better support faculty in the classroom.