## **A Pedagogy of “Small”: Principles and Values in Small, Open, Online Communities**

### **Introduction**

Innovation in open teaching and learning has become increasingly attentive to the commercial potential for *scaling up* as witnessed by the growth of massive open online courses (MOOCs) since 2012 (Urrea, Reich, & Thille, 2017). This attention intensifies under conditions of austerity and disruption, as both educational institutions and their technology company partners search for new markets and new means of profitable operation, targeting learners locally and across the world to whom education can be delivered with maximum efficiency and minimum cost. Drafting open pedagogy into this effort is troubling and invites us to revisit poorly-cited open education theories from the 1970s (see Rolfe, 2016) in order to understand the ecologies that shape open learning in the present.

This chapter is influenced by early work in open pedagogy (Katz, 1972; Spodek, 1970; Paquette, 2005). Using two relatively small, non-profit platform projects as examples, our aim is to revisit the community-centered philosophy of open pedagogy found in this early work and to ask new questions about scale while searching for productive ways to release open learning practices from their current institutional harness. We begin with an introduction of key terms and then offer an overview of our two examples, #smallstories and Young Writers Project (YWP), and a brief description of our research methodology. Finally, using Paquette’s (2005) value pairs as a foundation, we explore these case studies more fully using words gathered both directly from the sites and through interviews with participants. Combining these, we suggest and discuss the possibility that small open online communities enable peer-based pedagogy in ways that larger ones might not.

**Ideas and Values**

Before introducing the details of our research, it may be helpful to explore several foundational ideas, and their underlying values, that guide and serve as a framework for our research.

The foundational ideas drawn from Claude Paquette’s (2005) summary of early open pedagogy provide a framework for this chapter and allow a structured understanding of the stories and processes that will be demonstrated in our examples. For Paquette (1979):

Open pedagogy is centered on the class interaction between the student and the educational environment that is proposed. From this interaction, significant connections will be revealed for the student that will allow him/her to begin a learning process... For the champions of open pedagogy, creating the educational environment has three levels: the creation of a physical class environment, learning activities, and instructor intervention. (p. 18)

Paquette (2005) further observes and reflects on three value pairs that constitute axes of negotiation in the open classroom: autonomy and interdependence, freedom and responsibility, and democracy and participation.

To summarise these value pairs briefly, autonomy and interdependence counterbalance one another creating the founding tension for peer-based open learning that requires learners to fashion their own autonomy in continuous negotiation with their community. Paquette then suggests that open learning is energised by student agency (freedom) but is tempered by the need for students to learn responsibility and to recognise that their choices interact with choices that others have already made or will make. Balancing freedom with responsibility extends the complementarity of autonomy and interdependence. Finally, democratic ideals bring the principle of freedom of speech to the open classroom including the freedom to speak controversially; this principle however requires ongoing active participation of students in the management of learning and in the resolution of disputes.

The online nature of our two examples amplifies these three tensions and transforms the context for their negotiation. Unlike traditional educational settings envisaged by the open pedagogy of the 1970s, open online spaces are asynchronous, translocational and even global in scope. Creating the possibility of group negotiation is a familiar challenge to any educator working in open, online spaces. In our two examples there are opportunities to moderate membership lightly or through blocking, and there are potentially both social and technical obstacles that users need to overcome. In general, however, these two small distributed communities do not offer the opportunity to gather users into a room to resolve a dispute.

Paquette summarises open and participatory pedagogy as being constituted in the same tensions that enable communities like these to cohere: the balance that must be continuously adjusted between the operational values of the individual and the social or strategic priorities of the group. To Paquette, this focus on the negotiation between paired values defines open pedagogy as a community practice: continuously becoming, always incomplete, defended against complacency and radically opposed to standardisation.

**Ideas of small**

“Small” is a loose idea whose value is difficult to communicate with words especially in the current educational context, where institutional investment in efficiency combines with algorithmic innovation to promise economies of (massive) scale unbundled from labour cost. Much of this effort to scale up delivery without increasing costs ends up leveraging data and surveillance techniques used by commercial platforms. These include features such as personalization, automation, gamification and tracking that are familiar from what Chris Gilliard calls “the only web most students know” (Gilliard, 2017, p. 64). Consequently, our definition of small includes what it is *not.* Small is not big and not commercial. It is not optimized or standardized; it is not derived, averaged, or calculated. Instead, it is personal, crafted and artisanal. Small is also often entails a delay in responses; it can be slow and inefficient.

Small offers an alternative to large, data-supported, corporatized approaches to education. It acknowledges the risks of scale and limits of quantification (Eisner, 2013) that have become normalized. Small offers a choice to those who have, either consciously or unconsciously, already experienced moments where “the recipes [they have] inherited for the solution of typical problems no longer seems to work” (Greene, 2004, pp. 132-133).

What then might the potential of small be? Can small acts, small dollar amounts, small projects, small cultural shifts and small communities serve as paths to change or acts of resistance? Can small sites promote community and civility that fosters learning and builds skills? What follows is a modest exploration of these questions using narrative and conversational enquiry within the online context of the #smallstories hashtag on the open-source social platform Mastodon and the community-led Young Writers Project (YWP).

**Case Study Rationale and Significance**

By using Mastodon’s #smallstories and the YWP as our case studies, we chose two examples whose practices exemplify the principles of early work in open pedagogy, in particular the negotiation between individual and community needs which has been overlooked by recent analysis of open education (Rolfe, 2016). These two case studies serve as examples allowing us to connect the ideals and values of small communities and the potential for creating inclusive, sustainable, participatory peer learning environments in other contexts; by studying the ways in which smaller informal learning communities operate, can we see some new opportunities for these negotiations to be better managed in formal distance or classroom-based learning. As early adopters in Mastodon, we witnessed exploratory collaborative practices of prose, poetry, musical and creative remixing, and we noticed how small acts of monologue, provocation, and invocation led to rich dialogue. Within YWP, we noticed young writers making powerful connections with each other, demonstrating openness, learning, willing to take risks, and in effect, becoming one another’s teachers.

**Mastodon and #smallstories**

 Our first case is the #smallstories hashtag on the social platform Mastodon,[[1]](#footnote-1) which is a relatively new, on-profit open source alternative to Twitter. It was built to connect users through a federated network of “instances.” Each instance is an independent software installation run by its own administrator with its own focus, moderation policies, content hosting parameters, language preference, each existing at its own scale. For example, the OERu, a nonprofit network that offers free online courses for students worldwide (OER, n.d.), has set up its own Mastodon instance and are fully in control of membership, its code of conduct and content moderation as stated explicitly on their instance homepage: “This is the Mastodon instance for educators and learners involved in the OERu. Accounts of users not involved in OERu courses may be removed” (Lane, n.d.). Together, thousands of instances “form a giant constellation of interconnected communities. Users from any server can read, follow, and reply to users on another server” (Lawson, 2017). Many Mastodon communities are small; federation makes an instance with a user of one quite feasible. Culturally, Mastodon favours strong moderation and community safety, in conscious opposition to Twitter’s weak regulation of harassment. (Bartlett et al., 2014; Cole, 2015; Lindow, 2014) Its origins are connected to advocacy by and for LGBTIQ users (Hart, 2017; Kenlon, 2017). Some instances have a thematic focus, for writers or artists, for example. Mastodon also offers the potential to form loose communities around persistent hashtags, a practice that it shares with Twitter.

Though Mastodon is often compared to Twitter, there are several attributes that set it apart. The most often-cited difference is that Mastodon supports posts of up to 500 characters, with some Mastodon instances setting even higher character limits, as opposed to Twitter’s recently extended 280-character limit. A Mastodon post can include up to four attached images as well as short videos. This has created a rich environment for visual artists, while the character length has also attracted many writers. Content warning labels support user autonomy in deciding what material they read; granular levels of visibility for posts express a nuanced understanding of the ways in which individuals and community negotiate what they choose to share, and with whom. Together, these features support users who choose to distribute explicit materials to do so in a way that ought not to abuse or traumatise others. None of these features is fully restrictive, however: the functionality of Mastodon’s features depends on considerate use and awareness of potential sanction.

Mastodon has intermittently attracted attention from technology writers and social media commentators. (See, for example, Newton (2017) in *The Verge*). The early involvement of open and critical educators also led to articles on its potential to replace Twitter for educators concerned about harassment. Bali (2016) identifies reasons for educators to be interested in the project, including the fact that as open source software, anyone “can contribute to how it works” and install and run it anywhere. She noted reflective conversations taking place and suggested value in content labelling. Lynds and Richards (2016) showed similar interest in the early potential of the project:

Even if Mastodon is not long for this world, something with similar affordances will/should play into [Next Generation Digital Learning Environments]. As a GNU variant, we hope that more platforms and DIY solutions emerge. Our optics are around building competencies for users in environments that (hopefully) add value to people looking to engage and build meaning with others. (para. 1)

As well as offering educators user-control, Mastodon supports open and public networking in ways that are not possible on corporate-designed institutionally managed LMS platforms like Blackboard, Moodle, or Canvas. To educators concerned about students experiencing harassment, surveillance, or further erosion of privacy on social platforms or within learning management systems, an open source non-profit user-negotiated community platform may have significant appeal. Nevertheless, it is important to note that for many prominent open educators, Mastodon has not been convincing or engaging (Shaffer, n.d.). To the authors, this process of reflection and reservation is constitutive of the negotiation Paquette sees in open pedagogy: a willingness to entertain change while remaining critical of risks.

Between November 2016 and the end of 2017, the number of registered Mastodon users grew from under 10,000 to over one million on over 1,200 different instances (Grafana, n.d.). To avoid generalising about the Mastodon project as a single entity, we have focused on a smaller, organic community of practice assembled around a persistent hashtag: #smallstories. This hashtag appeared modestly in late 2016, at a time when users actively explored the structure of Mastodon in conversation with one another and with its developer; tagging was another form of structural exploration. In a federated network, tagging functions differently than on a single-instance platform; its function as a lens on community activity is incomplete and varies according to networked connections made among followers across instances. Nevertheless, #smallstories fostered a small community of writers and readers who gather and celebrate stories of the everyday. By the end of 2017, more than 70 writers had contributed their stories and used the hashtag close to 800 times. #smallstories has also generated #smallpoems, with contributors sharing, commenting on or remixing found materials. We have chosen this example as the kind of outcome that open educators hope for and that is hard to design: the community that achieves independent identity and extends beyond the life of a particular course.

**Young Writers Project (YWP)**

Young Writers Project (YWP) was established with grant funding as an independent non-profit in August 2006, with a mission to help young people improve their writing skills. The organization has four program areas: a civil online community (see <https://youngwritersproject.org> ) where young people share work, give and receive feedback, improve work for potential publication and take part in interactive workshops in writing and digital media; a Schools Project that includes a private digital platform, content and support for teachers to use in their classrooms; workshops both in school and after school; and publication of young writers’ best work. Since 2006, YWP has connected with an estimated 110,000 young people; published or presented work of more than 17,000; provided professional development training—ranging from one-off workshops to yearlong master’s credit courses—to 2,000 teachers; and has undertaken continuous self-review (Hall & Axelrod, 2014; Kotula, Tivnan, & Aguilar, 2014). Its founder explains its origins:

*In 1997, I was a newspaper editor and in a project we were working on I noticed that there was a profound difference between solicited submissions from students in 4th grade and those from 8th grade. The fourth graders’ responses were fresh, emotional, interesting -- and sprinkled with a few spelling, grammar and punctuation errors. The eighth graders’ responses were similar, unemotional and boring -- but they contained virtually no errors of grammar, punctuation and spelling. This led me to ask: What happens to the teaching of writing between 4th and 8th grades?*

*I followed up. I interviewed teachers and students, and examined available research and data on the teaching of writing. I concluded that starting in about 5th grade, the teaching of writing in U.S. schools tends to deaden interest and self-confidence, with resulting drop-offs in performance. Vermont and national proficiency scores confirmed that writing techniques were not effective; in Vermont, half of high school seniors were below proficiency standards, while nationwide 70 percent were below proficiency and these figures have held true. This correlation between student attitudes to writing and writing performance has been borne out in subsequent years of surveys, statistics, observations and external research.*

*So I started to look for a different way for young people to develop their writing skills and confidence. In 2003 I began a regular newspaper feature that promoted the importance of writing, offered new ways to teach writing and published best work by students around the state of Vermont. In 2006, Vermont Business Roundtable, a group of business and higher education leaders who recognize the importance of writing to success in school and business, offered a grant, and this enabled me to found the Young Writers’ Project as an independent non-profit.*

*YWP offers young people a non-judgmental and respectful space to accomplish four basic steps in writing: 1) explore and discover ideas until they find something that really interest them; 2) give and receive feedback and suggestions for improvement from peers and guides; 3) edit their work to make it better; 4) find authentic, external audience for their best work to affirm and motivate. In its school’s platform, YWP encourages teachers to use their individualized, private digital classroom spaces for the practice of writing, for showing that writing can be fun and for incorporating commenting into the curriculum. (Gevalt, 2017)*

For its first eight years, YWP only published work in a series of Vermont newspapers, radio broadcasts and websites. In October 2014, it developed a digital monthly publication, [*thevoice.youngwritersproject.org*](http://thevoice.youngwritersproject.org/)*,* and opened up its Web community to young people from anywhere. YWP has had over 40,000 users on *youngwritersproject.org* (Reid & Gevalt, 2017).

YWP is designed for user interaction; users can easily find and react to each other’s work. Community members can sort by author name or genre, can comment and reply, and are notified via email or private message when one of their posts receives a comment; when their comment receives a reply; or when a post on which they left a comment has been revised. In YWP Workshops, a collection of interactive workshops – guided by experts or Community Leaders (approximately 50-60 youths are chosen each year based on their energy, activity and skill -- each with a sequence of steps towards completion, content is not visible outside of the learning group, and all responses to the learning steps are coherently grouped and visible to promote interaction and to enable users to be less self-conscious about early drafts. YWP currently has approximately 4,000 active users whose ages typically range from 13 to18 years and whose skills are also wide-ranging.

In 2016, YWP founder Geoffrey and young writer Bridget presented to the annual conference of International Digital Storytellers.

*The most common question was, “How do you keep it civil?” They were particularly intrigued given that young people are free to post whatever they want – there is no moderation. But the simple fact that the young people are civil to each other is such a relief – an oasis, if you will, in a desert of school/teen harshness – they value and protect it. And, in turn, they are more apt to take creative risk, knowing they will be supported. A deeper answer, though, is because it is small: small enough that users feel a part of it and a sense of ownership, small enough that users trust it, and small enough that they feel they have identity and control. It is inherent in young people to have strong values relating to equality, voice, and opportunity. They protect those values when trusted to do so.*

*For a long time, I wanted the organization and site to be larger. I wanted as many young people as possible to join and work on their writing... I have since tempered that passion for large. We are using strategies that are making the site more diverse -- more young people from different parts of the U.S. and world, more variety of backgrounds and ethnicities and experiences. But I now want it to stay small.*

*Smallness retains the idea of community, that is a group of people who are different but who are bound by one common element. In the geographic world the commonality is the physical location. In the digital world, the commonality should be broad interests or goals, rather than beliefs. YWP is small and centered on a commonality of an interest to express, to grow, to learn. Many have different views and opinions and backgrounds. (Gevalt, 2017)*

**Significance of rethinking scale in online learning communities**

While Mastodon has been conceived as an alternative social network that somewhat accidentally began to host a collaborative writing project, YWP is more obviously driven by educational principles. These two small, open community-led environments are far from unique: they are examples of the kinds of loosely networked, collaborative projects that can be sustained at smaller scale by relatively informal negotiation and tacit cooperation, and that share some common attributes with small professional associations, cooperative platforms, and connectivist learning projects such as #rhizo14, #clmooc, or #ds106 (Hamon et al., 2015; Honeychurch, Stewart, Bali, Hogue & Cormier, 2016; Levine, 2013; Smith, West-Puckett, Cantrill, & Zamora, 2016). Projects like these exist all over the Web as reactions to, and forms of resistance against, conventional, corporatised models for learning and social networking. Many open educators have had first-hand experience of these kinds of environments (Mackness & Bell, 2015).

Both Mastodon and YWP use open source software. Mastodon has been developed out of GNU Social; YWP’s platform is built on Drupal. As von Krogh and von Hippel (2006) suggest, the case studies point to the ability of open source software project to create a culture of use that is attentive to continuous software improvement and favours governance and organization mechanisms that maintain open source software in the commons. Both Mastodon and YWP have semi-formalised groups of leaders in YWP and moderators in Mastodon. While the software is technically open, in governance terms, the administrative functions are reserved. Nevertheless, both projects rely on the labour and motivation of all users to maintain culture and values.

Moreover, both examples use non-profit business models and are grant-based or crowd-sourced. Mastodon’s development is funded solely by very small monthly contributions by site and project users; YWP is a non-profit and relies on donations from individuals, businesses, and foundations. Both are advertising-free, and neither track user behaviour. Against a background of commercial and institutional investment in (relatively) open learning at massive scale, these smaller endeavours draw more heavily on voluntary contribution and participatory leadership. They offer a vision of alternative social media centered around cycles of experience and connection and are designed to give equal voice to all participants and to value the agency and safety of historically marginalised users. Their focus is neither scale nor optimization via the exploitation of user data. In a time of surveillance capitalism, these differences are critical (Gilliard, 2017). By choosing alternative financial models, they act as small examples of ways to challenge dominant socio-political and economic models (Apple, 2004; Battiste, 2013; Freire, 1977), and in small but consistent ways they deconstruct the way power has been traditionally and commercially orchestrated (del Guadalupe Davidson, & Yancy, 2009); they offer a concrete example of what Foucault (1982) described as the essential task of “bringing into question…power relations and the ‘agonism’ between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom” (p. 792).

As alternative technology projects, Mastodon and YWP are also useful models for informal or less formal connectivist learning environments. Learning involves cycles of experience, whether active or cognitive; and reflections on, in, and about those experiences (Conrad & Openo, 2018; Cowan, 2006). Downes (2008) explained, “the learning process is influenced by the four elements of the semantic condition… diversity, autonomy, openness, connectedness” (para. 8). Similarly, Cormier (2008) explains that “community acts as the curriculum, spontaneously shaping, constructing, and reconstructing itself and the subject of its learning” (p. 3). Community as priority is fundamental to understanding the first-wave emergence of open online courses that introduced “massive” open-ended enrolment as a feature, and subsequently have been known as cMOOCs, to differentiate them from post-2012 xMOOCs. Reflecting on these principles, Downes (2017) emphasizes that the “community, rather than the curation or transmission of any sort of content” should be at the heart of a connected, online learning experience (p. 166). Following the principle that community viability enables interaction and prompts thinking, resulting in both intentional and unintentional learning, we suggest that these two projects enable us to rethink an ecology for open pedagogy that finds value in small rather than massive scale (Conrad, 2008).

**Exploring Through the Lens of Individual Experience**

The formation and development of these two participatory communities at small scale encourages us to explore the examples of #smallstories and YWP through the lens of individual experience. Staying true to small research principles, we pay attention to the ways in which individual users experience, contribute to, and learn in the context of their respective communities.

**A Methodology of Wondering, Becoming, and Generating**

Jackson and Mazzei (2017) describe “thinking with theory” as a methodology that seeks to pose problems, open up thoughts, and to find newness. Somerville (2007) describes a “methodology of postmodern emergence” that, with strong influences from Indigenous epistemologies, is centred around ideas of wondering, becoming, and generating within the research process. As users observing, discussing and analysing environments where we also participate, we are practising a loose ethnography, consistent with Stewart’s (2008) take on “weak theory” (from Sedgwick):

Theory that comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just *add up* but take on a life of their own as problems for thought. (p. 72)

Tentative process methodologies like these are helpful in approaching new or changing social formations, and in opening up ideas rather than seeking solutions. Our aim in this research is to begin and then to suggest further directions for reflection and discovery. In considering how best to engage our fellow users with research, we have chosen conversational methods—a semi-structured interview process guided by the principle that as researchers we wanted the flexibility to “create contexts where participants and researchers create reciprocal relationships to help them develop and deepen critical consciousness” (Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg & Monzὁ, 2017, p. 250), given that interactions within research are “always complicated, mercurial, unpredictable, and of course, complex,” (p. 245).

As Jackson and Mazzei suggest, observational research supported by conversational enquiry is “not about what things mean but about how things work” (2017, p. 727). Extending Jackson and Mazzei, we note that this is not even about the mechanics of how things work, but about perceptions by individuals reflecting on their participation andhow things are felt to be working. We are not fundamentally interested in counting numbers of posts or interactions, diagramming network relationships, or in classifying what users say. Our research follows the spirit of Paquette’s commitment to a pedagogy of individuation “qui mise sur ce qui distingue une personne d’une autre” – “that rests on what distinguishes one person from another” (Paquette, 2005, p. 1). This is similar to Downes’ (2017) distinction that “*personal* learning is something made to order” by the individual (p. 356), as opposed to something generic or “off the shelf.” We are also tactfully seeking to avoid the flattening effect of “coding, sorting, sifting, collapsing, reducing, merging or patterning” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017, p. 723)—the traditional repertoires of qualitative research analysis that we find too heavy-handed for such a tentative exploration.

**Methods to Ensure Accountability and Structure**

The protocols of human research ethics approval, important to each of us, set up conditions of accountability around this relatively open-ended process. These protocols remind us to open conversations with a clear account of purpose and the likely destination of the words gifted to us. Our project began with an open call to participate in a collaborative writing document. This call had the effect of reframing our own activities as users, and of letting others know (including the creators of Mastodon and YWP) what we are doing. Through this process, we co-developed a list of questions to guide our investigative conversations and gained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Chichester. These questions were:

1. How did you first hear get involved YWP or Mastodon #smallstories and why?
2. How long have you been involved & in what capacities?
3. Tell me more about (the above) participation. What benefits do you think you get from (reading, writing, remixing, leading etc.)
4. Do you think that your involvement as had an impact of your life beyond the YWP/ Mastodon #smallstories? In what ways?
5. Are there things that you feel unwilling or unable to share
6. Can you think of one event, story, phase, etc. that you think best describes your experience with Young Writers Project/ Mastodon #smallstories?
7. Have you/ would you encourage others to get involved?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The same questions were used to guide the interviews for both #smallstories and YWP, though the interview processes themselves were varied. With #smallstories collaborators, we did not ask for identifying information, although we knew their published usernames. We also offered the opportunity to engage with us through video link or through written exchanges. One participant, someone who might not have participated otherwise, opted to participate via messages. Six additional interviews were conducted using a videoconferencing tool, and two were conducted through email. Where quotations from interviews are included below, they are anonymised as A, B, C, et cetera, according to our approved protocol.

With the YWP group, it was additionally important to respect the sensitivities of research involving young people. As a result, YWP data was gathered using two surveys (50 respondents) and a group interview with nine former and current participants. The group interview participants were selected and contacted by an YWP employee able to ensure parental consent was in place, although half were over 21 years old; direct quotes are attributed to authors with names as requested.

We then reflected on the material that we had gathered, and in what follows, we connect this with our own observations, experiences, and intentions as fellow #smallstories participants exploring the same environments.

**Acknowledging Important Value-Based Tensions**

Our aim here is to see how well our findings, observations and shared insights within #smallstories and YWP correspond to Paquette’s framing of value pairs that hold small open communities in place. Like Paquette (2005), we believe open and participatory pedagogies emerge from the same tensions that enable communities to develop and be sustained by diverse individuals, as opposed to the “*collaborative principle* where every entity in the networkbecomes the same and, consequently, all dialogue, all meaning, ceases” (Downes, 2017, p. 90). The following section offers examples of each value pair from #smallstories and YWP and considers the tensions they create.

#### **Autonomy and Interdependence**

Paquette (2005) suggests that autonomous learning is a three-phase accomplishment that includes assisted autonomy, intermediate autonomy, and “grand” autonomy. Assisted autonomy is a contingent or intermittent experience defined by the length of time that a learner can operate independently before needing help; intermediate autonomy represents the capacity to assemble and use resources of one’s own and to participate fully and authentically on this basis; and “grand autonomy” is an unachievable state of ethical coherence in which the learner operates entirely according to her own expectations and laws. Paquette connects all three states to the counterbalancing recognition that each autonomous learner acts with others interdependently. This is the founding tension for peer-based open learning, one that requires learners to fashion their own autonomy in continuous negotiation with their community.

Our two examples encourage autonomy in contribution, up to a point. Users do not write to instruction, to a curriculum, or to a deadline. Participation is self-directed, and draws on the users’ own resources, motivation, and timing. The challenge emerges when new users need assistance. Educators who work in open online environments with students quickly notice that resources sustaining autonomy include user guides typically in written English, focusing on moderation expectations of a platform’s culture and techniques; at the same time, users learn the tacit social rules of courtesy and offense. However, these are often learned through trial and error. In our conversations about #smallstories, Casked:

*What if I posted something on the #smallstories tag that didn’t fit? I don’t want to jump into a space that others are inhabiting and do it wrong. I don’t know the rules of the thing, even though I know there are no rules.*

This comment highlights the challenges that many users face negotiating autonomy and communal norms within online communities. Later in the conversation, Cextends this idea explaining, *I don’t think I’m upset by it. I don’t feel locked out in any way… I haven’t quite figured out how I want to engage*. As this comment shows, the development of autonomy is a complex process of negotiating one’s role within a community. In contrast D entered the community with a higher level of autonomy, though the decision to enter with friends again points to the criticality of interdependence.

 *I dragged in a couple of buddies in with me and we just started playing. I like the idea that there isn’t really any rules, that there isn’t anything that isn’t permitted, outside of general social norms.*

Ehas substantially separated the value he gets from writing from the value of being read.

*The result for other people reading it is incidental almost. It seemed like it was important to write for me. Whether it was important for someone else to read is an entirely different scope that somebody else finds it intriguing... But I like it when I think that someone has read it. If I felt that no one was going to read it ever I would still write it.*

Not surprisingly, E and D post, read, and comment often, while C rarely posts but often reads. Though none of these collaborators experienced these cultural norms of #smallstories as prohibitive and exclusionary, their comments illustrate that even in a supportive environment, the new learner experience can be difficult and vary considerably. Ultimately, the development of higher levels of autonomy relies on help-seeking behaviour, and an ethos of patience and assistance. More subtly, interdependent autonomy online is mobilised in the ways in which users pay attention to each other’s presence by responding, commenting and sharing. For the #smallstories collaborators, this interdependent autonomy begins with noticing activity within the hashtag and contributing to a practice of noticing in the everyday.

*Writing a #smallstory has to do with the idea of noticing, particularly the small moments that if you take a step back have bigger meaning… giving me a reason to pay closer attention.* (A)

This noticing also can extend beyond the #smallstory hashtag within Mastodon:

*There are hundreds of equivalent stories being told [on Mastodon] everyday, just not being seen by their authors with the tag of #smallstories. And sometimes I’ll mention… that should have a #smallstories tag, and they say, “Oh yeah, I should probably do that”, but because the grouping of that is not a goal, I’m already writing says the person. (*E*)*

For B, noticing extends far past the site and has begun to change the way they perceive others, promoting a higher awareness of their interdependence throughout the world:

*Some of the #smallstories have been pretty moving. Some of them very personal, some of them tragic or sad, and that impacts me. It’s important for me to see these things. – I don’t see these things. It’s not that I deliberately shelter myself from them or prefer not to see these things, but you know, it’s important for me to know that there are other lives. It’s especially easy for me to forget that... There are 7 billion lives which means every day, 7 billion times however many numbers of small stories, and these things matter as much as whatever I’m doing at the moment and the #smallstories tell me that sometimes. (*B*)*

Moreover, noticing can change how one interacts with the world, empowering them to acknowledge and more fully acknowledge their autonomy to think and make small changes in their actions.

*I think it is just that, noticing. When someone tells a story that is small but is really profound, if someone takes the time to point it out and you take the time to think about it, it slows it down. You think about it. And then I think, let me try to slow down in my life. Somebody has taken the time to create a space, so that gives you a space to think about what would otherwise just let fly by you. (*C*)*

Small communities with clearly stated ethical purpose can, therefore, create an opportunity for users to more deeply understand and embrace both their autonomy and interdependence, resulting in what A describes as *a real generosity of spirit that flows through the hashtag; not just the stories but responses are so positive. It is powerful.*

Within YWP interdependent autonomy develops as writers feed off each other’s example and support. For example, one feature of the YWP community is called the “sprout.” If a post triggers a memory or an experience or a story on the part of a reader, s/he post their own story as a “sprout” of the original, and the two will remain linked. This can precipitate deep connections.

*A year ago, in December, I read a poem titled ‘Green Eyes’…and it sparked something in me. So, I started writing… soon it became a poem titled ‘You-Words.’ Its publication and the comments I received on the poem came as a surprise to me -- I hadn't expected to hear what others thought of it. I was thrilled that people related to and enjoyed my piece, and I was proud of this poem I had written… My experience with sprouting from ‘Green Eyes’ embodies the conversation of writers. The sprout is one form of compliment / conversation, the commenting on my post another, and my motivation (from receiving comments) to leave comments on other's work the third. (Janet, 2017)*

Janet’s comment demonstrates how her interdependent autonomy developed through the iterative cycle including the compliments/ conversation of the sprout, and the responses of others to her post which ultimately motivated her to leave comments on the work of others within YWP.

Like the #smallstories collaborators, Rebecca also clearly articulates how the relationship between autonomy and interdependence discovered within a small online community has had far-reaching positive impacts.

*YWP helped me see art as something collaborative, and something that you have to support others in as much as you ask others to support you. I have carried that with me into an MFA program, and I think it makes me a stronger and more dedicated member of that community.* (*Rebecca, 2017*)

By writing in a civil space, by knowing they can control what they write, and by knowing that any response will be supportive and non-judgmental, YWP writers explore their identities, emotions and ideas while gaining communication skills and confidence. They are, in effect, learning about themselves as they write in a space that is of manageable size, that respects the individual, and that is free of the bullying and/or negative responses by peers they receive daily in school or life environments. Likewise, those viewing notice and experience glimpses of the lives of others.

The relatively small troupes of active contributors within #smallstories and YWP is part of what allows for a *feeling* of interdependence. Just as in a co-created network developed through open learning, a smaller scale creates the possibility of users recognising others and being affected by stories shared over time. It is the tension created between autonomy and interdependence that can cause new ideas to emerge and learning to occur.

*I did kind of luck out a bit because there was a community that I could join, and the community I ended up joining was one that I was compatible with. The small stories thing has sort of spun off into – someone was talking about pedagogy of small and pedagogy of slow, and that sort of thing- the specific effect it had on me is to coin for my own use the phrase ‘pedagogy of harmony.’ But that’s what happens to me with these communities, right? You can’t plan for – and in general that’s how my ideas develop. Something sort of tweaks me and I go – oh, it’s this. (*B*)*

These acts of writing, responding, and noticing within both #smallstories and YWP seem to resemble the idea of mutual care that is described as the foundation of dialogue and radical education (Freire, 1977; Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990). One of the characteristics of small might therefore be that it focuses on developing personal relationships first. Another characteristic might be that it recognizes that “good teaching doesn’t scale… to move towards a more just world, we need to do a better job of finding out who [our students] are and what motivations shape their world” (Gilliard, 2017, January 31, para. 5).

**Freedom and responsibility**

Building on the value pair of autonomy and interdependence, Paquette (2005) connects freedom to empowerment and suggests that open learning is energised by student agency. In formal educational settings, teachers establish the tasks that are to be undertaken in order to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been achieved. In the open classroom, students are empowered to choose the activities through which they will learn (Broom, 2015).

For many younger writers, freedom comes from the anonymity they are offered on YWP which is critical to the opportunity to explore sensitive issues. In most cases, other users, parents, teachers, and classmates do not know their usernames.

*The feeling of anonymity was the ultimate power. I felt like I could post anything and that no one would judge me for it. I felt like my parents would never see it, my school would never see it, and like I could really freely express myself. (Anna, 2017)*

*I had a very abusive home situation growing up, and I admit I felt a bit cornered when it came to expressing that in my writing. I was able to work through a lot of the resulting mental health issues on the site, which the community was very, very supportive of and for which I am eternally grateful. (Zoe, 2017)*

*For many years, I hesitated to write about my struggle with food online. I recently overcame this, and posted a poem about the issues I have had around eating throughout my life, but for a while I was unwilling to share. It felt like once I put it online, it was real. (Avery, 2017)*

Anna, Zoe and Avery’s comments demonstrate the challenging issues and disturbing and confusing thoughts that youth participating in YWP often have as they try make sense of themselves and illustrate the importance of the freedom to express them in a supportive space.

*YWP is a space where they can explore some of their darker or weirder thoughts without fear of retribution or derision or any repercussion. We’d much rather have them write about topics such as suicide and cutting and bulimia and figure them out then have them take some sort of rash action. And in some cases, we know the community members have some pretty difficult home lives that they’re trying to sort out. (Geoffrey, 2017)*

Paquette also counsels, however, that this freedom be tempered by the need for students to learn responsibility and to recognise that their choices interact with choices others have already made or will make. Balancing freedom with responsibility extends the complementarity of autonomy and interdependence, and strengthens the bonds enabling communities to sustain peer learning environments that value diversity and create a context for sensitive disclosure.

Within YWP, the freedom to canvas difficult topics is balanced by appreciation and strength of this small community. As Bridget puts it, *YWP* was *my social media. ... It was my life, it seemed. … Facebook fills time and YWP fills my mind*. Bridget was one of the first informal leaders on the site, spending time commenting on others’ work and posting her own impressive new work. The freedom she experienced camefrom knowing that she was part of an appreciative community that would often affirm, and even emulate her ideas and level of engagement. Over time, a sense of responsibility took over.

*As I got older, at first I objected to all these new, young middle schoolers coming onto* my *site. But then I realized I was just like them. So I began to give them comments and encouragement. (Bridget, 2017)*

Similarly, Ava felt *an obligation to give back to the community* even during his senior high school year; *even though it was a crazy year, I tried to get on as much as possible and give comments to the younger writers*.

For alternative social networks, the effort to value both freedom and responsibility is framed by the broad failure of commercial networks to achieve this balance at massive scale. The larger social platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, have notoriously failed to foster user accountability; they struggle with content moderation. Real names policies have not prevented the flourishing of fake identities, but instead have exposed vulnerable users to abuse. Account verification has been diverted into reputational currency and has not provided protection against harassment. All three platforms have been exploited as distributors of extreme material, political propaganda, and fake news. In this context, what policies support the possibility that users can responsibly care for the health of a network, and self-manage out of consideration for others? And does this support the hypothesis that scale is also a factor in creating sustainable open pedagogy?

As with the YWP participants, conversations with #smallstories collaborators identify a variety of freedoms and responsibilities both offered and accepted. Specifically, the acceptance of content labelling, and the designation of images, and whole instances, as NSFW (Not Suitable For Work) indicates a willingness to accept constraint on individual practice as potentially valuable to community. It is also modelled in the way users can contribute financially to the support of the project, and in the open dialogue between community developers, moderators, and users.

*I remember thinking except for the fact that the platform is kinda of similar if you really get into it, it has a different kind of vibe. It’s got the protection people are asking for on Twitter. You can find instances that explicitly reject the kinds of abuse people complain about on Twitter, plus there are content warnings and people gently reminding others to use them and why. It doesn't feel really like Twitter at all to me. (*C*)*

It is not enough for the software to integrate features to protect users: in order to achieve the needed balance between freedom and responsibility, users must feel a sense of ownership and control; they must care enough to protect their community. Bdescribes different kinds of freedoms afforded within a community without expectations or specific agendas, something different from other platforms.

*For me it fills a role that none of the other technology that I use does, which is to be a part of a small informal, hap-hazard community that doesn’t particularly have any particular goals, doesn’t have a agenda, might not even consist of people that agree with me on things..., and it’s totally completely not available on other platforms. (*B*)*

D described another type of freedom offered by Mastodon #smallstories by contrasting it to the results of monoculture grazing among sheep.

*One of the things it does is makes me consider other possibilities, the ‘adjacent possible’. There are only few digital tools that create serious ‘adjacent possible’. It encourages you to take things outside the box – the walls are semi-permeable. It’s all connected. It encourages wide grazing.*

*We raise sheep. We had them out in pasture, in fabulous grass. When we brought the sheep in, we also had one we had kept separate, not out in the pasture. When we rejoined them the ones that had been out, their wool was amazing. The other one had wool that was markedly different. Mastodon is a healthy pasture with lots of stuff to graze on. A lot of spaces have become monocultures… (*D*)*

Dgoes on to describe honouring participation as an ongoing responsibility.

*This space is not for everyone… It has its own charms. The danger is becoming too big… but it goes the other way too, then it becomes a club. That’s why there’s a need for constant invitation and openness to participate. “You’re with us. Share with us. Come as often as you want.” You have to honour people’s participation. (*D*)*

For A,remixing the #smallstories of others into poems or videos is a practice of honouring, reflection and extension similar to YWP users who respond to a story by sprouting a story of their own. Remixing is conceived as way of paying attention: *a way to honour the writer, a way to riff off what they have written (*A*).* Noting, however, that some writers have questioned this practice, A poses an interesting question: *Where is the line between the invitation to remix and just an invitation to read?* In an open, online community anyone clearly has the freedom to remix the content. Yet, here, users demonstrate an awareness and acceptance of responsibility within this community to respect the wishes of other contributors. For open educators, resonates with the need to consistently and patiently restate the principles of an open environment, and to recognise that the negotiation of respect in communities that anyone can join similarly needs to be an open and ongoing commitment of care.

#### **Democracy and participation**

For Paquette (2005), democratic ideals bring the principle of freedom of speech to the open classroom. This is politically precise: not simply the freedom to choose what to do in order to learn, but the freedom to speak controversially. Paquette argues, however, that democratic opportunity demands democratic participation, requiring students to take an active role in the management of learning, and in the resolution of disputes.

Both Mastodon and YWP offer opportunities to explore the benefits and tensions involved in sustaining democratic ideals at small scale with minimum formal governance. In both spaces, as needs have been identified, the appropriate affordances have been developed in the software, the community ethos, and the content. Mastodon’s early development community that was largely built for, guided, funded, and maintained by members of the queer community who “looked into the software and saw themselves reflected back” (Hart, 2017, para. 28). Many of Mastodon’s users “were trans and/or nonbinary; many dealt with disabilities; many were victims of harassment. Certainly, the most vocal and most frequent of Mastodon’s unpaid contributors seemed to invariably fall into one or more of these categories” (para. 28). It seems likely that the differences within Mastodon identified by the #smallstories collaborators as largely cultural rather than technological are derived from these roots.

*There’s a friendliness… Every once in a while I see someone focus on something weird and strange, that’s off kilter, but I don’t think that’s the fundamental presence… the Mastodon experience seems intentional, not a chance occurrence. I think people are trying (at least the ones I’ve made the effort to follow) are trying to engage in a relatively honest way and are trying to be mildly friendly if not supportive. (*E*)*

*It’s a different space. I don’t want to recreate what I already had over there [Twitter]. I just enjoy who I talk to… I go on Mastodon and it is always a positive experience, but generally I enjoy the different space and the different community. (*C*)*

*It’s a surprising population a varied a group of people as I have ever been a part of. It’s wild, wacky, and strange. (*D*)*

The YWP site and larger project predate social media and were developed specifically to support the needs of youth. Because YWP is built on the value of respect and trust, users tend to feel agency to comment to others when they think a piece of writing -- or a comment -- might be construed as disrespectful. This becomes de facto moderation through reflection and dialogue; users think about it, and have a sense of their voice in how the community operates or considers its core values. While YWP staff make the final publishing and featuring decisions, YWP has community leaders to help identify powerful pieces for publication or special highlight and encourages community suggestions. Community leaders also can create writing challenges, and all members can make regular suggestions on how to improve their site.

In the case of YWP, smallness gives young writers a sense that their voice and their work as individuals matters within a respected community. They also recognize that the community’s intrinsic value is that they are respected and not judged. This leads them to want to share and take creative risk.

*YWP was actually one of the only places where I felt comfortable sharing things I couldn't share anywhere else. Part of it was the pseudo-anonymous aspect of the site, where very few people knew me as a person and most knew me only as a username. There, I could share writing that came from my soul and expressed feelings, topics, and ideas that I kept hidden in my outward persona in my day to day life. YWP was the one place where I could share those things and no one would judge me. Instead, people would offer their support and solidarity. The environment of YWP was so inspiring and comforting to me as a troubled young writer and showed me that I was not alone. (Tyler, 2017)*

One result of this democratic participation is that the YWP community is openly supportive of diversity and self-development. Avi, a YWP user now in college, posted a personal essay when he was a sophomore in high school declaring that he was gay and that he viewed himself as a boy. The post received 24 positive comments and 1,600 views in two days. It had a profound impact on him and gave him courage to share his feelings, in person, with classmates.

*In the beginning, I did not want to share my process of questioning my sexuality because I was too afraid to even think about it. Once I felt comfortable with it myself, YWP was one of the first places I came out. This is similar in my gender identity as well. I worked through an abusive and manipulative relationship on YWP, where I was able to dump my feelings in a constructive way. (Ava, 2017)*

YWP does not track demographics, but on the basis of school identification, it reasonably estimates that nearly 15 percent of its users are young people of colour compared with a five percent overall population of colour in Vermont. YWP has programs specifically directed at young people of colour and has generated creative projects including the slam poets Muslim Girls Making Change (Waqar, Adam, Ginawi & Abdikadir, n.d.), who have performed throughout Vermont.

Like the other value pairs, however, there remains a tension between democracy and active participation, particularly participation among traditionally marginalized groups. As Mastodon has grown, some early Mastodon users and developers have expressed concern about being pushed out by dominant groups (Hart, 2017). A flurry of other blog posts written in April 2017 echo Hart’s concerns and hopes both from the perspectives of existing marginalized users and more mainstream newcomers (Brown, 2017; Drott, 2017; Guiton, 2017; Jeong, 2017a, 2017b; Liu, 2017; Parreno, 2017; Pincus, 2017; @dredmorbius, 2017); Moreover, people of colour and other minority groups remain underrepresented within Mastodon.

Within YWP, the issue of sustaining democratic participation has been a cornerstone of its work. YWP regularly surveys all its users for suggestions on how to improve the site and programs; it seeks out volunteers for special projects; it rewards, publicly, the most committed users and writers with Senior Writer and Community Leader status which allows them the ability to designate stories for publication, choose daily prompts, organize special projects. Many of these projects have centered on student voice, social activism, societal injustices.

Since 2007, YWP has provided teachers with private digital classroom platforms and this program reached a peak in 2012 of being used by teachers in 60 schools with an estimated 8,000 students. Annual surveys of students using the platforms confirm that small community networks extend the classroom experience, allow students to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of each other, and allow teachers to gain a greater understanding of their students. However, limitations remain. As one teacher writes,

*Creating community through shared writing is a wonderful tool that I have used for over a decade. Yet, it has never been what it could be because I held a lot of the power. I decided who was chosen to read aloud, I made the copies of the “good piece” to model. With YWP, kids are in the drivers’ seats. They decide what to read, who to read, and what pieces should “go viral” in the classroom. And of course, whenever a learner feels in control, they are certainly more motivated to do what it takes to become better*. *(John, A.D. Lawton School, 2013)*

**Final Thoughts**

 The cultures of open source and alternative social media-maker communities continue to evolve. Our conversations have led us to believe that while corporatised education focuses on enclosure, profit, reputation and efficiency, open source communities offer a counter-cultural model for learners to interact technologically, economically and socially in a complex world. Community-facing projects can appear small by some measures; we argue that this is because they restore capacity to individuals to negotiate and self-manage without having to move through a preset curriculum. We do not want to overstate, or ascribe permanence to the value of these projects, however, as they are inherently vulnerable in a context where venture capital funding has become a standard for platform viability. We also recognise that small communities are constrained by human bandwidth and that this risks reproducing privileged networks in exclusive formations. As F comments, #smallstories is *[n]ot so much a community, in part because I'm new yet and feel sometimes presumptuous hashtagging. I feel like there's a cool kid table of smallstories folks and I'm really an underclassman - or at the geek table a few rows over.*

And finally, we recognise that Paquette’s value pairs are not always able to be negotiated successfully. As we learn continuously from the Internet, communities and social groups that focus only on harmonisation of ideas, politics or values will often struggle to appreciate dissonant views and their efforts can too easily be diverted to excluding or shaming; conversely, users who valorise the expression of dissenting speech as a mark of independent thought will often fail to appreciate the organic and tender efforts of groups to grow and change. The dissonance this can create is difficult to resolve at scale; in small communities, however, we continue to see a willingness to entertain cooperative struggle as the basis of learning from peers who do not think as we do.

Regardless of the future of the Young Writers Project or Mastodon’s #smallstories activity, it is clear that for at least some users, the recuperation of online community from profit-based platform culture within small open online communities re-instills hope: hope that strangers can be kind and learn from one another, hope that care-based communities are possible both online and in the real world, hope that there are alternatives to the status quo, hope that change is possible. To us, this cultivation of hope is an inherently pedagogical project that connects capacity to learn to the effort to live thoughtfully, and this is where we have found connection between these two platforms and our work as open educators.

As educators, we recognise the stories we have collected as accounts of learning taking place, and we believe that this account of learning is connected in important ways to openness of the two environments. We do not come to this position lightly or without reflecting on the tacit, informal ways in which welcoming communities can feel exclusive or unkind at times. Our analysis of Paquette’s value pairs has helped us to identify that tension within communities, particularly around individual freedom, is an inherent feature of open practice. Nevertheless, on the basis of our analysis of these two less formal projects, we conclude that against an institutional context of investment in massive scale, artificial personalisation and machine-led data analysis, educators have good reason to support a pedagogy of small whose measures are in the transformation of individual experience, one human step at a time.

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1. Mastodon has been in operation since October 2016. See <https://joinmastodon.org> for more information. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)