When we discuss terms like open textbook, open courseware, and open source, a common theme emerges: sharing content that might otherwise be protected under intellectual property laws. The use of open materials by faculty is something of a continuum, with those who closely guard their intellectual property and privacy on one end, with faculty who seek out and use open content and technologies in the middle, and with those who actively contribute to open content on the other end. However, to say that concerns over intellectual property or privacy are the defining characteristics of open faculty would be a mistake.

By Maria H. Andersen
When I began writing this article about open faculty, it seemed like a straightforward topic. I’ve had a great deal of contact with faculty at workshops and conferences all over the United States, and I’ve seen firsthand how some faculty embrace open resources and some shy away from them. To prepare for my writing, I thought it would be best to have some in-depth conversations with faculty at various positions on the open faculty continuum. Interestingly, over the course of these conversations, I found it necessary to adjust my straightforward view of open faculty. For a while, I even thought I might just have to throw in the towel and quote Facebook’s relationship status: It’s complicated.

All the faculty I spoke to could think of at least a few contexts in which they would not be willing and/or able to share or participate openly. For example, few faculty are willing to embark on large, time-intensive projects, such as writing textbooks, without some guarantee that they will be compensated for their personal investment (time). Even open textbook initiatives sometimes pay authors to buy the rights to existing books.

Research faculty may need to closely guard patentable research under the terms of their institutional contracts, even if their inclination drives them to share openly. However, on some campuses, faculty have been able to pursue a more open model of research by using forums such as Academia.edu (http://www.academia.edu). The general willingness to share in the research context likely varies by discipline. Science faculty, for example, often publish their research with multiple authors and may be more used to a collaborative model, whereas humanities faculty write for publications that favor a single-author model. Faculty in disciplines like literature or fine arts might not feel obligated to openly share their work, since the livelihood of an artist or author depends on rigorous protections of copyright.

Commonly, faculty will lock down some content (research or texts) under intellectual property laws but feel morally obligated to share in another aspect of their field. For example, Kenrick Mock, at the University of Alaska Anchorage, openly shares his PenAttention software, which is designed to help classroom instructors who are using tablet computers. At the same time, he has coauthored computer programming texts that are protected under copyright. Personally, I choose to share all of my ideas about teaching and learning online in a blog. I try to write only for journals and magazines that share their materials in a public and free web space (or that let me archive a copy on my website). I tweet about the progress of my dissertation. I share all the presentations I’ve created on the web with a reuse/remix Creative Commons license. In these contexts, I am a member of the open faculty.

On the other hand, I have written a book of classroom activities, which is protected under copyright, and I will not publish the specifics of my dissertation research until it is completed. In these contexts, I am a member of the closed faculty (if there is such a term). This split personality is not unusual, however. Whether someone is open is a matter of context.

To truly understand open faculty, we need to step back to a time before the Internet, before it was so easy and inexpensive to share anything and everything. In the pre-Internet era, faculty fell on the same continuum between those who freely share ideas and resources and those who do not. Faculty who shared in those days did so in department meetings, at conferences and workshops, in journal articles, in letters to colleagues, or in the day-to-day water-cooler conversations. Even if a faculty member had wanted to give away his or her intellectual property (e.g., textbooks, lecture videos, research) for free, the cost and the distribution difficulties were a huge barrier. There simply was no such thing as free; someone had to foot the bill.

Two factors delineate a faculty member’s attitude toward openness: a nature influence and a nurture influence. The first factor is the strength of a person’s inclination toward sharing. This characteristic is something that is innate to personality, similar to the Myers-Briggs scale of introversion/extroversion. To move a person on this scale would be akin to changing an introvert to an extrovert. On the one end are the keepers, faculty who ask themselves: “Why would anyone outside my course want to know what I think?” At the other extreme are the sharers, faculty who believe that their contribution to the...
The second factor that influences attitude toward openness is how strongly the person feels a moral responsibility to share freely with his or her community. In my conversations with faculty who openly share their thoughts and content, I asked why they share. Many said something to the effect that they felt it was their duty as an educator to share—that everyone in education should share. Open faculty see sharing their ideas and expertise as a way to quickly validate or refute ideas, to promote important academic programs, and/or to mentor those instructors with less experience or to be mentored by those with greater experience or more creative ideas. Open faculty value the ideas and content shared by others in their networks and feel an obligation to share alike. This sense of moral responsibility to share is so strong in some faculty that it bothers them when ideas and content are closely guarded. They see this as an affront to their values.

In the category of faculty who are strong sharers and strongly open, we find project leaders and thought leaders. In 1986, for example, Ronald Douglas organized a movement to reform the field of calculus. He encouraged others to openly share their ideas and research in position papers to be presented at a face-to-face meeting of the minds. In 1993, Lee Shulman began a national conversation (albeit in old-fashioned print publications) with other faculty about the idea of teaching as community property. These faculty are sharing facilitators, the faculty who organize large-scale projects, the ones who prod deeper thoughts and conversations in the wider community.

How has this framework of openness changed in the digital age? All the faculty I spoke with said that they are more than willing to share what they learn about teaching, and all of them said that they do share their ideas and experiences with colleagues. But not all of them share in what can be considered open environments. What’s the difference between those faculty who share with colleagues locally and those who share on the web? Technology skills.

In the digital age, technology acts as both a barrier and a catalyst between analog openness and digital openness. If faculty don’t know about or can’t use technology tools that can enhance their ability to share, then technology is a barrier between analog and digital openness.

On the other hand, as faculty learn to use new tools, technology can act as a catalyst, rapidly increasing a person’s ability to share with larger audiences. Open faculty are learning some of these technology skills from formal workshops and professional training, but many spoke of learning technology skills from other open faculty (or even students) during...
on-the-fly informal learning sessions.

Open digital faculty do more than just share and participate in open resources; they transfer their approaches to the teaching space. Learning becomes a shared activity in which the students also collaborate and participate in shaping the course activities. Student participation takes place in open environments where students might tweet what they learn, share insights on a group blog, create their own website of resources, or participate in a class wiki.

Today’s digital sharing facilitators are just like their analog counterparts, motivating others to participate in large-scale projects and movements. The difference is that today’s sharing facilitators leverage technology to reach a much wider audience. David Wiley encourages us to publish and use open versions of textbooks through publishers such as Flat World Knowledge. Lawrence Lessig writes passionately about the need to change copyright and has convinced many of us to use Creative Commons licenses on our digital materials. George Siemens introduced us to the idea of connectivism, and in 2008 he and Stephen Downes organized a “massive open online course” (MOOC) about the topic so that anyone could participate. Terence Tao uses his blog to organize math researchers to focus their collective thinking around unsolved or “stuck” problems. Jean-Claude Bradley leads the UsefulChem project, which encourages faculty to freely share their research online as it progresses.

Although the natural inclination toward sharing cannot be altered, the moral responsibility to share can be influenced by the surrounding culture. The sense of obligation to share or not to share may be similar to the decision to be a vegetarian. For some, it is a lifestyle choice that may form slowly over a long period of time after many conversations with friends and colleagues. For others, the change can be sudden: a paradigm shift caused by participation in an unusual event. If an institution places value on faculty participation in open academic communities and social media activities (e.g., academic blogging), that culture can slowly influence faculty to be more open.

**Supporting the Work of Open Digital Faculty**

Institutions should value intellectual diversity, and by this I mean that institutions need open faculty in the same way they need extraordinary teachers and expert researchers. Open digital faculty are exceptionally good connectors—open communities of learning usually span many disciplines, countries, and levels of educational institutions. These faculty can be extremely valuable for connecting faculty in one field with those who have similar ideas in another field or at a different level of education. Because they share on the web, open digital faculty can maintain good ties with former students (now alumni) and with colleagues in other countries.

This doesn’t mean that campuses should encourage all faculty to be open faculty. As noted, the inclination to share openly is partially hardwired by nature, and it would not be fair to expect all faculty to share any more than it would be to expect all faculty to participate in a skit at the next all-campus event. With that said, if an institution highly values openness, faculty can be encouraged to openly share more of their research or teaching activities.

Many of the faculty I spoke to suggested (strongly) that participation in open digital activities (e.g., blogging, writing open-source software, being a curator of open-source materials) should count toward tenure and promotion. The quality and quantity of digital activities could be easily measured in many ways: by tracking the number of unique and returning visitors to a website; by looking at the quality and number of comments on a selection of blog posts; by tracking the number of downloads for the PDF of a book or article; by counting the number of institutions adopting an open text; or by looking at the number of views that a digital presentation or video receives. These digital activities should not be the sole measure of tenure, but they should be counted in the tenure formula. The irony today is that if the open activity is analog (e.g., participation on a committee), it likely counts toward tenure, but if the open activity is digital (e.g., writing an academic blog), it probably does not.

Another factor institutions need to consider is that open digital faculty generally have additional needs for campus technical support. However, they need a different kind of IT support: more server space; administrative rights to install software; access to up-to-date technologies like streaming media and blogging platforms; flexible technology budgets; and financial support for conferences and workshops. They will push at (and leak out of) the boundaries of whatever learning management system (or other enterprise systems) the institution wants them to
use. This is not because they are uncooperative; it’s simply that these enterprise systems tend to be locked down, allowing only employees and students to share within these environments. Open digital faculty will want to “chat” (text, audio, or video) with faculty at other colleges, to share a course shell with colleagues at a neighboring institution, and/or to engage students in conversations with experts in the real world. These activities require platforms that are not restricted to employees and students of the institution. Open-source platforms (e.g., Moodle, WordPress) are fed by a community that can quickly adapt to new technologies and applications.

Naturally, administrators worry about open digital faculty. What if they say something the institutional leaders don’t agree with? What if their work with students on the web creates a liability? Administrators can do three simple things to minimize these issues:

1. If a faculty member writes or shares content openly on the web, using space provided by the college, the inclusion of a simple disclosure statement can provide some separation between the individual and the institution (for example, “These views/materials are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of my institution”).

2. To guard against liability, administrators can make sure that open faculty receive training on copyright issues with materials used, privacy issues with students, and security issues with web technologies. These days, most campus activities involve the potential for liability. All administrators can do is make a good-faith effort to protect the institution by ensuring that faculty have a solid grounding in the potential risks. Today’s students live much of their lives in the digital world. Faculty have the potential to model and promote good Internet behavior to future workers and leaders.

3. Administrators can support open digital faculty by making an effort to understand what the faculty do: read some of what they write; take them to lunch and discuss their latest projects; try to understand that these faculty are public ambassadors of the institution and stealth faculty developers on campus. In gaining the trust of open digital faculty, administrators will more likely be seen as advisors than as adversaries.

For me, an interesting side effect of sharing on the open web is that I’ve learned to be more careful about what I say and write. In an online environment, people can easily misunderstand the meaning of a sentence or paragraph. Immediate feedback and open discussions about the content and wording of blog posts help me see my words from the perspective of the reader. On Twitter, this is even more profound, since communication is scrutinized 140 characters at a time. Real-time feedback on ambiguities in my writing, sentence by sentence, have made me think much more carefully about what I say in both online and face-to-face environments.

Who, Then, Are Open Faculty?
As I noted earlier: It’s complicated. Today’s open digital faculty are likely to embrace openness in some contexts (e.g., teaching, research, text authoring) but not in others. Even if they would like to share freely, they may be constrained by intellectual property issues.

Looking for indicators of open digital faculty is easier than coming up with a strict definition. The presence of several of the following characteristics should be taken as an indication of open digital faculty:
■ Writing a public blog or maintaining a public wiki to share academic interests
■ Freely sharing what might otherwise be guarded intellectual property (e.g., textbooks, research-in-progress, computer programs, course materials, artwork)
■ Participating in a learning community in a social networking platform (e.g., Twitter or LinkedIn discussion groups)
■ Participating in a social network that includes students, both current and past (e.g., Facebook)
■ Encouraging students to participate in class-related projects that employ web-based media (e.g., student blogs, group wikis)
■ Creating or participating in open courses
■ Sharing video or audio content created for a course (e.g., podcasts)
■ Sharing information and ideas from conference talks on the web (e.g., recordings, tweets, presentation links)

My goal in writing this article is to help faculty, administrators, and college/university support staff to better understand who open faculty are and why they make the choices they make. The model presented here is my best attempt to map out the open faculty mindset (both analog and digital). My hope is that some enterprising graduate students and/or faculty members will take up a more academic research project to see if this model holds for a large sample of faculty. And if they do conduct this research, I hope they will openly share their findings as they progress.

Note
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