



## THINGS UNSAID: EXPLORING THE MARGINS AND LIMITS OF OPEN

O/TESSA 2022 Keynote

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## MY TERRITORIAL JOURNEY

I am conscious of the privilege I embody in being free to move about these territories even as the original stewards of these lands await meaningful reconciliation with the settler state.

Reconciliation begins with the return of these lands.

I join you today from my home in Tk'emlups te Secwepemc territory within the unceded traditional lands of Secwepemcúl'ecw (Secwepemc Nation), where I am an uninvited visitor.

I moved here from nine years spent in the territory of the Qayqat First Nation, one of the smallest First Nations in Canada and the only registered First Nation without a land base.

I attended graduate school in territories associated with the Wabanaki Confederacy, the traditional homelands of the Wolastoq and Mi'kmaq peoples.

I was born, raised, and primarily educated in lands covered by the Upper Canada treaties and the territories of Algonquin Anishinabeg.

**SUPPORT  
TK'EMLUPS TE  
SECWEPENC**

We meet today on the cusp of the one-year anniversary of the announcement of the confirmation of The Missing. A memorial will be held on Monday.

Donations can be made to continue the investigative and memorial work.

And please remember that this reckoning is ongoing, including yesterday's announcement from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation. For crisis intervention or to donate to survivor supports, consider the Indian Residential School Survivor Society.



Off the top, please know that you are welcome to share anything today that moves you. It's not a criticism of the OTESSA team when I note that

I am truly honoured to be speaking today as we begin to wind down the celebration of openness and critical approaches to technology and education that is OTESSA. The last two years have offered unprecedented challenges to the organizers of both the association and of the conference, and I'm grateful for their perseverance and for all the work that has been brought together to culminate in these meetings.

I also want to thank all of you who have contributed your generous, thoughtful minds to these meetings, not least my fellow presenters, and of course Martin, Sherri, and Maha, my keynote partners in critical pedagogy. Every time I find myself in the presence of any or all of you, I feel as though I have been invited to the very coolest Big Kid's table at a family dinner. I have learned immeasurably from all of you, and I find it both overwhelming and astonishing to be following your talks.



Before I begin, today, I want to offer some invitations and some warnings.

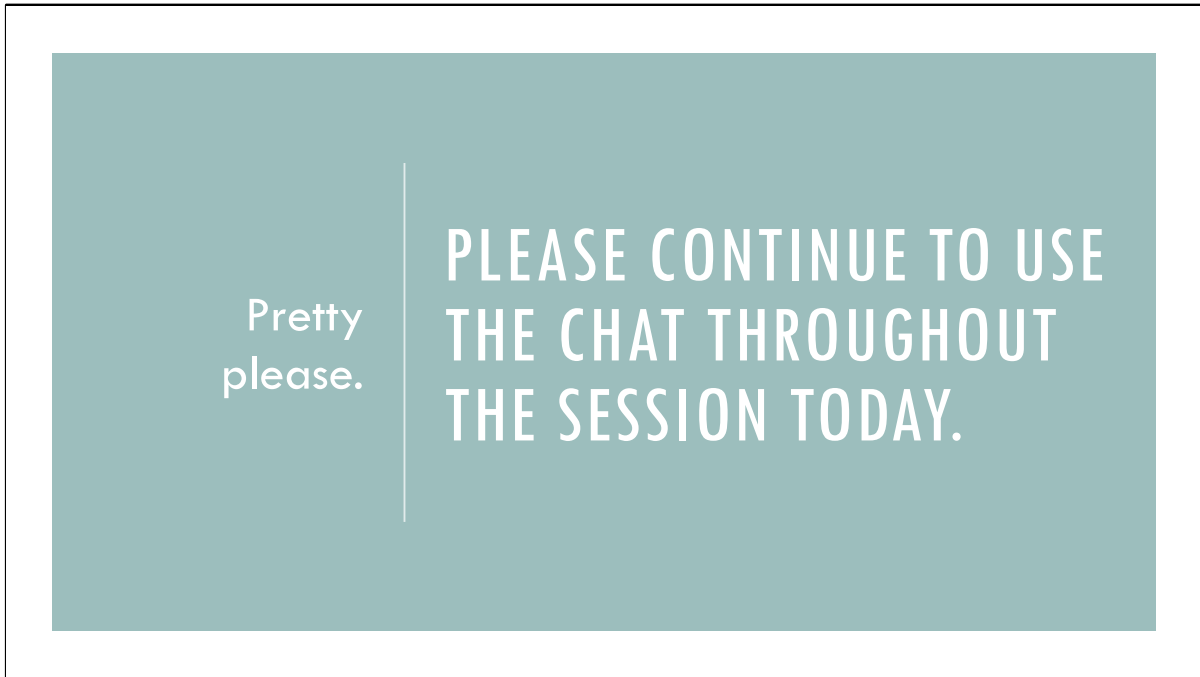
## HOW ARE YOU?

Please share in the chat.



I will start with an invitation: would you please share with me in the chat how you are doing? It's a genuine question, and I encourage you to share with me as freely as you feel comfortable being. I can tell you that I am feeling a lot of things — slightly at sea, having been called away by my family and my health from much of the first few days of OTESSA. I'm feeling jetlagged and a little homesick, having flown back from Ontario less than 48 hours ago and not at all fully acclimated back to my desert now-home, a tension familiar to many of you, I'm sure, who make multiple homes yours. I'm feeling a bit like I'm missing an appendage, having been with my son for the last month just about 24/7 and now having sent him back to school today so I could be here and focused on you. I'm feeling joyful and grateful at the names of friends I recognize in this space. And I'm feeling nervous, as I always do before a talk, and perhaps more today than usually because of the nature of the talk I want to give. Which teases a warning to come, I suppose.

SO. How are you?



And here is my second invitation: speak up as I talk today, I beg of you. Interject. Argue. Chat. Talk to each other. Talk to me. I will try to keep an eye on the chat, but I will also take a record of it at the end. I think the best part of Zoom — and some days I struggle to find the good bits — is that I don't have to be the only voice here. I can welcome you in to our conversation and we can have a conversation. On day four of a conference I can't imagine you're interested in being talked at, so let us — please! — talk together.

## CONTENT WARNING: MISCARRIAGE AND PREGNANCY LOSS

Mountz, A. (2016). Women on the edge: Workplace stress at universities in North America. *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien*, 60: 205-218. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12277>.

And now, a warning. I want to talk, today, about things that are difficult to talk about, and I am going to offer up for you some disclosures about my experiences of pregnancy loss and secondary infertility. As Allison Mountz' groundbreaking work has shown us — and if you haven't had the pleasure of encountering "Women on the Edge," I really encourage you to do so, and I acknowledge here my debt to and solidarity with Mountz' own disclosure of pregnancy loss in that article — academic bodies are often sites of miscarriage, and yet the exploration of that reality is just about nonexistent. I want you to know that if the things I talk about today are too much, or too raw, or too recent, or too true, or too upsetting, I uplift your choice to walk away, to take a break, to make a cup of tea, to come back, to not come back, to email me after, to never speak to me again. We're going to take some steps into difficult terrain together, and you can join me for all of it, or some of it, or none of it.



## REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS IN CANADA

**Join**

Join the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada.

**Donate**

Donate to Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights.

**Donate**

Donate to keep Clinic 554 alive in Fredericton, NB.

I am also acutely aware of having this conversation against the backdrop of the assault on reproductive rights happening in the US and elsewhere around the globe and the absolutely shameful crisis of access to abortion right here in this country: to my colleagues in New Brunswick and the North and rural Canada, I see you and support your work. If you are able and if our conversation today moves you to do so, I encourage you to consider donating to a fund that supports access to reproductive health services. I've included some suggestions on this slide.

## CONTENT WARNING: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, FEELINGS, AND OPENNESS

What does it mean to you to define your work, your practice,  
or yourself in terms of “open”?

I want to try to ask some questions about the limits of openness — how we define it, what we mean by it, what its ethics and limits and boundaries are — by reflecting on the loneliest experiences of my life and the value of shared grief.

I also want to give you a warning that we’re going to be meandering through the intersections of the body and the institution today. Some of you have heard me tell a story about the first paper I ever proposed to OTESSA, a piece on my desire to develop an open tenure process for myself and others, for the conference that never was in 2020, wherein the anonymous reviewer — and here I question whether the disclosure I am about to make is wise, or nah, but we’re in for a penny, my friends, and I often say that if I’m not worried that a talk I give is going to get me reprimanded by someone, then what is the point — said that they hoped my paper would not “indulge” in autoethnography.

Oh ho ho. We are indulging today, baby.

I come back to that reviewer’s comment not just because I am a dog-in-the-manger with a soupçon of rejection sensitivity about my person, but because to me it pushes at the edges of some unexplored terrain in the open movement which is to say: just

how open is open? If you want open to be Open Source and I want open to be Open Hearts, can we meet in the middle? Or is my work indulgent while yours is serious? Do I dabble while you develop? Is there a conversation we can have that allows space for both and all interpretations of open? Let's try to do that today.

I am curious about your definitions of Open. I hope you'll share them in the chat. What does it mean to you to define your work, your practice, or yourself in terms of "open"?

## WHO AM I, ANYWAY?

Brenna; Dr. Gray; Mumma.

Learning technologist.

Podcaster, writer, reader. Teacher.

Comics nerd.

Professional performer of  
vulnerabilities and failures on  
Twitter.

Ok, so with all that out of the way, who the hell am I, anyway? I answer to a lot of things, including Brenna, Dr. Gray, and Mumma. I'm a learning technologist and someone who cares a lot about the tools we use and how we use them. I work at Thompson Rivers University, where I share space with some of my favourite people to fight alongside, as a faculty coordinator of educational technologies and all-around shit disturber. I'm a podcaster and a writer and a reader. I'm a teacher. I came to the EdTech space from a PhD in Canadian Literature and a scholarly background in Comics Studies — I was once, briefly, don't blink or you'll miss it, probably the foremost expert on the Marvel comics series Alpha Flight — and nine years of community college teaching. And lately, I think and write and talk a lot about care.

A strange and genuinely upsetting truth about my career and my scholarly profile that I wrestle with regularly is that the pandemic has been good for both of those things for me, even as I battle burnout and struggle with isolation and fear for my family's health and try every day to fight or fix broken systems and ask critical questions. I have joked with my friends that my academic field of greatest significance is "performing my vulnerabilities and failures on Twitter," and let me tell you, in the time of Covid that has been a real growth discipline. As we all fall apart, we look for people to fall apart alongside, and I am always all too happy to comply.



Photo by [Kostiantyn Li](#) on [Unsplash](#)

## MODELING FAILURE

Clare, N. (2019). Can the failure speak? Militant failure in the academy. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 33, 1-4.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100628>.

I joke, but modelling failure has long been an important part of my scholarly identity, because I have always felt so lonely in failure. The academic convention around stories of failure — and you must read Nick Clare on this, his “Can the Failure Speak?” is brilliant and satisfying — is to weave them into stories of success. You know the ones. “I was just about to quit academia forever and take a job in PR when I finally landed that tenure-track job at Extremely Fancy University.” “This paper was rejected 43 times before it was finally published in Literally The Most Important Journal In My Field Quarterly.” To be blunt, I find such narratives of failure profoundly unhelpful when I am in the trenches of failure. Failure that is only ever mediated through the lens of success, I argue, serves the status quo — hang on and you too will achieve XYZ, even though the system is wildly rigged against you. But look at me! I did it!

When success feels impossibly far away, these tales are unhelpful except as narratives of perseverance. Toxic perseverance is at the core of a lot of academic practices — I survived this hazing and so can, so SHOULD you — that keep us as underpaid sessionals without benefits, or trapped in departments that are bad fits for our mental health, or plugging away at projects we grow to hate or resent for far too long.

The most significant and impactful failure in my life is not academic. It is not my failure to secure a post-doc or my failure to publish my dissertation even as a single measly article or my failure to achieve a lasting reputation as a literary scholar. Those things all hurt once and still do, sometimes. But the most significant and impactful failure in my life is my body's failure to carry a second pregnancy to term, and there is no narrative of success to wrap it around. It is current, present, raw, and on-going. It may bother you to hear me refer to this aspect of my life as a failure. But that might be because what you have internalized about failure. I am deep in the trenches of this failure, my friends, and it unequivocally feels like failure. And the comfort I have found in living this failure openly I believe has something meaningful to teach us about what open can be, if we can open up our openness to new avenues of thought.

It's important that I pause here to acknowledge that my subjectivity greatly enables my approach to open hearted discussions of my own failures. While I have certainly experienced sexism and do sometimes worry that the performance of my vulnerabilities and uncertainties, particularly in technology spaces, is a liability because of the perception of my gender in these spaces, I am insulated by so many other factors: my whiteness, my able-bodiedness, my cisgenderness, my education and credentials, my class, and the relative security of my job. I think about this particularly as I begin the task of applying for tenure, and think about how further security will change what I feel capable of doing. In this way, even when I talk about failures in the absence of successes, I do so from a position of security. And when I draw attention to my body and the gendered ways it is impacted by pregnancy loss and work and the institution and everything else, I do so from a position of security. This knowledge both motivates me to speak and makes me aware of the importance of taking care with my language.

In fact, as I reflect on my subject position, I also reflect on that reviewer's comment in 2020. When we reconvened OTESSA in 2021, I gave that paper, exactly as I had submitted it, with one addition: a crack about indulging in autoethnography. But what if I felt more precarious, like I had more to lose, or less at home within this community? What if I felt continuing on with that paper was a risk I couldn't take? How we frame our responses to ideas – and what we consider worth hearing – is also an enaction of an open ethos. Or a lack of one.



Ok. So now that we've established that I will say anything, let me tell you my story of pregnancy loss. Actually, let me rewind and remind you from my previous comments that I do have a child, an absolute shooting star of a five-year-old human who the internet knows as The Groot. In 2016, I had an uneventful pregnancy and in early 2017 a slightly dramatic but not earth-shatteringly so birth. After a few years of getting our feet under us as new parents, it was time to grow our family.

It took some time, but in the late summer of 2020, I was finally pregnant. It was a scary time to be pregnant, as the pandemic continued to rage around us. Fall of 2020 was also a tremendously stressful time at work, marked by long hours and a panicked community, as we moved hundreds of courses online.

One of the cruelties of miscarriage is that you rarely get to find out why it occurred. Mountz draws a line between the high-stress environments of the academy and the advanced maternal age of academics to the high prevalence of miscarriage. I don't and can't know what caused my miscarriage in Fall of 2020. But before I was able to talk about my good news, I was burdened with very bad news. Very bad news, and silence.

## MISCARRIAGE.

An instance of misconduct or misbehaviour; a lapse of conduct; a misdemeanor or misdeed.

A failure; a blunder or mistake; a mishap, a disaster.

The spontaneous expulsion of a fetus from the womb before it is viable.

Missed carriage. Failure to carry. Missed opportunity.

The word miscarriage is amazing, by the way. In the OED, the first definition for it is: An instance of misconduct or misbehaviour; a lapse of conduct; a misdemeanor or misdeed.

The second is: A failure; a blunder or mistake; a mishap, a disaster.

Miscarriage in the sense of pregnancy loss – the spontaneous expulsion of a fetus from the womb before it is viable – is fourth.

But I always think of missed carriage. My failure to carry. A missed opportunity.

So quiet. This missed carriage of mine.

Not talking about my miscarriage was excruciating. But I also didn't know how to begin to process the loss and I couldn't imagine a way to make that space. The emotional burden of not speaking increasingly took a toll.

First, I was in physical pain. A lot of it. All the time. It impacted everything I did, including and especially my ability to show up as my whole self at work. Pain is



freaking distracting. And I have no intention of getting too far into the weeds here, but I was also bleeding. A lot. For weeks. But that first time, I didn't feel like I could do anything but show up. If you saw me at OpenEd or OEGlobal or took a BCcampus course with me or came to a workshop or dropped by my office hours in the Fall of 2020, I was probably in agony.

But more than that: I was losing a much wanted, much anticipated, much hoped for pregnancy. I was devastated. I was, I realize now, depressed. And every day I would log into my office hours and smile into the camera and cheer my colleagues through a complicated, scary, upsetting time for them, too. But I didn't know how to access that same support.



Something prompted me to Tweet, ill-advisedly, one cold and lonely November night. Which will probably be the inscription on my tombstone, to be honest, but regardless. We had made the decision, due to Covid, not to travel to our family for Christmas and I was at a very low point. I can still remember the gist of that first tweet without looking it up: "October was pregnancy loss awareness month, and my body chose to observe in the traditional way."

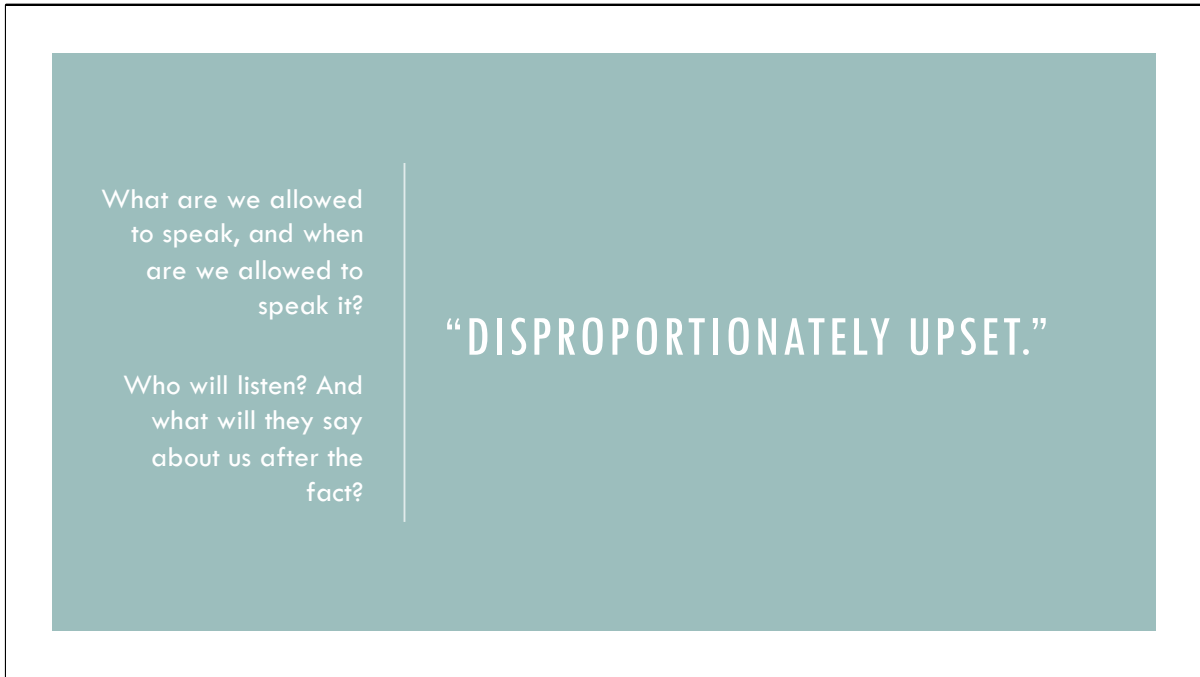
As I microblogged about my experience of pregnancy loss, people wrote back to me. Publicly, many. But privately, by DM and email, many, many, many more. People wrote to share their own experiences of loss, many having never spoken about miscarriage, many continuing to live deep in their own grief. I wrote about my anger at the silence, my intense sense that someone should have told me what this was, or what it would feel like, or how to survive it. And I was confronted with the silenced experiences of so many others.

The more I wrote, the less alone I felt. In my openness, I found community. In that community, I found healing.

Since that time I have had two more miscarriages, in July 2021 and January 2022. In

March of 2022, I became very ill and needed a dilation and curettage procedure — an abortion procedure — in the aftermath of that third miscarriage. I had that procedure on March 28<sup>th</sup>. Shortly after that, I took a month off of work and tried so hard to heal — I am not sure if I have.

This talk is my first real event on the other side of all of that.



When I miscarried in January, much of the ultrasound and bloodwork and waiting and crying and hoping took place over Christmas 2021, another holiday spent in Covid isolation. At the third ultrasound, the kind, gentle radiologist came in to talk to me. That’s always a bad sign, by the way. You never want to meet that guy. He diagnosed me with an impending miscarriage. He sat with me while I wept. He left me in the care of the gentle, generous technicians, who brought me water and a heated blanket and let me stay in the room to call my mum.

He then wrote in his report that I seemed “disproportionately upset.”

What are we allowed to speak, and when are we allowed to speak it? Who will listen? And what will they say about us after the fact?

When I tell you I was “disproportionately upset,” am I “indulging in autoethnography”?

I know the difference that Open makes because I talk about my pregnancy losses in a way I do not talk about my secondary infertility, in many ways because there’s nothing to tell. Every month that I am not pregnant is profoundly upsetting, but you

can't really call in to work with "Hey, I had a disappointing pee-on-a-stick experience." The lack of a story to tell makes speaking hard. But the contrast is telling. I have a narrative, in my head and my heart, of pregnancy loss. I can use it to challenge our notions of decorum, of what is acceptable. Of infertility there is little to say. I am not pregnant as I speak to you today, though I wish that I was. I can be open about this much, at least.

## THREE THINGS:



How do we define Open?



What do we mean — and what do we not mean — when we talk about Open?



What are the ethics, limits, and boundaries of Open?

So I said I wanted to talk about three things today:

How do we define Open? And you shared some of your thoughts on this off the top.

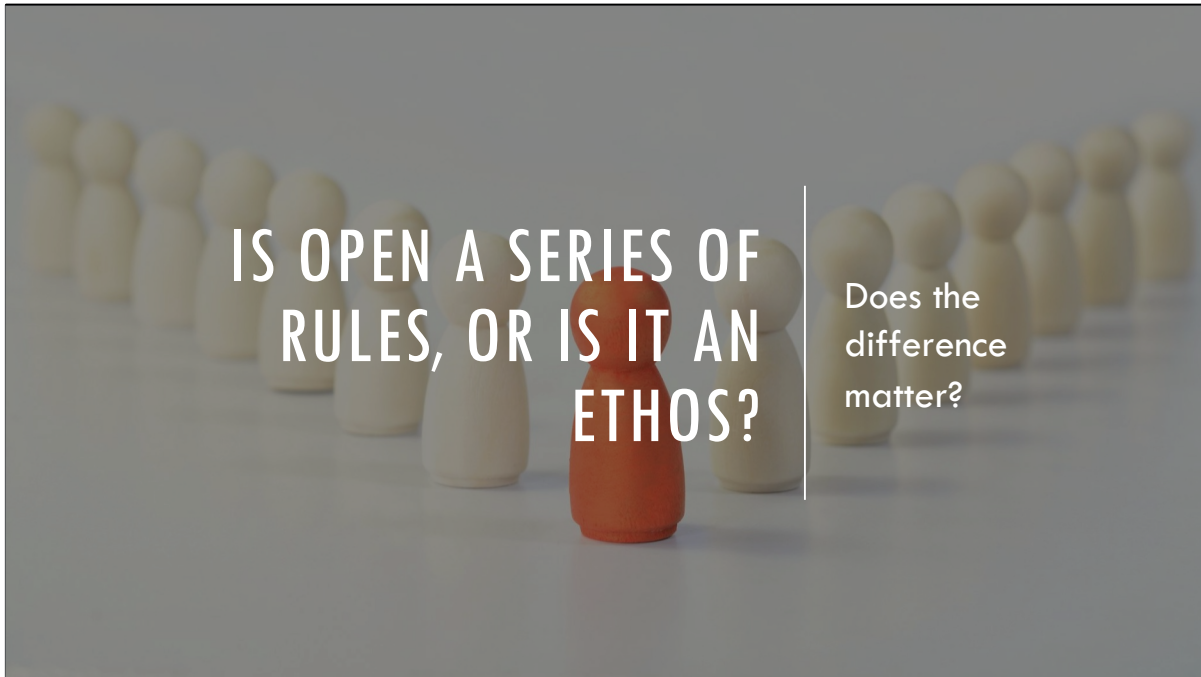
What do we mean — and what do we not mean — when we talk about Open?

What are the ethics, limits, and boundaries of Open?

Open is a gorgeous word because it has so many possible meanings, and the way we use it here, in OTESSA, offers yet more possible readings, too. We are Open Technology, Open Education, Open Scholarship — but we are also Open Society. Open, as we use it in our name, is expansive and embracing.

But Open as we practice it sometimes isn't. My first encounter of this as a baby EdTech was meandering into a discussion on Twitter of which Creative Commons licenses were not really open, and quite a vitriolic pushback against people who dare to use the Non-Commercial license option. First, I was profoundly confused — imposter syndrome like whoa. Then I was bemused: we live in an era of Proctorio and Course Hero and Turnitin, in an education space where every bad actor pretends to be good, where open-washing is the main event, and we're surprised when folks choose to put Non-Commercial licensing on their work? Really? Does the conversation about which CC licenses are "open enough" begin to address the reason

why someone might opt for NC? Does it move the needle on the core anxiety?



My question is this: is open a series of rules, or is open an ethos.

I encourage you to share any thoughts you have on this in the chat.



## DEFINITIONS OF OPEN

Noun form: A gap. Unconcealed or plainly seen. Unenclosed or unfenced. An opportunity. Without obfuscation.

Adjective form:

- 3. Affording unrestricted access or entry (to all, or to a specified category of person).
- c. Designating a prison or other institution with minimal restriction on the movements or activities of inmate.
- 6. Not concealed or protected.
- 24. Exposed to the mind, brought to light; evident, plain, clear, easy to understand.
- 28. Not restricted to the few, generally accessible or available; such that anyone may use it, share it, or take part in it.
- 29. Free in giving or communicating; liberal, generous.

When I look up open – just me and the OED again, friends – I get great definitions. A gap. Unconcealed or plainly seen. Unenclosed or unfenced. An opportunity. Without obfuscation. I love them all.

When we look at the adjectival form, it's even better. Definition three: Affording unrestricted access or entry (to all, or to a specified category of person). Oh the OED can see us, friends. It knows open ain't always open.

Related to definition three, we have: designating a prison or other institution with minimal restriction on the movements or activities of inmate. Even an open prison is a prison.

Definition six: not concealed or protected. Open is visible, sometimes too much so.

Definition twenty-four: exposed to the mind, brought to light; evident, plain, clear, easy to understand.

Definition twenty-eight: not restricted to the few, generally accessible or available; such that anyone may use it, share it, or take part in it.

Definition twenty-nine: free in giving or communicating; liberal, generous.

Which do we wish to be?



## FOR ME, OPEN IS ABOUT TRANSPARENCY.

I want open to illuminate power differentials, shine focus on unheard voices, and enable change.

When I was an undergrad, I didn't know a syllabus and a course outline were the same thing until second year. It simply did not occur to me to ask.

I used to tell my parents I had weekly essays due in my English class in first year. What I had were weekly *reader responses*, but I didn't know there was a difference, and so I dutifully and exhaustedly manifested carefully researched, impeccably cited essays week after week. My professor wrote "A+" on them and handed them back without comment. That class damn near killed me and I had no idea I was producing something no one asked for.

Making transparent and clear the hidden curriculum of the university is why I care about open.

Everything else matters to me, too – of course. Access and lowering course costs and creating sustainable networks and systems. But perhaps its my role in faculty support that makes it so clear to me how damaging our opaque systems, shrouded in mystery, really are. Tenure, comprehensive exams, course evaluations, hiring, negotiations: secrecy breeds inequity. And working in faculty support, many days, is just an exercise in absorbing the anxieties of the institutional community into your core self.

And maybe it's the same thing that motivates me to tell you that I had three miscarriages and that they marked me, changed me, and impacted my working life every day.

My transparency, like so much about me, is embodied. My openness is embodied. I cannot wish it otherwise.

## HEY, YOU GOT YOUR AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN MY OPEN EDUCATION CONFERENCE!



I think back to that reviewer, and the autoethnography I have so brazenly mixed into his open education conference like the nerdiest version ever of that old Reese's commercial. I believe that when Open is an ethos as opposed to a series of rules, it can make space for all manner of scholarly and non-scholarly approaches. You simply cannot make me care as much about what CC license someone chooses as whether they feel safe and represented to share their work openly in the first place (and David Wiley can pry my NC designation out of my cold, dead hands).

A question we sometimes hear as we look to address and establish institutional priorities is, for example, whether open can co-exist with efforts to decolonize our institutions. If open is a series of rules, maybe it can't — some traditional knowledges are not for open access, and if that line is drawn, it can make those two larger institutional projects feel at odds. But if Open is an ethos, of course it makes exceptions and accommodations and revisions for appropriate sharing and reciprocal relations. Maha Bali and Rajiv Jhangiani have both spoken to the ethics of open practice and the necessary limits on rigid definitions of open.

Mandatory open, compulsory open, isn't open. If you can only welcome me into your space under a prescribed set of terms, perhaps you aren't so open after all. Perhaps

this makes me disproportionately upset.

I turn back to my public performances of vulnerability, my writing about failure. My miscarriages. Why do so many people working in otherwise open spaces flood my DMs to thank me for speaking unspeakable truths — not just about miscarriage, but about burnout and institutional failings and anger and moral injury and more?

Open as a movement does not wear this on its own, of course. Most of us work in institutions that are patently, perhaps even proudly, not open, and the institutional ethos might shape us more than the open spaces where we find solace and comfort. And open is not a panacea for the world's ills. Miscarriage, bleeding bodies, soul-rending grief: these things are untouchable and unspeakable in society at large. And I'm very aware of the limits of social shift that are possibly undertaken by one white lady's Twitter feed. But I do hope that an expansive understanding of openness comes to be open to all our experiences. Even the indulgent autoethnographic ones.

## UNSAID / UNSAY

**Unsaid:** not said or uttered.

**Unsay:** to deny; to withdraw, retract, or revoke.

I titled this talk today “Things Unsaid.” There’s a double meaning there. I am certainly curious about the things that go unsaid in open spaces, the disclosures we feel we cannot make, and how that circumscribes who we are and how we can be in the spaces we inhabit. To go full former English Professor, I’ll explore two more definitions with you here today, thanks to the OED.

Unsaid: not said or uttered.

Unsay: to deny; to withdraw, retract, or revoke.

I can’t unsay the Things Unsaid we’ve explored here today, and I hope that tomorrow morning I still won’t want to.



WHAT DO YOU WISH WE  
WERE TALKING ABOUT?  
HOW DO WE START THAT  
CONVERSATION?

Please share  
in the chat.

I want to build in a little space today to ask you what your unsaid things are. You don't have to be as personal or as revealing as I have been – in fact, we can keep it to the sense of “what are your ‘things unsaid’ about openness, or about education,” if you like. But in less loaded terms: what do you wish we were talking about that we aren't?



## A FINAL THOUGHT

I hope that together we can find more space within the world of Open for Things Unsaid, and make spaces of openness safer for more of us to bring more of ourselves to this important work that we do.

If Open is an ethos, then there's enough room for all of us, and all of ourselves.

I'm not sure I've brought all these thoughts back around and full circle here, but I want to leave you only with this: I hope that together we can find more space within the world of Open for Things Unsaid, and make spaces of openness safer for more of us to bring more of ourselves to this important work that we do. If Open is an ethos, there's room for all of us, and all of ourselves.

Please feel welcome  
and invited to follow-  
up via email:  
[bgray@tru.ca](mailto:bgray@tru.ca)

THANK YOU FOR MAKING  
THIS SPACE FOR ME  
TODAY