

[00:00:00] Bonni Stachowiak: Today on episode number 405 of the *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast, Alan Levine is back to talk about open education as a way of being.

[music]

[00:00:13] Production Credit: Produced by Innovate Learning, Maximizing Human Potential.

[00:00:22] Bonni: Welcome to this episode of *Teaching in Higher Ed*. I'm Bonni Stachowiak, and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Alan Levine is an independent educational technologist, sometimes calling himself an itinerant web geek, providing anything from development of custom websites most often, but not limited to WordPress, but also supporting planning for training and development in working and creating online.

He creates a lot of free resources like WordPress themes, plugins, and other funky web tools available on GitHub. He has more than 60,000 of his own flicker photos in the public domain. Alan, welcome back to *Teaching in Higher Ed*.

[00:01:28] Alan Levine: It's great to be here, Bonni.

[00:01:31] Bonni: I understand that you and I are taking this show on the road, although I don't love travelling. What I love doing is sitting down on a couch. Instead of on a road, maybe we're on a couch today perhaps are we sitting on a couch?

[00:01:45] Alan: Sure, we can do that. We can sit on a couch, a lounge chair, whatever's comfortable. I had this thought after going to someone else's podcast of, when you do this, like as a host, you're inviting someone into your place. Yes, it's usually a Zoom room but really, you're the host. I imagine, what would happen if we recorded on your couch or your space. I don't know, it

probably doesn't make a difference, we're still having a conversation, but it's just one of Alan's weird back of the mind thoughts.

[00:02:22] Bonni: I think one of the things you're reminding me of as we get into talk today about open education more broadly, is really entering into other people's spaces. As you were describing that coming to join someone on the road or a little bit of perspective-taking, it is just dawning on me right now that in some ways I did some of that work before the pandemic. I can vividly remember when we switched from using Skype, which was audio-only, our technical setup switched so we would do Zoom.

Then I found it really intriguing that there would be some people who had a very strong preference for having that simulated eye contact and being able to see that. Then some who were like, "No, no," and it was very drastic. I didn't do a complete analysis on it, but from memory, a lot of it was that men seemed to, and maybe it was just that happened to be the men I was speaking to, but really liked to have the eye contact and then women tended to not just in all generalities.

I can remember being very surprised when we made the switch and then someone, "Can we turn the video camera," and I thought, "Oh gosh, I have no makeup on and just look terrible." One person going, "You look so different, I don't know what it is," and I'm going, "It's because I look horrible today because I didn't know I was going to have my camera on," but really now just so much more of an ease with-- most of the time now the camera is on and an ease with, "Yes, I'm going to show up however, I'm going to show up that day."

Really, there is that intimacy of entering another person's space, and for some people, that was really not a welcome invitation. Most of the time I enjoyed and it's also painful, but in good ways to be experiencing that not just with another person, but also then trying to envision, which I try not to do too much, for the people who are on the other end.

As we get started in this conversation, I'd like to invite you to just share a little bit on open education. Do you see that as a movement, and/or do see it as a way of being, is it both, is it neither? I'd love to hear you share a little bit about that.

[00:04:48] Alan: I will, I want to pick up because that dynamic that you described, to me, it's one of these pitfalls where we find it's, you can't be assertive about either being right. I have had really brilliant conversations through audio only through the Skype or whatever means where it was just the conversation that made it felt like we were all there. That can work, but there is something often in conversations where it is valuable because we don't have

the body language in audio-only. There was something valuable about being able to see the person we're talking with.

I don't feel comfortable saying absolute whether either one is correct, and that goes into talking about open education as a whole thing. Yes, it's a movement and you could trace the origins back to all the things that were done in distance and open learning that preceded the internet and that whole history up to the major event of MIT with introducing their OpenCourseWare initiative, where they basically gave away the shop in terms of course materials, which leads to some of the questions that already came on Twitter, like course materials is not the course experience.

That was an impetus and as of lately, the thing that's been the big energizer to no secret is the concept of open textbooks and addressing student needs of affordability at the same time, giving faculty the customization to not just take what publishers shove at them. Yes, it's a movement because I guess it's a movement because maybe not everybody's onboard or not everybody understands it. For me, openness has always been like an attitude or way of being that doesn't really answer anything for people who won't understand what open education is about. Its broader theme is the simple thing of making it accessible to anyone, regardless, and not as a commodity, but also that it's more than materials that it's practices and ideas and exchange.

For a long time, it's felt like the focus has been on the things, the pile of things. It used to be learning objects and then it was OERs and it's textbooks and they're all important and they're all things that are key to the work that does. I've really always been more interested by just the human dynamic of what it means to be in a potential space where we can have connection and community at the same time, the dark side of the yin yang circle that we constantly see is that's there too, it's something to wrestle with.

Again, is it better to do podcasts where you see the person with cameras on or cameras off? It depends. I can't say 100% for sure, I don't feel comfortable espousing like absolutes in something that's so complex.

[00:07:54] Bonni: It reminds me a lot of the conversations around educational technology in general, and that is just what are the affordances. One of the things I notice now is that there's way less crosstalk, especially when there may be three authors-- co-authors on a book and maybe they all come on. We learn our own social norms as we join and there's just less crosstalk, yet if we were only audio right and couldn't see each other now, I think there's a part of me that-- because I actually, in those cases like to close my eyes, because I like to picture that-- again, podcasting is such an intimate medium so you're actually with that person.

People tell me, "Oh yes, I took you--" Sarah Rose Kavanaugh, just the other day said, "I took you for a walk, you and Josh Isler, for a walk with the dog," or whatever, really, someone has a lake walk that they do with the podcast. They've got it planned into their week and all that kind of thing. To imagine with my eyes closed and not having to be performative at all to attempt to resolve anyone's nerves on the other end with whatever.

I also had to be really careful actually, earlier on, doing what today, I would call classroom observations. This was a computer training company, so we didn't call it that, but sitting in people's classes, because the more that they were really getting me to think and challenging me in a really good way, the more my eyebrows would go down so I had to train myself to like eyebrows go up while you're taking notes. It was actually more of a compliment if the eyebrows were down because it was like, "Oh wow, you're making me think really hard."

I think about those affordances and those kinds of ways that people might come across. This actually takes us to-- and by the way, the question that you had mentioned about using open educational resources, "What would students feel like they're getting," I think there's a lot we could say as far as creating those experiences. I try to use the word being a curator a lot because I think too many faculty think we have to make this stuff up for ourselves.

Anyway, this gets us to Terry Greene's question. He asked about what motivates you to share so openly. He mentioned SPLOTs, which again, for people who haven't been super familiar, a real way of creating sharing within a course through blogs that can come from lots of different sources, and photography and blogging. What motivates you to do that? Terry Greene says, "Also, please ask him never to stop." Could you talk a little bit about what motivates you?

[00:10:41] Alan: Terry Greene does because he's so nice and generous and such a consummate. I've gotten to work with Terry a lot. I guess it's the things that happen that are often unexpected. You can't go to a thing like, "Oh, I'm going to start sharing stuff so people contact me, and they use my pictures on books." You can't go in with the expectation of happiness.

The magic of serendipity is when you're not looking for it and someone responds. It used to be the old blogging was the rage, teachers were starting to do it, and students would be blogging about an author they're reading, then the author would join the conversation. That would change the experience for an incredible number of people just to have that glancing, unexpected blow.

I live for those moments. I don't know, since I started this work, it just seemed the way to go. It just seemed like that is what I can do. What I most want to do is do it in a way-- I don't want to sound like, "Oh, I'm promoting my stuff, or my stuff is

great." It's not about me, but a lot of it is sharing the way I always thought I was influenced by John Udal, brilliant computer scientists who had this concept of what happens if people narrate their work.

We might have even talked about this in our first episode, see how blurry my memory is, that often, in many fields, but also in education, we're pushed towards publishing the final paper or getting the presentation or the video or the thesis. What happens to that whole journey of things that you learn, the wrong turns, things that got left on the cutting room floor that you did to get to that point? We often don't capture that, not that I want to turn into a life recorder, but to me, it always helped when people I respected or just followed or learned from would share how they went about challenging problems.

Whether they're technical, whether they're pedagogical, they share how their mind works in a little bit, and that always appealed to me. Mostly, what I found, Bonni, is that there's some mix of participating in other people's spaces. It can be as simple as joining a Twitter thread or commenting on a blog or giving someone feedback. Those are really positive ways in the open field to participate and contribute that don't involve publishing or picking licenses or all that stuff, but just a small level of giving back to someone else because I think it creates some virtuous cycles.

What I found and one of the things I wanted to talk about is, it's so easy, we say, "Oh, Twitter's terrible today, it's horrible, it's a dumpster fire," and it is in places, but in many other places, you find such warmth and generosity, and so it's a complex environment. There's something about that and other social spaces to some degree, I don't even need the name them that somehow, I read someone who reads Bonni, and then I see their conversation, she looks interesting and all of a sudden, I start following you, and then I'm tapped into the people that you have conversations or share with.

To me, that just seems to be increasing the potential serendipity power of what can happen to you. I just think, doing that in a way that doesn't become a full-time job, it comes back in beneficial ways, but it takes time. To me, that's just what my experience has been, but I can't really say it works for anybody else.

To Terry's end, sharing pictures, I like photography and I just started something inspired by a colleague of just trying to take photos every day. Not to notch a board on the wall because many years I'm like 340 out of 365, but devoting time, effort to say, "I'm going to step away from my work for 15 minutes and go outside and look for something interesting," or I'm looking around my room and just, is there some detail? I've been in this room how many thousands of times, but the way the lights falling on the floor, or the way those books are arranged. You can always see something new in a familiar space.

It's been a useful creative driver for me. Again, I can't say that works for other people, but it's just become a habit and a thing that sustains me. I know when I'm in ruts with my work or my project, when I come up with something I think I can just-- my wife always calls it disappearing down the rabbit holes and finding one thing that leads to another, to another, I pay attention, especially online, to things that just raise my curiosity. Random pictures from the Library of Congress in my new browser tabs, I love those. It's this Chrome extension, and it just makes me stop and think, "What is going on in that picture?" I like the creative juices that come from that.

[00:16:17] Bonni: I want to have you help me through something I've been thinking about. By the time this airs, I'm fairly sure this episode will already be out, so I will have already done this, but as of today, our recording, I have not. I spoke with Remi Kalir yesterday, and his project, Annotate22. What we spoke about in that episode is that one of our children annotated the only faucet in our entire house that has a separate faucet for hot than it does cold.

Unbeknownst to me, they had gone upstairs, printed it out from my fancy label printer, because they can access that and print, it's not like someone has to be sitting there to log them in or anything, it's just a label printer. I've been wanting to take a picture of that, but candidly, right now, our recycling bin is overflowing in that particular room, so I'm waiting until that gets taken care of and everything.

I keep thinking, "I want it to be special, I want it to be special, I don't know how to approach this," so if you have something that seems rather ordinary like that, although it's special because it's annotated and everything, it's a faucet, it's a bathtub faucet. How might you go about approaching that from a photographer's eye wanting to be able to see it differently? What would be some ideas you would give someone of wanting to capture this in some unique kind of way?

[00:17:39] Alan: That's a good question and it put me on the spot because I think-- to some degree, photography is the act of cropping out from the world in detail. The framing is always important. Do you feel the damage as much as possible with this faucet to emphasize what's different or do you put it way down in the corner to show where it fits into its larger surroundings?

Do you think of some curious object like a Lego figure that you can sit on top like, "He's trying to do construction on it." Sometimes it's changing the light in that room. Of course, in that kind of room, you may not have the option, but things can change, whether you do it in bright daylight or you could go in at night and illuminate it with a flashlight and make it spooky.

It doesn't always work, sometimes you're just looking at something and you're saying, "There's nothing there." You might take it for fun, and it might work out. You might be able to edit it, I do edit my photos. Other times I know, I've been outside, usually, and it's just something about the light, and something says to me, "There's a picture here. I don't know what it is, but maybe I need to get down on the ground and change perspective. Maybe I need to shift so it's more back-lit than front-lit."

The rules of photography are, really pay attention to light because that's everything. Maybe there's good reflections off of the faucet, like sparkles or things that and maybe it's something that is flat but may look more interesting if you did it black and white or made it look an antique photo. I don't know if that gets anywhere, but I will look forward to seeing what you produce with that photo.

I just can't remember, long ago when I used to travel, I was always amazed at different hotels, especially in various parts of the world where you'd go into a hotel shower, and there'd be a different kind of interface that you've never seen before. Some of them had elaborate instructions. I saw one with a seven-point list of how to operate the shower.

Bonni: [laughs]

[00:20:00] Alan: I started collecting-- somewhere in flicker, I've got a tag set of showers as interface items. Because if you get the hot water wrong, you're going to burn yourself. That's not a good thing, but it's just funny that a thing, as simple as a faucet has so many ways to be designed, that someone thinks is ideal and generally, for the user ends up being like, "Oh, I don't know how to use this thing."

[00:20:25] Bonni: There's two things that are coming out of what you just shared and thank you for that. One is that you do it a lot. You try a lot of different things. You try it with the bright light you try with another light. When I have been successful at creating what I consider to be really beautiful images, it's because I took 400 that weren't. It's nice that digital space is not too troublesome these days. Of course you can always just delete the ones you don't care for, if you're concerned about the storage space and all of that, so try it different ways try.

The other thing that's coming out is that, of course, there's not just one way to do it. That's the trouble that we get in sometimes is thinking, "Oh, Alan would know the right way to do this, he's a good photographer, I'm not," and that self-talk is what gets us into trouble. Candidly, I just want to mention real quick, I took a photography class when I was in college and I'm remembering today, speaking

to you, that I spent all this time and got really excited about taking-- one of the assignments was a portrait assignment.

I got this beautiful student who I knew and she would stand outside of these statues. I got what I considered to just be beautiful pictures of a woman I thought was beautiful, who I did not know well, but I was really proud of that work and I got a C on the assignment. I remember, vividly, the professor writing, "There was just nothing different about these photographs." I thought, "It's different, this is a beautiful woman, it's a beautiful campus and these are beautiful statues. I don't even know what you mean, it wasn't different."

It was really both something I took very personally. I think if we're spending so much time to try to make something different, I think that's maybe not my goal as a photographer in here, was the professor, assuming that I wanted something-- I wanted to capture what I saw, I didn't want to capture something that would be so different, you know what I mean? Anyway, so much there, as far as teaching and all of that.

I did also want to say one other thing and that is that I challenged myself because I feel I can just get in this mode. One thing that I got into was feeling like I wasn't good enough or smart enough to do Mike Caulfield's SIFT. I had him on the show, I followed all his stuff, I did all of that and then when coronavirus hit, and I had students, they would bring in on sticky notes, "This week in business ethics news," and they would stick it on the back wall.

I remember when one sticky note was about this thing called coronavirus or COVID or whatever. Then before you know it, two weeks later, there are practically all that, then before you know it, we weren't, of course in that classroom anymore, but a lot of misinformation coming that way. I told myself, "You cannot do this anymore," and I forced myself to create a playlist on my YouTube channel. That's for my ongoing SIFT.

Of course, how could I expect myself to know as much as a man who does this for a living? [laughs] This is his life's work. Why would I hold myself to that standard? I'm just trying. Every time I post a video, I laugh because there's like 20 views. [laughs] It's not like it's out there. I think one of the fears that we can have though is, some part of us being really wrong or stupid is going to be out there on the internet for everyone to see forever.

I don't know if you have that, Alan, do you have things where you look back and you go, "I certainly don't think that today," or "I was wrong." Do you perceive older you from years ago as not knowing what you're talking about, but you still leave it up there anyway for preservation

[00:24:16] Alan: All the time. I have to let you know that on my clock here, we recently passed 2:08 PM and we'll get back to 2:08, but I just will let you know. I was noticing.

[00:24:27] Bonni: I love it. Speaking of noticing things.

[00:24:30] Alan: There is-- we chat about this before and I'm trying to think of the way to articulate it, this thing where we're always measuring ourselves to someone else, the experts in the field or the people who know more and downplaying what we do. You can't get around it. There is a name for it, I'm not going to throw it out, but we all know what it is and we all have it and we all deal with it. What I found is, I don't care if there's something, because that's not me, 10 years ago.

If I have something and I will find things I've written before, that I've been wrong, that I disagree with now, but that's okay because I'm not a clone of that person. I'm different and that was part of where I am now, and I don't mind being wrong. I found in my teaching that it was quite beneficial to mess up in front of my students. To do something wrong, to run the technology wrong, to have something break, because I show them, the problem isn't failing it, the problem is not trying to remedy or work our way around it.

We have this self built in idea of perfection that we can be. I try to just be a goofball where appropriate. Not to take myself so seriously that I think I have to be this perfect person. My blog posts are riddled with typos. When I go back and see old ones, it's like-- I don't have time to fix them all. Or there's broken links, but I don't think I have to be this perfect entity. Again, you have to come to this on your own, you have to find and develop your personality. When you look around you and see your colleagues-- I'm in all of Mike Caulfield. I can't phrase things like him, but I shouldn't try to.

You have to get to some point hopefully where you cultivate and develop your own confidence and your own to approach to things. I found, long ago, with certain things, and this may feed into one of the questions that came from Joe Murphy, that I think the bigger problem that we face both with the students we teach doing faculty development is finding that right way to help people understand that it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to say, "I'm an idiot." You don't say "I'm an idiot," but, "I don't know how to do this. I broke this or I messed up can I get help?" I think people feel like they have to figure stuff out.

This came when I was doing my media classes and my students would blog their progress and I would read things in their blog that would be like, "I was trying to do this one technique in gimp and I spent an hour and a half trying to figure out how to do an alpha mask. That's where I came up with the rule that Joe

described--" not that it was a rule because I couldn't enforce it, but I would suggest like if you spent 15 minutes trying to find a solution to something, especially technical, you search for it everywhere, you've watched a video, if you get to the 15 minute mark and you've gotten nowhere, ask either me or your student colleagues, because we were a small community of a class, like it's okay to ask for help.

I think that's such a barrier for a lot of people. Even me, we had this thing that says, "Oh, if I do this, I'm going to look stupid. They're all going to think I'm stupid." That is a big narrative in the back of my mind. I've done some talks where I would ask people to write what their obstacles to sharing are. Generally it's that thing of, "My work isn't as good, I don't do anything special." That's a hard one to get around and you just have to encourage, embrace and to me, I like to model being imperfect because I am extremely imperfect.

[00:28:49] Bonni: This is a perfect transition for me to head us over to the recommendation segment. I have two I'd like to recommend today; two links for people to check out, with two overriding principles. One is to remember it's not linear. The post I'd like to share is from Clint Smith, his Instagram post. For those not familiar with him, he has a Harvard PhD and has a New York times bestselling book called *How The Word Is Passed*. He wrote this on his Instagram post when he appeared in Harvard's monthly alumni magazine, I believe it is.

He writes, "The first time I applied to Harvard, I didn't get in, I was bummed, but I put my head down, applied the next year and was accepted. Then in the third year of my PhD program, I failed my comprehensive exams and had to take them a second time with the understanding that if I failed them again, I would be kicked out of the program. I was embarrassed. I was ashamed. I felt like a fraud and a failure. I felt like I was on the verge of disappointing everyone around me, it was a real low point. I eventually took the exams again and passed the second time but I'm writing this because I think it can be easy for people to create a clean, neat, linear narratives about your life and how one thing just naturally led to another and how it was always all peaches and roses. That's rarely the case and it definitely wasn't the case for me. After getting this out of the mailbox--" and the picture, by the way, is his face on the cover of their magazine.

"After getting this out of the mailbox, I realized that this is probably why seeing my graduate school magazine with my face on it, the graduate school I was one exam away from being kicked out of, is really surreal. Could have never imagined something like this after getting that email that made my heart sink five years ago. I'm grateful for those who held me down in those hard moments and who reminded me that no matter what happened, my value as a person

was not contingent on being affiliated with any school, any program, or any degree. Thanks to Ed Magazine for the generous feature and interview, Wild Times."

The second little lesson and then anecdote or artifact I'd like to pass on is to take the time for feedback. This is another social media post, although this time on Twitter, and this is from Corey Stoughton. She writes, "Basement flood, opening boxes haven't peaked in four years, the forgotten highlight of my entire existence." I didn't realize the Harvard connection until this very moment. [laughs] This is Harvard Law School letterhead and it is from a name that might be familiar to some people and that's Elena Kagan who is on our Supreme Court, a Supreme Court Justice in the United States. Her title at the time, Visiting Professor of Law. This is June 22nd, 2001.

She writes, Dear Ms. Stoughton, just a quick note to thank you for an excellent exam. You had all the questions just right, it was a pleasure to read. Thanks too for your excellent class participation. Congratulations and I hope you're having a wonderful summer. This reminds me a little bit, Alan, of earlier when I told that story of the theater professor telling me that my portraits weren't-- these are things we carry in our minds and our hearts and that they either can affirm our value as human beings or they can detract from our sense of value and contribution.

I'm just going to say we got to take that time for feedback and just imagine we could wind up in somebody's either literal or digital file cabinet someday and let them rediscover the ways that were edifying their lives and their work.

[00:32:58] Alan: That's beautiful. It takes some experience to get to that point of saying whether your photo instructor had that opinion, it's like, that photo mattered to me and there was something there that is important. I know I couldn't do that as a student. I can only do it as a much older student right now. Thanks for sharing those. I scribbled down some things. I looked at links I've been saving in my pinboard, I still do social bookmarking.

The first one is a site called, I never heard of this, youglish.com. This is one of those things where I find out I don't know stuff every day. There was a discussion on one of our **[unintelligible 00:33:40]** where faculty members asking about websites that provide pronunciation guides for terms for teaching art and that there are some pronunciation websites, like, "How do you pronounce blah," but they're full of ads and it's a little bit distracting. I thought about it and my answer was like, "There are some of the online dictionaries that have the audio versions."

I thought of Wiktionary, the wiki dictionary, which has some audio ones. I actually didn't get around to responding it and but there was another response

from someone else in the list who mentioned this site. What it does is it archives selected videos from YouTube that have that word and they must be searching or using the API to get them on the transcript. You can find art terms. I found *chiaroscuro*, which I remembered from our class. It has like 180 different videos where it has that context.

The beautiful thing about that is that it's helpful for understanding the pronunciation of the word but you get it within the context of another discussion. It's available in like 12 or 15 languages. For people, like if I ever traveled to France or something and I want to understand some French words, I can get them from there. Whether the resource is any good or not, it's that continual reminder that, "I don't know almost anything about anything on the internet. There's always something else out there."

The other project I stumbled upon, and again, I come across these things, I look at them, I poke around a while, and I register them way in the back of my mind but the open syllabus project has been mining this huge archive of syllabi from classes and they're ones that are publicly available from institutional websites. What they're doing is, they aren't making the syllabi public because they do belong to people but they've analyzed them and pulled out metadata from them to get things about what are the most popular readings assigned in a particular class or at a particular college or which of these or how many are using open textbooks?

It's an interesting way to use data in a way that respects the privacy of the people who created these. Unlike the homework sites which just scavenge student work and publish it without their consent. There is a way, they have a call for people to share their syllabi if they want to contribute but I just thought was an interesting project and a clever way of using a large data set to provide insights. Those are things that come along that the eyebrow goes up and the hamburger menu gets clicked on and, if anything, that curiosity is something that I'll know I'm losing it if I just shrug it off because that's been the magic juice for me.

[00:36:54] Bonni: It's been such a pleasure to get to have continued conversation with you in lots of different ways. I'm so glad we got to go on the road today and sit on a couch [laughs] and get to connect in this way and be able to share this between both of the podcasts. Feels really special to me, so thank you so much.

[music]

[00:37:15] Bonni: I'd like to thank Alan Levine for once again being a guest on today's episode of *Teaching in Higher Ed*. I'd like to encourage you, if you've not

already, to subscribe to the weekly *Teaching in Higher Ed* update where you can receive the show notes from today's episode, which there are lots of great links in this one, as well as the recommendations that show up on the episode but also a collection of recommendations that are growing over time that don't show up on the show, a little bit beyond what we cover here as well as some quotable words and other resources. Head on over to teachinginhighered.com/ subscribe. Thanks once again for being a part of *Teaching in Higher Ed*. I'll see you next time.

[music]

[00:38:17] [END OF AUDIO]

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