

[Silver Linings: How starting my teaching career during a pandemic led me to the OER community]

Hello everyone! My name is Beau Gilbert. I use they/them pronouns, and I'm going to be sharing the silver linings I found this year while teaching during a pandemic. This presentation is licensed under creative commons.

[About Me]

I'll start by sharing a little background about myself. Like I said my name is Beau. I earned a master's in education from Portland State University. I'm currently part-time faculty for the College Success and Career Guidance department at Portland Community College. I also work part-time on the student affairs side of things at another local community college. I accepted my first teaching position the day Covid-19 shut down in-person learning. Yes, literally the day. My one and only time stepping foot on campus was for my interview, and in the middle of that interview, everyone across the table from me received the email that the college was closing for the foreseeable future. My interviewer - department chair - had asked me, "so how do you feel about teaching remotely?" And that was my future. The two classes I have taught within the past year are Study Skills for College Success and Today's Careers. Both classes have between 10 to 25 students each term, so I have a lot of time and flexibility to really foster strong relationships with students individually, and also as a group, because of these small class sizes.

[Timeline]

I want to start by kind of offering you a timeline of what this past year has looked like for me. I started in Spring 2020 and I was given a whole lot of advice right off the bat. My department chair suggested that I reach out to the previous instructor and the asynchronous instructor of the class. And I was really thankful for this advice. I was appreciative, however, the previous teacher had zero insight for me on how to transfer the class to a remote environment during a pandemic, and the asynchronous class was truly just taught in a different format because they didn't even have live class sessions. So although I had a lot of suggestions being thrown my way and I had people to email if I had questions, I did really feel pretty dang alone that first term. Another suggestion I was given was to stick with the materials and textbook that has traditionally been used in the class. I was told this would be a good way for me to get familiar with class content and the main learning outcomes, and I found it interesting that the learning outcomes and structure of the class came from this textbook, right? Because shouldn't the textbook be supportive of outcomes chosen by the college and the department, not the other way around? So I had a pretty big point of confusion right off the bat, but everyone around me was saying not to make waves my first year, and I am known for being impatient and wanting to create change. So I took a breath, I listened to those around me that were more experienced, and I decided to get that 120 dollar textbook for my class. It didn't take long for me to feel confident in the fact that I never wanted to use this textbook again, though. It was outdated, to say the least. It didn't align with my values as an instructor that tries to be gender-inclusive, anti-racist, and just a collaborator with my students. One example: one whole week of this class has traditionally focused on teaching students their learning styles and how they should study based on the outcome of their quiz. Well I had a problem there, because learning styles have been debunked and should no longer be taught to students, right? The turning point for me was when I realized it was taking more energy for me to refute parts of the text in class than the few key

components that I wanted to be emphasized from it. This textbook isn't meant to burden my role as a teacher, it's supposed to support it, right? So there was one day in class that first term when my students were complaining about the textbook and I honestly couldn't blame them. So I promised them in that moment that I wouldn't use it again and I'd find another solution. That other solution came in the form of an email asking me to apply for the Equity and Open Education Faculty Cohort. I applied and was accepted the Summer 2020. I had already started my second term of teaching by the time that this cohort class started, but I was hopeful that this would offer me the guidance that I was desperately in need of. I had already selected an OER to replace the old textbook, but that really felt like just the beginning to me, and I was really eager to learn more. I received a stipend for participating in the faculty cohort, in addition to designing some Open Education materials for my course. And at the end of it all I gained a really awesome community that I'm so thankful to now be a part of. In Fall 2020 and Winter 2021, I incorporated those new concepts from the cohort into my class curriculum. I also started teaching my second class, the one that is called Today's Careers, in the Fall. I was asked to fill in very last minute, and unfortunately this time I did not have a previous instructor to reach out to for advice. This time I actually felt prepared, though. I had the knowledge from the OER cohort and I automatically went searching for an OER textbook to use. And now we're in the midst of Spring 2021, and I am confidently - very confidently - teaching two different classes using OER textbooks. I continue to be open to feedback, and I'm flexible when I need to make quick changes. I've also started testing out new programs that I feel align pretty dang well with Open Education. And I am anxiously looking ahead to designing my own OER textbook.

[Major Factors Affecting My Students]

So, why now? Why would I go through all of this in my first year of teaching? I had a lot of people in higher ed tell me not to. 'Don't make waves! Just settle in, learn the ropes first. You'll have plenty of time to make your class yours.' Well, unfortunately, there's this pandemic looming and continues to loom over me and my students. And to be honest, I didn't feel like I had time at all. I felt a sincere urgency to release any burdens I had control over for my students. Here's a list of factors that were affecting my students that first term of teaching, and sadly I have gotten very used to receiving emails of this nature a year in. The pandemic alone is affecting my students. A loss of work, and on the flip side extra work, being called into cover for sick co-workers. Everyone in the household being home and needing to use the same computer and internet and table all at the same time. Disabilities. Certainly a [factor] before the pandemic, but made even more difficult in a new class environment that none of us were prepared to navigate. Racial injustice and protests right here in our neighborhoods. Lack of focus and motivation. Remote school is not the college experience that my students signed up for. Most of the students in my classes prefer in-person classes and need that guided instruction. They thought they would have socialization and the chance to make new friends, but instead they're lucky if one other classmate even turns on their camera to offer them a smile. And the students that aren't turning on their camera have genuine fears and reasons for not turning them on. My first term, I had a student on the last day of class turned on his camera for the first time. He said, "Hey Beau! I have a question. Did you know I was Black?" I answered him, "no." I had no way of knowing. His name on screen and his voice didn't make me jump to any conclusions, and I told him that. Then he asked me, "Did you assume I was white?" and I answered yes. Every time I share this I get a little choked up because we had a great discussion that lasted long after class time about this. About how empowering that was for him to be able to be fully present in a class and know 100 percent that I was not making judgments or assumptions about him

based on the color of his skin or his clothing or the way he talked. Because of that student I have never required anyone to turn on their camera in my class, and I continue to think of how I will replicate that empowerment for students like him when we are back in person. I have a lot of students with significant social anxiety that continues to get worse just because they've lost the practice of regular communication with strangers. And then the effects ultimately come full circle back to the pandemic, where a student gets sick and I worry because I haven't heard from them in two weeks, or their parent gets sick and doesn't get to come home from the hospital.

[Lightbulb Moment]

So why now? If not now, when? My students were begging for a break. When I had students that first term tell me they weren't going to buy the textbook because they needed that money for rent after being laid off, I said "Of course! I wouldn't buy it either!" So ultimately, I couldn't blame my students for the way they were feeling. This is a picture of me in bed with my cat last Spring. After many of those first classes I jumped right into bed because it's literally all my body could handle. Thinking back to my own college experience, I genuinely don't think I would have finished school if I had to do it completely remote during a pandemic. So I switched gears. Instead of waiting until I had more knowledge and experience as a teacher, I trusted the education that my own teachers provided me and I went with my gut. And my gut told me to explore the OER community.

[Equity and Open Education Faculty Cohort Summer 2020]

I cannot say enough good things about the Equity and Open Education Faculty Cohort that I participated in last summer. I learned so much and I still have so many bookmarked links from the cohort that I have yet to fully read through, but I absorbed as much as I could each week. The instructors were phenomenal, and every week and topic was so refreshing for me. It was just like, "yes, I'll take that, and this, thank you." And the very best part for me was that each week we had a small group, hour-long discussion. To say this group discussion was the highlight of my week is truly an understatement. I was pumped every week to attend. I had talking points ready. I had questions prepared. And the beautiful thing about those discussion sessions was that every single one of us was looking to make a change in our classes. We were all in that same place of wanting to do better by our students. I didn't have to hesitate or try to read the room before sharing my opinion on the costs associated with textbooks. We were all on the same page of being open to learning and wanting to be better educators. And that's not just to suggest we were all of the same opinion all the time, right? We did have differences in opinions at several points, but we were all eager to listen and learn these varying perspectives and how they might have an impact on students in our own classes. During a time where everyone is kind of left to their own trying to just scrounge some semblance of a class together in the remote environment, I really needed this time in community with others. And I am so thankful I had the opportunity to participate.

[Biggest Changes]

Reflecting on the past year and the impact that the faculty cohort had on me as an educator, these are the biggest changes that stand out to me. I now teach the way I want to. I bring my full, authentic self to the classroom every time. I let my students know when I'm having a bad day, or my mind is elsewhere, or I didn't really like the activity I had planned for the day but I'm going with it anyways. I'm vulnerable with them, and I believe this has allowed me to be more open to feedback, and I think it encourages them to

be genuine and caring in the way they offer me feedback. I also think it lets them know that I'm okay with them being vulnerable in front of me too. I regularly evaluate my classes and activities. Once I switched to a free textbook - it was interesting - I felt a lot more at ease to critique it, because it wouldn't cost me anything to change it again. Since I was more in tune with these external factors affecting my students, I was constantly looking for ways to keep the class flexible in case any big problems came up, like a Covid illness or a week-long power outage like we had earlier this year. I give my students the power to change the class. Because I'm vulnerable with my students, they know I'm not the type to claim expertise over the class or get defensive about the material. If they tell me that something sucks, I agree with them! "You're right, I hate that activity. What suggestions do you have for me so that we can do it better next time?" When I transition them from thinking they were just doing throwaway assignments for a grade to actually making a difference for the future of the class, their investment and motivation shifted. I now take accommodation needs and make them universal for the class. Since this was my first year teaching, I really had no clue what type of accommodations I'd need to make for students. I had no idea. One of the best things I've done is decided to take any accommodation requests for a student and apply them to the whole class instead of just that one student. And that's actually a recommendation that our Disability Services team says to us in those [accommodation] emails. So I was surprised to hear how many students have disabilities that benefit from these accommodations, but don't actually go through the process of officially getting accommodations. Just the idea of me using a universal design in the class makes my students feel more freedom to open up about these struggles. When it comes to alternative formats, I provide both Google Doc and Microsoft Word templates. Not every student has access to both. For the weekly readings, I offer a recording of myself summarizing the highlights, as well as a written notes or transcript version of the document. For a list of due dates, I include a calendar in the syllabus, and I also give them a term-long to-do checklist that is within the LMS. And if you have that resource available to you to make them a checklist, do it. If there's one thing my students have appreciated in the last year it's that checklist. And one of the most common accommodation requests I get is for more time to work on an assignment, so I removed the late policy entirely. As long as they do the work before I have to submit their final grade to the school, they get the credit. And what I find probably the most important for myself as an educator is that I continue to see the value in learning, growing, and allowing myself to make mistakes. Telling myself that it is okay to make mistakes has been super important for me this year, because I have to be willing to make mistakes in order to explore the unknown. I have to be okay with the possibility of messing up if it means I also have the possibility of doing better.

[Examples in Practice]

Now I've attended enough conferences already to know that y'all want to see some examples of what I've actually done. So the rest of my presentation here is taking you through some of the work I've implemented into my classes this year that my students have loved.

["Choose Your Own Adventure" Assignments]

For weekly readings, my students get to do a "Choose Your Own Adventure" assignment. The first example here is commonly known as a 3-2-1. For mine, they are asked to share three things they learned, two questions they still have, and one thing they absolutely just did not understand. This is a huge help for me in preparing for a class for the week, because when I ask, "how did the reading go?" and, "do you have any questions?" I don't have to worry about silence. They literally had to turn in

questions to me for a grade, so they know what to ask to get a discussion going during class - they're prepared. I also have them provide a self-grade at the end of each week's assignment. Now as a reminder, I teach study skills, so I think it's really important for my students to understand how they earn a particular grade and why they earned it. You'd think they'd all just give themselves A's, right? Very rarely have I actually had a student give themselves an A. I have a lot of "A" students that rate themselves as a "C" student. It's kind of heartbreaking, actually. But that was an important lesson for me as a new teacher, because now I know that I should praise the best parts of their work every time. Instead of just offering them feedback on what they could do differently next time, I start by telling them what they did phenomenally so they are more confident about what they did right. The second example here is commonly known as a "one-pager." In my class, my students know this as visual note-taking. Note-taking is important to study skills, so that's what I call it. A lot of my students are resistant to this form of note-taking at first. Almost all of them were taught at a young age not to doodle on their homework, so asking them to do this for a grade makes them absolutely panic. But there's science behind this method, right? Of using both visuals and text to take notes. And the students that do decide to give it a try stick with it for the whole term and they end up loving it. The third example here is an application or hands-on opportunity to try an activity listed in the textbook. A lot of textbooks have activities dispersed throughout the chapters, right? Did you know that students don't actually do those unless you tell them to? They'll just skip them and keep reading. So for the students that want to do things and try to put into practice what they're reading, I encourage them to actually do those activities. My hope is that when they leave my class, they'll see the benefit in actually doing those, right? So maybe when they're in their math class next term, they won't struggle so much, because they'll actually do the practice problems that help them learn the material. And the last "choose your own adventure" option that I don't yet have an example of is quizzes. This is not something I initially offered in my class, but I now have students requesting quizzes. Weird. We discuss in our section on test anxiety that practice quizzes are great for overcoming that anxiety, so they'd like more opportunities to do that in a low-stakes environment like my class. I was pretty shocked, but I was happy to get the suggestion and do plan to offer it since they asked.

[OER Textbook Usage]

This one might seem a bit obvious, but I started using OER textbooks in my classes. The one on the left titled College Success is the one I currently use in my study skills class. For the most part it checks a lot of boxes for me. It was published right at the start of the pandemic, so it's very new and up to date and it incorporates student perspectives from a lot of different scenarios. It even mentions transgender people in it, and as a trans person myself, I gotta say that is a huge thing for us to see in a textbook. The textbook on the right is called Blueprint for Success in College and Career. Now, given the contents of this one, I could have used it for both of my classes, honestly. But the OpenStax book, I just clicked with a lot better for my study skills class. The section of Dillon's book on career exploration, though, is perfect for my careers class.

[Started Writing My Own OER Textbook]

Because of participating in the OER faculty cohort over the summer, I also started writing my own OER textbook for my study skills class. There is a pretty major section - of the OpenStax textbook I use - in the first few chapters that I didn't want my students to learn. They use a term in there that has recently been recognized as harmful to students of color, and I really just wanted to skip it entirely, so I did. I remixed

the chapter, excluded the parts I didn't like, kept the parts I did, and I even incorporated some components from other OERs as well. That's as far as I've gotten though. I have a few colleagues in my department that are also interested in creating this OER textbook with me, so we've collaborated to create a list of new learning outcomes and must-haves for our own class activities. We applied for a grant in the Fall, but we didn't make the cut, so we've kind of tabled it for now. I hope to pick it back up again when we aren't working from our bedrooms anymore.

[Culturally Responsive Warm-Ups]

I designed my own warm-ups that are inclusive and representative of my student's experiences. There are a lot of great, free-use websites now for pictures. I have three of them linked in these samples. I put a lot of thought behind these warm-ups. My class is on study skills, which some might think doesn't provide a lot of space for conversations about race, gender, social justice, you know, but I can always do that with my warm-ups. It doesn't take much to create these. All I have to do is listen to my students and what's going on. For example, the one on the left: Amir. Now, this one I can tell you I made over the summer, because I mentioned that Amir has "attending a protest in Portland" on his to-do list for the week. Over the summer, there were protests happening every day and night in Portland, and many of my students were at them. And I wanted to give them the space to process and talk about what was going on around us, but I also didn't want to force them to talk about it if they wanted to have class as the one hour of the day when that wasn't at the forefront of their mind. So having this in our warm-up is a subtle way for me to say, "we can talk about this if you want," but it's up to them to decide how much we talk about it. The middle example, Taylor, is a non-binary student. You'll notice that Taylor uses they/them pronouns. Now, as an educator that is regularly referred to as "Mrs. Gilbert," this is a power move for me. I'll admit to that. I need my students to know how to use my pronouns, and most of them have never had a teacher ask them to use they/them pronouns. Ever. So I do. I have to do that for myself. I start this warm-up by saying, "please be mindful of Taylor's pronouns here. It's okay if you mess up, but let's hold each other accountable and correct each other if we notice the wrong pronoun is used." This was super scary for me to do the first time, but I have never had a student complain or throw a fit about it. When someone slips up, they usually just correct themselves. And sometimes it's a great learning opportunity. For example, when a student uses a "he" pronoun here for Taylor, another student might go, "huh.. I thought they looked more feminine than masculine. Interesting that you came to that pronoun use." And then we get to have a conversation about gender stereotypes and assumptions we make about people based on their appearance. All of that just from a warm-up in a study skills class. The one on the right here tends to be a hot topic in my classes. Sometimes the class is very defensive and just says, "nope! Cancel the administration. Next!" And then we move on to the activity for the day. Other class sessions, though, this involves a lot of emotions and can take up a huge chunk of our class time. Last term I had a lot of LGBT students in my class, and I didn't know that until this warm-up came up on the screen. They had a lot of emotions to process. They had a lot to share that I think they haven't had a lot of opportunities to share about before this. These warm-ups are my way of saying to my students: I'm listening. I see you, your whole self. And your whole self is welcome in this classroom.

[Regular Student Feedback]

I am always asking my students for feedback. I do breakout rooms in my classes each week and I ask them for feedback every single week. I've made so many little changes over the past year because of this. I no longer go into breakout rooms to check on students unless they call me in there. That is their

space to be in community with their peers. While I would love - I would love - to hover like I would in the classroom, in a physical classroom, but in a physical classroom they have time to see me coming and change the conversation, right? In a breakout room, I might barge right in on a conversation that wasn't ever meant for me to hear. I also get their suggestions on what type of breakout rooms they want. Some classes ask me to give them a room that is for students with their cameras on and that want to use their voice to talk with each other, and then another room that is just for chat, and another that is for working independently. Other classes ask me to divide them up based on their strengths, so each breakout room will have a note-taker, a conversation starter, and a time-keeper, and those are their responsibilities. Now that Zoom also allows for students to manually choose their own breakout rooms, that has become the standard for my classes too. So if they have a problem with a classmate or even if they just change their mind halfway through and decide that they do want to talk to others, they can just switch on their own to a space they're comfortable with. I also offer an extra credit option that was shared with me through the OER faculty cohort over the summer. If any of the students in my class provide me with feedback on the class and a suggestion on how to improve it, they get extra credit. For example, this last term, I had a student within the LGBT community share that they didn't like the last chapter of our textbook. It's a chapter on basic nutrition and physical health and self-care. What they didn't like is that it mentions safe sex and consent, but it has no mention of what safe sex looks like between same sex or LGBT partners. This student straight up said to me, "As a trans teacher, I expected you to do better." Phew, me too. Me too, my friend. That was quite the oversight on my part. So I gave that student extra credit and promised that this term I would find some Queer-friendly health material to include. I also do surveys at the start and end of the term. At the beginning, I ask them what they know about the course learning outcomes, what they hope to get out of the class, what grade they plan to earn... these are helpful factors for me to consider and how much extra push I give students. Some students are only working to get a "C" and it helps me panic less when I know that when I give them a "C" that that's what they wanted, right? I can change my language with them from, "You only have a few days left to improve this!" to, "you made it to the grade you wanted! I am so proud of you." And this last source of feedback: Dear Beau Letters. These are my absolute favorite. This is a tool I learned from my own teachers in my master's program. In the physical classroom, this would be similar to an exit card where the student will take the last few minutes of class to write me a note before they leave. I've actually come to really like the online version of this, though. I might continue it when we return to a physical classroom. I have them send me an email. Now, again, I have at most 25 students in a class, so it's not like I'm getting bombarded with 300 emails all at once. But these letters always heal my bad teaching days, always. Sometimes my students just let me know what's going on in their lives, sometimes they send me funny TikTok videos, sometimes they apologize to me unnecessarily for not talking enough during class because of something terrible that was going on at home at the same time. And a lot of times they let me know their favorite part of class today, and they ask me a question they were too nervous to ask during class. And the really great thing about requiring my students to send me an email at the end of every class is that I can guarantee that every single student of mine knows how to get a hold of me. They all know my email address, and they all know that I will respond to them when I see an email from them. They know they can count on me, and when students leave my class, I am confident that they are leaving equipped to communicate with other instructors because I taught them how.

[Advice]

Alright, so that is my first year of teaching during a pandemic. Here is my advice to anyone just starting out with OERs, and maybe you're a little overwhelmed by it all. Start small. Small and slow solutions. My students quote me saying this because it's very relevant to study skills, too. Developing new habits, trying new things that we want to sustain in our lives requires us to start small and to go slow. So whatever you're able to try out right now is perfect, and however long it takes you to finish that is also okay. I have no idea when I'll finish my OER textbook. I don't have a timeline for it and I am okay with that. I'm putting in the work on it when I need to. Find colleagues to support you and to network and brainstorm with. If you need a place to start, apply for the Equity and Open Education Faculty Cohort. I couldn't have asked for a greater welcome to the community than that program, truly. And say hi to your librarians. They are the freaking superheroes of this work and you want them to be your best friend. And I'll say it again because I can't say it enough: join the Equity and Open Ed cohort. It's worth it, I promise you. And finally, share your progress and accomplishments with others, no matter how small they may seem. There is a lot of movement behind OERs, but there's also still a lot of hesitation and fear and unknown, so every accomplishment we make should be shared and celebrated so others can learn and gain confidence in this work too.

[What are you willing to try?]

So I want to send you all off with an action item here. Write me a "Dear Beau Letter" and let me know one thing you are going to try to bring Open Education Resources to your classroom or school. And I'll tell you what I tell my students: this letter is just a check-in between the two of us, so you can write whatever you want. And you don't actually have to write me a letter if you're not feeling it, that's okay, but it does help with accountability to physically put that out into the world, so my inbox is open if you want.

[Contact Info]

Here's my email address [beau.gilbert@pcc.edu]. I welcome any questions you have. I also welcome any desires to collaborate. Like I said earlier, I am trying to find a Queer-friendly sex ed talk now, so if you're a health teacher, send me a message.

[Gratitude]

And I have to end with some gratitude. I am so privileged to be an educator today and there are a lot of people that helped me get here, and I always try to give them a shout-out when I can. Thanks for joining me today. I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference.