

On Open Access, Dandelions and “Open in Order to Grow”

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My favorite flower is a dandelion. Why? Because it pops up everywhere in the Spring. There are whole fields *full* of bright yellow dandelions. And guess what? They’re free. You can pick as many as you want. You can make them into bouquets, mix them with a few daisies. You can give them to friends, keep them for yourself. Later on, when they go to seed, you can blow on them and relish in the knowledge that you’re contributing to a whole new Spring full of extra dandelions. The joy moves on.

Open Access (OA) is a lot like dandelions. If you’re an OA advocate, you already know what I mean. If you’re not, well – let’s just say Open Access is about spreading the “joy”. You’re walking through a field that is full of interesting papers. You can pick any one. And if you don’t like that one, you can pick another. Two papers you find look like they have some complimentary information. Wait, here’s a third. And a fourth! Before you know it, you’ve found a whole host of papers on the topic you’re researching and you have enough to start building an idea.

An idea is a powerful thing. It may yet only be a seed, but the more you nurture it, the more you add to it, the more likely it is to take fruition, to grow, to become something more. Open Access to research is like fertilizer. The more researchers have to go on, the more they can develop their ideas, the more they can discount things that haven’t worked in the past, the quicker they can move on to new ideas, new methods, new discoveries.

So, I’m for “open in order to grow” – to grow the field of Open Access papers, to grow the readership for each of those papers, to grow the discoveries that will follow. I’m for taking those OA papers, and having them go to seed - multiplying them and spreading them all over the world. In this way their impact will reach Asia, it’ll reach Africa, it’ll reach the Americas. And if we’re really, really lucky, it’ll reach just the right person with just the right idea. And that idea will germinate, it’ll grow. Tomorrow that idea won’t be an idea. It’ll be an automated electric car, a test for diabetes, clean energy, easy access to water in the desert. The possibilities are endless.

As I'm constantly reminded when I tell friends about my favorite flower - dandelions are weeds. Well, you know what the thing about weeds is? They're pervasive. They're hard to get rid of.

So too is Open Access. Which is why I know the movement is here to stay. It was a controversial topic in the beginning. Not everyone was quick to jump on the 'openness' bandwagon. Yet, what did OA do? It kept growing, it kept popping up in unexpected places. And there, just when you thought you'd cleared away that path - yet another OA paper, yet another OA mandate sprung out of nowhere. And they just keep growing.

So rather than fighting the current, I say give in. Let Open Access grow. Let researchers have free access to the literature, let those students in Nairobi have it too. Let those NGOs in Brazil learn from the experiences of other NGOs in Columbia. Let doctors in Vietnam teach and learn from doctors in Poland. Let us all grow together.

And while we're at it, let's spread a few dandelions too.