

The wide open learning world: sea, land, and ice views
by Curt Bonk



Sea Learning

The day was August 27, 2009. That morning I explored CNN for some online news and found a story about the youngest person to circumnavigate the globe in a sailboat by himself. His name was Michael Perham and he was from the UK. I had never heard of him before but it was clear that I should have done. A couple of years earlier, at age 14, he had set the record as the youngest person to sail across the Atlantic. Now at age 17 and 164 days, he travelled east around the globe to beat the record of the American teenager Zac Sunderland. It took Michael 9 months and 12 days to complete his demanding and highly eventful journey.

The previous month, Zac had completed his westward journey around the world in his 36-foot (11-metre) sailboat *Intrepid*. He arrived back at his Marina del Rey, California, starting point on July 16, 2009. With 13 months and 2 days elapsed from start to finish, Zac's journey was much longer than Michael's. However, his world record would last a mere 42 days. When Michael Perham sailed his 50ft racing yacht, *TotallyMoney.com*, back into Portsmouth, England, he was a couple of months younger than Zac. Situated as I am in Indiana, smack dab in the heartland of the USA, I was a tad disappointed by this widely syndicated news story.

In addition to racing against each other, Michael and Zac were racing against time, constantly changing weather conditions, and extended loneliness. Imagine these two young sailors heading in opposite directions around the globe, each starting off his journey at the tender age of 16. And as luck would have it, they met in Cape Town, South Africa, along the way. Fortunately, with twenty-first century technology the world virtual community sat in on this storybook meeting and simultaneously learned from it. In a February 11, 2009 [blog](#) post Zac documented their chance encounter with interesting text and pictures for anyone with Internet access to see. In the midst of this excitement, Zac's mother informed him that [Minoru Saito](#) from Japan, the world's oldest solo circumnavigator, was about to pull into Cape Town as well. With that information, Zac quickly delayed his journey for a few days in the hope of meeting him.

It was at that moment that the power of the Web came into full view. As Zac put it in his blog:

"I went down to the Royal Cape Yacht Club on Friday morning to welcome Saito-san in. We waited at the YC for a few hours and didn't see any signs of him or his approach. We went up to the club and on to his web site (www.saito8.com) and saw a photo of his boat. As I walked outside I saw him pulling in just then."

A picture found on the Web helped identify the record breaking sailor they were about to meet. Imagine these two daring teenagers, who would each later that year become the youngest person to circumnavigate the world on a sailboat sitting next to Saito, who was the [oldest at age 73](#) to do so. Not only that, he was attempting it again at age 75. If successful, this would also be his record-breaking eighth time to sail solo around Planet Earth by himself. Imagine the lively conversation Zac and Michael had with him as well as the stories that were shared and mentoring offered. You can get a sense of it from Zac's February 13, 2009 [blog](#) post. Of course, as with all of us, long after departing Cape Town, they can keep up with Saito on the Web from his [homepage](#) and [Wikipedia](#) page updates as well as online news stories and shared online video coverage.

I had been following Zac Sunderland during the previous months and was hoping to interview him for an extension to my new book, [The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education](#) published in July 2009 by Jossey-Bass/Wiley. I had read his blog and watched his online videos. It was clear that each day at sea was a unique learning experience. When it came to more formal learning pursuits during his quite eventful and arduous journey, Zac had taken all his high school books with him and emailed his assignments back to his mother for grading. The Internet was his lifeline for feedback.

He also had his satellite phone to make contact with his parents and friends. At one point he also talked with astronauts onboard the space station who were flying 250 miles above him. And so it is today that astronauts can now meet aquanauts through the power of technology. As I wrote this newsletter piece, I sent Zac an email asking him about the technologies he used to learn with while sailing around the world for more than a year.

I also wrote to Michael Perham's press agent. Within 24 hours, I got a pleasant response and an upcoming interview with Michael's father. That is the way of the world today: you learn about someone's feats through online technologies and you contact them online and interview them the

same way. No landline phone, no letters, and no endless waiting for a response. With the Web, most responses come within 24 hours and sometimes within seconds. There are [dozens of ways](#) to use online technologies to contact people for interviews. In fact, it is the high level of communications technology available today that convinces parents to allow their teenage sons and daughters on such a voyage.

As I explored their sites, I found much informal learning embedded in the stories of these young sailors for my students to learn from. The day after Michael's triumphant welcome home to the UK, I posted the Web [homepage](#), [video blog](#) site, and [Wikipedia](#) page for Michael Perham as well as the Web [homepage](#), [blog](#) site, and [Wikipedia](#) page for Zac Sunderland to the opening week discussion forum for my online class on learning theories. I also gave them an article link from the [Telegraph](#) that detailed more about Michael's adventure. I asked my students questions about learning opportunities that were available on their boats as well as the ways in which Matt and Zac became teachers to the world. They can watch videos about their respective adventures from [BBC News](#), [Sky News](#), [ESPN](#), [CNN](#), and other news agencies. Shared online videos of their experiences can also be catalogued in [YouTube](#), [Zimbio](#), and other places.

I have shared online videos that they must watch and reflect on each week of the course. These videos range from such sailing adventures to original research of famous psychologists and educators to everyday examples of theories in action. My class has [several video options](#) to watch each week that are intended to connect the book, discussion forums, and Webcast lecture posts. As they view them, the class content typically springs to life. In fact, the YouTube videos that my students watched last fall made the course so exciting that they did not want to leave. It was as though a magic pill had been inserted into their mouths. There is no other way to describe it except as phenomenal.

What is clear is that learning from the adventures of both Michael and Zac can be formal as well as informal. My graduate students in education can reflect on the teaching and learning techniques of Michael and Zac as they explore their blogs, videos, and Web pages. At the same time, college classes on sailing, oceanography, meteorology, geography, cultures of the world, interactive media, and Web design might tap into these same resources, albeit in vastly different ways. Admittedly, such media resources are sometimes taken offline by the creators or the links no longer work for different reasons. But as this happens, countless other educational resources spring up. Learners simply need teacher expert guidance through it all.

Michael and Zac are not the only ones travelling by boat from whom your students can learn. What if, instead of sailing solo around the world like Michael and Zac, your parents are planning to pick up a new boat in Brazil and sail it for five months through the Caribbean en route to Charleston, South Carolina? That is what exactly happened in the spring of 2006 to Bridey Fennell. Bridey was just 16 at the time. Her mother, Karen Fennell, got in touch with officials from the Indiana University High School and arranged for Bridey to take four classes while on board the [S/V Roam](#), a 46 foot Dolphin 460 catamaran. To complete her four classes, she could upload and download assignments via the Web or email them directly to the instructor when in port. She could also practise French lessons on different islands. During the journey, ship dock captains and retired teachers on islands like Grenada supervised her examinations and sent them in for grading. Notably, she performed outstandingly in all her classes.

Bridey was learning at her own pace using the resources available to her. Without the Internet, it would have been much more difficult and she would likely have fallen behind her peers back home in Chicago or not been able to go at all. At the same time, her older sister Caitlin found a way to be a teacher and mentor to elementary students in the Chicago area. She created a programme for students at Lake Bluff Elementary School to monitor the journey of the Fennell family as part of a geography class. Her blog updates were posted for these young people to monitor, track, discuss, and comment on. Other family members also got involved in their own [blog](#) posting. So while Bridey was engaged in formal learning online, her family was teaching others in formal as well as informal settings.

Land Learning

It is the early morning hours of August 31, 2009 and just a few days after reading about Michael Perham's record setting day. Before heading to bed, I finished writing up an interview I had conducted with [Adora Svitak](#) and submitted it for publication.

As much as Michael and Zac are phenomena in the sailing world, Adora is a prodigy in the world of writing and literature. At age 11, Adora is known as "the world's youngest teacher." She has been teaching and learning online since she was seven when she published her first book, [Flying Fingers](#). More recently she wrote [Dancing Fingers](#) with her older sister, [Adrianna](#), a thirteen-year-old pianist and violinist. A technology enthusiast, Adora Svitak's [website](#) captures much of her writing, [poetry](#), [media events](#), and teaching experiences. As with many preteens, she also has a [Facebook](#) account. In contrast to most of them, however, Adora's Facebook account and blog

posts take on a much more serious and professional tone.

That is only part of the Adora Svitak story. Adora reads at least two books per day. She has even read and endorsed my 470 page "[The World is Open](#)" (TWIO) book and wants to teach it to my graduate students. In addition, she has a [blog](#) and writes invited posts for educational blogs such as [The Educator's Royal Treatment](#). More impressively, she has written a novel, Yang in Disguise, and over 400 short stories. With the ability to type more than 110 words a minute and a vocabulary that is well beyond her years, Adora Svitak is simply amazing. Last year, she wrote more than 330,000 words and she was only 10 years old at the time. Not surprisingly, some consider her a little professor.

As part of her international teaching, she has visited schools in the UK. A January 2009 article in the [Telegraph](#) ponders whether she is the cleverest person in the world. For those who prefer the visual to text, they can watch a YouTube video from Michael Dolan on Channel 4 in London. This video covered Dolan's worldwide quest to find the [World's Cleverest Kids](#); most notable in it is the story of Adora Svitak.

Adora presents lessons on writing and literature to children in schools both live as well as via Web conferencing. Not only has she spoken in hundreds of classrooms and school auditoriums, she has conducted professional development seminars and workshops for teachers. If you miss them, they are often posted to her personal channels in [YouTube](#) and [TeacherTube](#). In taking her message to wider audiences, Adora has shared her teaching and learning insights and ideas on the BBC, TLC, NBC, [FOX](#), CCTV, the UK Channel 4, Good Morning America, [Montel Williams](#), and the Tyra Banks Show, among other well known media outlets. She has also been featured on [Oprah](#). And, in case you are wondering, yes, she does have a [Wikipedia](#) page.

Ice Learning

The same day I complete my article on Adora, I receive an email from [Cassandra Brooks](#). I had interviewed Cassandra for a story in a chapter in my [TWIO](#) book on online collaboration. For her master's degree, this young woman had been studying the Antarctic toothfish (more commonly known as the Chilean sea bass) as well as a smaller invertebrate creature, the krill.

Cassandra seems blessed. Twice this young adventurer was selected to join research expeditions to Antarctica. Through the innovative [Ice Stories](#) project, the [Exploratorium](#) in San Francisco opened the world to Cassandra's work as well as that of her fellow scientists and researchers on that frozen continent. With this one creative Web-based project, young people around the world have read her blog posts and asked her questions about her research. In addition to blog posts, some of her fellow researchers have provided Webcast presentations to explain the research they are conducting in more detail at [Explo.TV](#). With such resources, the Web places young as well as older learners face-to-face with leading scientists and researchers where they hear and see amazing discoveries as well as often quite dire future predictions.

Near the other end of the earth, [Wendy Ermold](#), a researcher for the University of Washington's [Polar Science Center](#), has spent weeks of her time on ocean ice or on board icebreakers hundreds of miles north of Barrow, Alaska. Wendy has also conducted research on Disco Island in western Greenland and Ellesmere Island in Canadian Arctic Archipelago. As part of her work as a scientific programmer and field technician, Wendy studies the mechanisms controlling Arctic water circulation. Much of the research is posted to the Web for others around the planet to find and learn from. Websites featuring her work include one from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) [Ocean Explorer](#). There are countless hours of highly interesting and motivating educational content from just this one Web portal. Maps, podcasts, videos, pictures, and stories are all there. Once collected and analyzed, [climatology data](#) Wendy and her colleagues have posted online can be resident on the Web (or other places it evolves into) for many years and perhaps centuries to come.

While she is conducting her research, Wendy learns from Web resources. As an example, she often downloads content from the [OpenCourseWare project](#) from MIT to listen to on her iPod. Wendy told me that she also finds lecture materials from Stanford, Seattle Pacific University, and Missouri State University for her learning needs. Wendy added that she often hops from one to another resource as her needs and interests shift. The learning path is not prescribed in the same way that might happen in more formal learning settings. Free and open online content helps with her learning needs. And she can replay the contents as often as she likes and at whatever moment in the day she feels fits her best.

Wendy makes personal choices as to her learning needs, formats, venues, and overall mix of resources. As she does this, she often is learning from some of the most renowned scientists and scholars in the world. Perhaps most important, the fascinating [story](#) of her informal and highly personal self-paced style of learning physics from OCW materials can be posted prominently on the Web by MIT for others to learn from and become inspired. She teaches online. She learns online.

What's remarkable is that neither her teaching nor her learning episodes take place in traditional classroom settings. That is twenty-first century teaching and learning; it suddenly springs up where learners and teachers are and at the moment that learning happens to be needed. Increasingly, such teaching and learning is found on the Web.

Sea, Land, and Ice Learning

Somewhere between Cassandra in the south and Wendy in the north you will oftentimes find [Jon Bowermaster](#). It is September 5, 2009 and I am reading his latest post from his world famous [NOTES FROM SEA LEVEL](#) blog. It is a fascinating entry on [Ocean Warming](#) that had been posted earlier that day. In it he said:

"I went for a swim this morning in deep water in the middle of the South Pacific. Twelve-thousand-feet deep. The sea was lumpy, with six-foot swells running towards Hawaii, a couple thousand miles to the northeast. Using just a mask and snorkel, no fins, peering into the depths I tried to imagine what was below. It gets dark fast just below the surface despite the bright sunlight, which leaves everything to the imagination. That's the wonder of the ocean; even its most expert fans have very little idea what lies two miles below. When it's suggested that everything's been "explored" or "discovered," I put on a mask and try and see into the deep ocean. There's a lot down there we have no idea about and I wonder if we ever will".

He goes on to discuss the warming of the oceans and the impact that global warming is having on the continued melting of the polar ice caps (especially the thinning of ice at or near the North Pole) as well as the number and intensity of hurricanes recorded each year.

Bowermaster is an environmentally concerned writer and filmmaker who, during the past decade, has created the [Oceans 8](#) series for National Geographic. His mission in this particular project was to visit all seven continents plus Oceania from the view of a sea kayak. Unlike the stories above, the ones Bowermaster tells us in Oceans 8 come from sea, land, and ice. He was not alone on this journey; in fact, he gathered some of the leading photographers, filmmakers, scientists, and navigators in the world to bring the viewer to places on this planet that they might not otherwise have seen. He and his team have used the power of the Web to report from places such as Antarctica, Vietnam, the Aleutian Island, French Polynesia, Gabon, Chile, Bolivia, Croatia, and Tasmania. With that, they bring interesting and highly sensitive aspects of life and culture of this planet directly into our homes and learning spaces.

As this new millennium began, the Web became his vehicle for telling and retelling his stories. In his daily [blog](#), one will find photographs, videos, maps, charts, streaming videos, audio dispatches, and countless intriguing stories. With Bowermaster's [homepage](#), the world comes with you whenever and wherever you have an Internet connection. These resources can be used to think about what is now possible with online environmental and global education. Not only do his adventures appear in National Geographic magazine, DVDs, books, and television specials, with Web resources like [National Geographic video](#) and [Link TV](#), they can be freely replayed by millions of potential viewers online.

I talked to Bowermaster several times during the summer of 2009. When I asked him about Link TV reusing his content free to the world, he told me, "The more the merrier! A great goal of any story teller is to have their stories heard, so I'm thrilled that they've aired in 160 countries on the National Geographic Channel, live as DVDs, and are showing in-full on [Link TV](#)." He then added that, "previously some of the films have been shown in full on [Ocean.com](#)." The latter is home of the [Ocean Channel](#); a place brimming with life and imagery in and around the world's oceans.

With these myriad outlets for his awe inspiring work, Bowermaster is a global educator using a global forum called the Internet. With that one resource, he is teacher of the world about the world. As with the online resources provide by Michael Perham and Zac Sunderland, I post many of the resources Jon Bowermaster has provided to my learning theories class discussion forum. I then ask my students to reflect on his teaching philosophy and learning approach after exploring and viewing some of them. During the past few days, I have found their responses quite thoughtful and encouraging; especially for the first week of the semester. It is clear that the Web offers tools, resources, and expertise that previously was not possible. There is so much we can all take advantage of now to supplement, enrich, and elevate our courses. So much to inspire our students with!

The World is now Open for Learning

As Web technology has opened up the world for learning, Michael Perham, Zac Sunderland, Bridey and Caitlin Fennell, Adora Svitak, Cassandra Brooks, Wendy Ermold, and Jon Bowermaster are now our teachers and fellow learners. What is obvious is that these extremely adventurous and interesting people are non-traditional teachers and learners. In the past, we might have waited days, weeks, months, or even years for books to come out about their experiences, ideas, and viewpoints. Today their homepages, blog posts, and shared online videos come to us

instantaneously.

Keep in mind that Michael, Zac, Bridey, Cassandra, Wendy, and Jon did not have schools, colleges, or universities close by for their personal or professional development when on their respective journeys and expeditions. And Adora--the only one who was located near traditional schools--purposefully decided not to take advantage of them. Instead, she opted to learn virtually as well as teach that way. In a world of free and open access education, a learner can always find one or more teachers as well as peers to learn with. A wealth of useful teaching and learning resources is always at your fingertips. In fact, there are millions of other online teachers and learning resources today. You will find them in places like [TeacherTube](#), [YouTube Edu](#), [NASA TV](#), [Link TV](#), [NomadsLand](#), , [National Geographic Video](#), [MSNBC Video](#), [Current TV](#), [Discovery Channel Videos](#), [SciVee](#), [MIT World](#), [BBC News: Video and Audio](#), [CNN Video](#), [Big Think](#), [Flora TV](#), [TED Talks](#), and [Academic Earth](#), to name a few.

In my *World is Open* book, I provide more details on the online teaching and learning adventures of Cassandra Brooks and the Fennell family. The other people mentioned above are discussed in the free e-book extension to the *World is Open* book on which I am currently working. It will have the same chapter sequence, just different content. I hope to post it to the [World is Open book website](#) in the next couple of months. Already tons of resources from these two books are posted there for anyone with an Internet connection to freely explore and use. Such resources include several book excerpts, a book prequel as well as a postscript, and all the citations and Web resources for both books.

Such is life in the twenty-first century. It is a time brimming with lively teaching and learning opportunities at every moment of the day. With all the rich learning discoveries and adventures made visible on a daily basis and then replayed whenever needed, it is a quite interesting moment in the history of humankind. This is the learning century. Our schools are no longer physical structures but are increasingly virtual or blended experiences. Our teachers are not just found in specific geographic places for limited periods of time during the day for eyeball-to-eyeball learning endeavours. Today they are available at 4 am, 4 pm, or midnight. And our instructors and tutors might be as young as 11-year-old Adora Svitak or perhaps years younger. They might also be centenarians long thought to have been retired from teaching or who had never taught until their eleventh decade on this planet. And they are located with a simple mouse click on a Web link.

What should be clear is that the world is open for learning. The routes we take to the local school, college, university, or government or corporate training centre are no longer just paved in concrete; our learning journeys might now take place aboard ships or planes, high up in the mountains, at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, or when standing on thinning sea ice. The world is wide open from sea, land, and ice views as well as from spaceships hovering hundreds of miles above or beyond. Many of these learning adventures today are not geographically specific or in physical classrooms but are online, filled with rich digital images, animations, simulations, communications, and collaborations. As the learning world opens up, it is time we each found approaches to teach as well as learn that fit our personal interests and styles.

Curtis J. Bonk
Indiana University
cjbonk@indiana.edu or curt@worldisopen.com

Blog: [TravelinEdMan](#)

Author of [The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education and Empowering Online Learning: 100+ Ideas, for Reading, Reflecting, Displaying, and Doing.](#)
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