“I’ve searched all the parks in all the cities — and found no statues of Committees.” ~ G K Chesterston

About two years ago circumstances reduced my full time job in a UK university to four days a week. I was aware of two possible dangers: firstly, my four days a week job would actually turn out to be a full-time job with less pay. Secondly, I was concerned that this non-work day would be academically unproductive and get absorbed by domestic responsibilities, jobs around the house, or general unproductivity. From the outset I endeavored to work on my own projects, unencumbered by the restraints of working for a large organization and, conversely, unsupported by other colleagues and the extensive resources my (then) employer had to offer.
Of course great men and great women (however defined) rarely work in isolation, but G K Chesterton’s quip is a reminder that it is individuals who are commemorated. I don't make any claims to greatness, but I believed I could create, innovate, build and achieve without the consent and approval of others. The main thrust of my project was the building of the website YazikOpen.org.uk (http://www.yazikopen.org.uk/) a directory of open access (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_access) research articles for the learning and teaching of languages. I was accountable only to myself for questions such as:

1. Where is the business plan?

2. Have you asked X, Y and Z for permission?

3. Is this a good use of your time?

4. Is there any demand for this?

5. How is it going to make any money?

6. Can you change the colour of the website? I don’t like that green, blue, red etc.

7. Will the IT support people let you have access to what you need?

I was of course still employed four days a week so I was not depending on this project to provide personal income. In this respect it was a “best of both worlds” scenario. Now that I’m at a different institution and back to working full time, I thought it would be useful to reflect on the learning experience of producing a complex higher education teaching resource in a way which might be described as pre-industrial — there has been no specialization, division of labor or externally imposed specifications. I built the site myself from the start, performing all the roles and tasks necessary to create, build and maintain the product.

A Hybrid Academic

Hence I singlehandedly produced the website. I was the academic, the developer, the designer, the administrator, the financier, and every other role necessary in building the project.
To my mind, I believed I could build a useful resource on my own which would never be done by a university. The project itself is a hybrid of my different interests and beliefs and values. Before the project began I held three (possibly more) values which were separate and not integrated. Firstly, I’ve long had a commitment to the scholarship of university teaching, notably in modern languages which formed the basis of my previous professional role. Secondly, I had become increasingly aware of issues surrounding open access and the realization (in the UK at least) that public money is used to fund research in UK universities, but the publications resulting from that research are not available to the public. Thirdly, as a matter of personal vanity, I desired to create something which I thought would raise my profile in the UK higher education community at a time when my professional circumstances were less than ideal. The project is therefore a hybrid of personal values.

YazikOpen is built using the open source software Drupal (https://drupal.org/) (Version 7). It is hosted on a commercially available shared server. I built the website, added the content, publicised the website myself via my personal and YazikOpen (http://www.twitter.com/yazikopen) Twitter accounts. I am responsible for its maintenance, its security, its appearance and its updating. Learning about all aspects of building a (not straightforward) website is a steep learning curve.

A Hybrid Tool

Despite the apparent individualism, YazikOpen is a collaborative project. However it is one in which I don’t know who my collaborators are. Drupal core is built and maintained by a vast community of developers. The optional (or contributed) modules are built by individuals or teams and are reviewed for conflicts, stability and security. For YazikOpen the key contributed module is biblio (https://drupal.org/project/biblio) which enables content to be added in various formats including bibtex, ris and Open Pub Med as well as providing a user interface for adding articles. If we conceive Drupal core as providing the architecture to build a basic website, the add-on modules provide the functionality to create more technically elaborate and complex websites. The bibliography module “…allows you to create and maintain bibliographic lists of publications.” More
accurately the module enables the user to construct an online library catalogue. I do not have the technical knowledge to develop and modify either the core or the optional modules, but as of January 2014 over 30,000 individuals have contributed in a large or small way to the development of Drupal. In this regard YazikOpen might be seen as a product of thousands of collaborators.

Drupal is a free open source content management system (CMS) consisting of a ‘core’ and hundreds of optional modules, written in PHP. I experimented with Joomla and WordPress, but was unable to find already-built modules with functionality I required to build a reference-based website, and without programming skills was unable to build the functionality myself. This was particularly daunting as one my former colleagues showed me a cartoon of the Drupal learning curve compared to other web development packages. Whereas other packages are presented as showing the standard increase in knowledge over time, the Drupal curve is depicted as a cliff. Developers are seen as falling off the cliff, hanging off the ledges and hanging themselves. Some developers scale the cliff only to be run over by a train. Although I faced many technical difficulties, it was easier to get started than I expected. A one-click Drupal installation was available from my hosting company and Drupal for Dummies proved to be a worthwhile investment. Admittedly it took several rebuilding attempts to get the website working properly the way I wanted it to, but I am very stubborn by nature and don’t like to give up.

Drupal is foundational to my project. The successful maintenance of my website depends upon unknown people who are not accountable to me working to ensure that the core and contributed modules are secure, stable and do not conflict with one another. Therefore this website, indeed any website, is never a finished product. Without regular maintenance it is
vulnerable to viruses, browser incompatibility and software conflicts. This is not a project which starts, then finishes, but one which is either actively nurtured or breaks. Now at 20 years old, much of the World Wide Web is a graveyard of neglected and broken websites, often forgotten by their developers or existing as tombstones commemorating ‘finished’ projects of times past, where the website was one of the ‘outputs’. Like a vehicle, a building, or a garden, a website without maintenance and nurturing will sooner or later become a pile of rust, a heap of stones or an out of control blight on the neighborhood.

I was motivated by the knowledge that I was developing new skills, despite not having the objective of becoming a professional web developer. I also had (and still have) the overarching feeling that this project, or one like it, might be the one which brings about a career-changing success.

**Strategies for Engagement**

It is one thing to build a website of this nature, but another to popularise it and make it known in the target community. While this article focuses on the process aspects of building the resource, the promotion strategy has been somewhat haphazard. In truth I hoped that it would be discovered and take off on its own. I’ve made a lot of use of Twitter ([https://twitter.com/yazikopen](https://twitter.com/yazikopen)) and LinkedIn groups ([http://www.linkedin.com/groups/YazikOpen-4252966](http://www.linkedin.com/groups/YazikOpen-4252966)). My attempts to allow people to sign up and add their own content has generated mostly spam. My attempts to generate revenue through Google AdSense has not worked as Google regards the site as mostly links and not original content.

Many of the articles in YazikOpen are relevant to language teachers in high schools, and a lot of followers of YazikOpen are schoolteachers or former schoolteachers who have shown...
leadership in UK school languages. Those who have engaged include Independent Technology consultant Joe Dale (http://www.twitter.com/joedale), school leader Helen Myers (http://www.twitter.com/helenmyers), and Languages head Isabelle Jones (http://www.twitter.com/icpjones). The relatively close knit nature of the modern languages community in the UK and my role within it has been important in raising awareness of YazikOpen. I also worked on the Routes into Languages Programme (https://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/), a long term Government funded project which brought me into contact with policy makers and schools. The current programme manager is my former colleague and collaborator Angela Gallagher-Brett (http://www.twitter.com/angelagallagher3b), herself a former school languages teacher whose commitment to scholarship in language learning led her to undertake a PhD in language learning motivation. It is striking that these contacts and engagers with YazikOpen are people I have come across in more traditional professional settings alongside their online presences.

It could be argued that academics employed in well-funded universities are the people who benefit least from open access. Most of my academic colleagues work in universities where they are able to obtain any research content they wish either through subscription or through interlibrary loan. Many academics are very much in favour of open access, of course, and open access has become an increasingly high profile issue in the UK (as elsewhere). In my view the Finch report’s (http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/) proposal to put aside extra money to pay traditional journals to make articles open access has played a key role in de-radicalizing the open access approach. Finch protects publishers’ profits and leads us to the situation where individual researchers will be unable to publish as they will be in competition for these limited funds.

I do believe that the website raises awareness of access issues and encourages scholarship amongst those who have limited access to research. The stats provided by my web-hosting company reveal that a high number of the 2000 or so
unique visitors each month are from China or Russia. The twitter followers indicate a UK bias, the webstats have a much more international flavor.

I spoke about the website at the University of Southampton e-learning symposium (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8DIQZzaXnU) in 2013 which provided a face-to-face engagement opportunity with a wider audience of language teachers. Again ‘traditional’ settings such as conferences, face-to-face conversations, and business cards have yielded interest in the project.

The Definition of Success

On an earlier draft of this article I fell into the trap of thinking about my project in the same way I had to evaluate and self-evaluate activity in the context of my paid employment where metrics such as web hits and value for money are important measures of a project’s success. My experience of previous projects has been that however successful they are in the short term, once the money runs out they get rebranded, fossilised, hacked, or abandoned altogether.

The great advantage of running your own hybrid project is that there are not predefined terms for success and there is no fixed time frame for any success criteria you might set yourself. YazikOpen is a part of the wider open access movement and provides a unique service in providing open access to articles about language teaching. It was built to serve a niche part of the online community and that’s exactly what it does. There is a great personal satisfaction to learning new skills and knowing that you can apply these new skills to other projects.

Developing and maintaining the site costs money, time, and effort. However, I am passionate about open access and know that my website provides a service which no other provides. The satisfaction of knowing people can access articles without coming across paywalls is important to me. This is not just a website, but a cause. One piece of advice I would give for anyone wanting to do something similar is to focus on something you care about enough to enjoy investing your own time, skills and money.
I reason that YazikOpen is a success and that is why I want to tell people about it. I believe open access is important and people need to know about it. I believe language learning is important and want people to be able to read about it without facing paywalls. My website is a success because it provides a place where these things come together and happen. Without the website these are just beliefs and opinions without any solution. The website offers a solution.

**Conclusion**

I would hesitate to claim that YazikOpen is especially innovative, but the fact that the website exists and works is beyond any dispute. It is certain that this project could not have been supported by my university in terms of time or resource, or least not at the time when my professional environment changed considerably (more [here](http://johncanning.net/wp/?p=352)).

So what lessons might I pass onto others? Creating a project like this outside the university environment can be a productive endeavor. A few thoughts:

1. Patience and perseverance are essential qualities when learning new skills and concepts.

2. The outside space has no deadlines or external demands and specifications though unless you have no other work or home commitments a project like YazikOpen will often be crowded out by these demands.

3. This outside space is one in which risks can be taken, which would not be feasible in a work environment where everything is costed (in time and reputation as well as money).

4. Fame and fortune come to a small number of website developers, but there is no guarantee the fruits of months or years of hard work will ever come.

5. The financial risk involved in a web-based project is very small, but the time outlay and opportunity cost (which will be financial for some) might be substantial.
6. Don’t forget more 'traditional' ways of telling people about your work, e.g. conferences, friends, colleagues, flyers and business cards.

I would also add…

1. If the project takes a completely different direction to one expected that’s not a problem.

2. If the free open source software doesn’t work for what you want to do, try different software.

3. If something doesn’t work, there is no one to get angry but you.

4. The journey may take a long time, but nobody is timing you.

5. Whatever happens you will learn new skills.

6. You might be making a huge difference to somebody, but you may never know that person or know much difference you made.

[Photo by Sprengben [why not get a friend] (http://www.flickr.com/photos/sprengben/)]

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**About the Author**

**John Canning** ([@JohnGCanning](http://www.twitter.com/johngcanning)) is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Learning and Teaching, at the University of Brighton. He also runs Yazikopen ([http://www.yazikopen.org.uk](http://www.yazikopen.org.uk)), a database of open access research into teaching and learning modern languages, and he is the author of the online book [Statistics for the Humanities](http://statisticsforhumanities.net/book1/).