Sharing Resources through Online Movement

Making course materials accessible to anyone with access to the Web might seem counterintuitive to institutions offering online courses and degree programs. Still, the "open content" movement is growing. It involves making education resources available cheaply or for free over the Internet. Many believe that these nascent, online repositories can transform higher education, and benefit not only individuals, but institutions as well.

"In continuing education, we've always understood that the focus on students means we have to make our offerings very convenient to them," says Gary Matkin, Dean of Continuing Education at the University of California, Irvine, and Principal Investigator of a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to advise and support the Foundation's Open Content Initiative. "That's why we offer our classes at night, and on weekends, and that's why we are so excited about online education. Here's something that takes that a step further, and it is solidly in our tradition to help people learn when and where they want and to help them with their learning goals. We are absolutely true to our traditions by entering into this open educational resource movement."

Using foundation grants, institutions such as UC Irvine, The University of California at Berkeley, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have begun the process of uploading course materials into online repositories. Though the structure is loose, set definitions and standards

Survey: Recent College Grads Optimistic About Finding Jobs

Members of the class of 2005 appear optimistic about finding full-time jobs soon, although they are less certain that those jobs will meet their expectations, according to the results of a multinational survey released by consulting giant Accenture.

According to the findings of the survey—which polled 1,600 recent or soon-to-be college and university graduates in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Spain—six in 10 (59 percent) who are not working full-time said they anticipate beginning a full-time job within six months, and only one-fifth (20 percent) believe it will take more than one year to find a job.

The results are comparable to those of a similar survey that Accenture fielded last year, when 60 percent of respondents said they expected to find a job within six months and 16 percent thought the process would take more than one year.

Despite this overall optimism, only about one-third (37 percent) of all respondents are extremely or very confident that those jobs will meet their expectations. Graduates in the United States and Germany are most optimistic, with 53 percent and 47 percent of respondents in those countries, respectively, saying they are "extremely confident" or "very confident" about finding jobs that meet their expectations. This compares with 36 percent, 27 percent and 21 percent of respondents in the United Kingdom, France and Spain, respectively.
Nascent Open Knowledge Resource Movement Catching On

From page 1 are still unclear, and context is often lacking, Matkin says purveyors of online education have two primary reasons to involve themselves with the open content movement. First, open education resources provide a free, copyright-free way for educators to download material that they can use to bolster their own online course offerings. Second, it offers a vehicle through which an institution’s quality educational offerings can be introduced to a larger, outside audience, enhancing an institution’s reputation and prestige.

Open Content Catching On

In 2001, MIT introduced its OpenCourseWare (OCW) initiative. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation funded the first phase of the project with $11 million in grants. MIT put up a pilot site in 2002, and currently has more than 1,000 courses available openly at http://ocw.mit.edu. In 2007, OCW will offer all 1,800 MIT courses. Earlier this year, Utah State University, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Rice, and Carnegie Mellon were among the institutions that began their own open learning collections. (Collections are accessible through a portal site at www.opencontent.org)

“Information as a digital resource offers the best of both worlds,” says David Wiley, Assistant Professor, Instructional Technology at Utah State University and Executive Director of the Open Sustainable Learning Opportunity (OSLO) Group. “It gives us a permanence in that it’s always there, and it’s non-rivalrous, in that if a Web page is up on the network, all of us can use it at the same time. It provides a foundation for open sharing that we’ve not been able to ever do before.”

Not Intended as Alternative to Structured Learning

But to learners, the concept is often misunderstood, says Anne Margulies, Executive Director of the OCW initiative. “You cannot register for MIT open courseware, because it’s certainly not the same as an MIT education,” she says. “It’s not interactive with our faculty, and we don’t grant any kind of degree or credentials.” Instead, she says, “The best way to think about what open courseware is, is to think of it as a publication—one that provides the raw materials that educators, students, and self-learners can use.”

Surveys of MIT OCW users found that they are highly educated—66 percent have bachelors or masters degrees. Meantime, “educators are using it to help plan, develop and teach a course, as well as for personal knowledge.” UC Irvine’s Matkin says institutions need not fear that opening their content will detract from the educational experience they offer. “Most courses out there on open source are not going to be so well-designed that somebody can wing through them without the help of an instructor,” he says. “Most of us need a teacher, a narrative thread, and interaction, and with some [open source] courses, you’re never going to be able to get the educational value out of it that you would otherwise. One of the problems we’ve had in the rhetoric of online education is the jumping to logically arrived-at, illogical extremes.”

“High-Quality” Lacks Definition

Another obstacle for open education resources is what constitutes high quality content. “There’s an interesting tension between this notion of wanting our open education to be high quality, and to see a lot of diversity,” says Utah State’s Wiley. “Quality has to be brought to levels of specificity—in much the way that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, high quality is as well.”

Matkin says initially, foundations feel that if they engage major research institutions with good reputations, those institutions will have a stake in making sure that content under their name stands up to quality standards. He expects that participating institutions will have to agree to also maintain their content once it is up, so it does not become obsolete.

As the kinks are worked out and more institutions begin to participate, Matkin sees the movement achieving success comparable to that of the open-source software movement, where a community of users actively improves shared software. “That’s the self-generative quality that we’re trying to produce in education,” he says. “We’re not quite sure how we can get to something that can sustain itself, and it may catch on in some communities and not others. One size will not fit all, but some if it will catch.

“The notion of a self-generative community based on improvement, where an educational product can be reviewed and improved on a continual basis, that could be transformative to our society, and could transform education.”