

## OpenCourseWare

In 2001 the William and Flora Hewlett and Andrew W. Mellon foundations announced they would be funding MIT's "OpenCourseWare" initiative. The OpenCourseWare project website states the project's goals:

1. Provide free, searchable, coherent access to MIT's course materials for educators in the non-profit sector, students, and individual learners around the world.
2. Create an efficient, standards-based model that other universities may emulate to publish their own course materials (MIT, 2002a).

The OpenCourseWare Frequently Asked Questions further states:

The idea behind MIT OpenCourseWare (OCW) is to make MIT course materials that are used in the teaching of almost all undergraduate and graduate subjects available on the Web, free of charge, to any user anywhere in the world. MIT OCW will advance technology-enhanced education at MIT, and will serve as a model for university dissemination of knowledge in the Internet age. This venture continues the tradition at MIT, and in American higher education, of open dissemination of educational materials, philosophy, and modes of thought, and will help lead to fundamental changes in the way colleges and universities utilize the Web as a vehicle for education (MIT, 2002b).

The context and history of the OpenCourseWare project can be traced back to Stallman's 1983 announcement of the foundation of the GNU project housed within the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab. The purpose of the GNU project was "to write a complete Unix-compatible software system called GNU (for Gnu's Not Unix), and give it away free to everyone who can use it" (Stallman, 1983). Formation of the Free Software Foundation, a tax-exempt charity for free software development, followed in 1985 (FSF, 1998). The idea of technology-facilitated sharing was coming of age.

When Linus Torvalds, then a student at the University of Helsinki, released the initial version of his "Linux" operating system in 1991 he licensed the software using the GNU General Public License (GPL). While many people liked the basic idea of free software as espoused by Stallman, some thought his zeal (which occasionally bordered on a berserker rage) was giving the movement a bad name. At a February 1998 strategy session Eric Raymond and others created an alternative label, "open source software," which retained what they liked about free software and rejected some idealistic baggage (OSI, 2002).

Later in 1998 Wiley launched the OpenContent project and announced the first open content license, working on the premise that non-software content – specifically educational content – should be developed and shared in a spirit similar to that of free and open software (OC, 1998). The notion of free and open content quickly gained

popularity. In 2000 Stallman announced the GNU Free Documentation License (Stallman, 2000), in 2001 Lessig and others announced the Creative Commons project (CC, 2002), and by 2002 OpenCourseWare had come to MIT, returning to where the idea of technology-facilitated sharing had been pioneered 20 years earlier.

While intellectual property laws like the DMCA seem to be proliferating, peer-to-peer system users are illegally sharing proprietary content with each other, and secure digital content in the form of e-books are being “hacked” and compromised, OpenCourseWare offers an alternative view of the future of educational technology and the instructional content to be delivered thereby: a future in which less time, money, and energy are spent worrying about digital rights management and stopping “pirates,” and more time, money, and energy are spent getting students in touch with high quality educational content. When empowered students begin to ask “why are we paying \$100 for a computer science textbook by some guy we never heard of when comparable resources are available from MIT for free?,” all teaching and learning are bound to change.

## References

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