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OpenCourseWare and OpenLearn

By Stephen Downes

What is an online course? What is an online education? These questions are at the heart of recent offerings of free online content from institutions like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Britain's Open University.

When it was launched in 2002, MIT's OpenCourseWare (OCW) was emphatically declared to be a limited online offering. "OCW is not about online degree programs. It isn't even about online courses for which students can audit or enroll," wrote Phillip D. Long. (1) It was intended to be nothing more than "the content that supports an MIT education."

The understated message in an initiative such as OCW is that an MIT education is not equivalent to the resources that support the education, that it consists essentially of the contact with the professors and the community that develops among the students. And the scale of that difference is emphasized by the release of the material, so much so that OCW could be considered to be a marketing ploy by the University. (2)

Perhaps not, but as OCW materials circle the globe via the internet, something like an MIT education is being created with them, often with MIT's stamp of approval. Thus we see UNESCO and the French University of Egypt signing an agreement to adapt the MIT content for use in the delivery of a number of courses. Something like an MIT education *can* be obtained – but like the liturgies of old, the intercession of the scholar is needed to interpret the source materials.

But is the development of an institution and a class, whether online or in person, necessary in order to translate digital content into learning? What of the self-study materials that have blanketed the digital world offering everything from database design to Spanish lessons?

Enter the Open University, which in 2006 announced the launch of its own open content initiative. (3) Rather than the mere release of learning materials, the Open University released complete courses. The courses contain learning outcomes, links to resources and structured instructional materials. Everything, it might be said, that a home learner needs to complete the course. (4)

The MIT model has captured a lot of interest. Now institutions such as Johns Hopkins (5) and Utah State University (6) and numerous others (7) have followed MIT's path. The model has come, almost, to define online learning. But prior to MIT's initiative, online learning embodied the full package, and the offerings online could quite properly be called a course. And open educational resources meant something like "free courses", as offered, say, by the University of Washington. (8)

In the world of open access journals, different publishers are classed by colour according to how open their offerings really are. There is the "gold" model, where content is published in completely open access journals, and the "green" model, where articles appear in subscription-based journals, but may also be self-archived on one's own website. (9) The difference is that while one model, the gold model, ensures a publication will be freely available, the other model, the green model, means only that it is possible.

A similar distinction may be made between the models offered by the Open University and MIT. The Open University offers a "gold" model for open learning online. The course materials are presented in a fully online course, from which a learner could obtain an education in that subject. The MIT model, by contrast, is a "green" model. It makes free online learning possible. But it is itself not an instance of free online learning.

(1) http://campustechnology.com/article.asp?id=5913

(2) http://www.elearnmag.org/subpage.cfm?section=articles&article=8-1

(3) http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/

(4) http://innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=432&action=article

(5) http://ocw.jhsph.edu/

(6) http://ocw.usu.edu/

(7) http://www.ocwconsortium.org

(8) http://www.outreach.washington.edu/openuw/

(9) http://www.ecs.soton.ac.uk/%7Eharnad/Temp/impact.html