

No Brick No Mortar No Boundaries

Distance Education and OpenCourseWare

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"Education is learning what you didn't even know you didn't know."

—Daniel Boorstin

THE GOLDEN RULE

Recently, in the midst of a conversation about academic freedom and academic capitalism, a colleague asked me if I had heard about the golden rule. My thoughts ruminated back to basics. I was able to vividly see the image

of a classic poster, which hung in my classroom for years. It read, "Everything I need to know, I learned in kindergarten." At that moment I knew that I was missing something, only I wasn't quite sure what it was. The problem I faced entailed not being able to pinpoint a single golden rule from my repertoire of principles connected to the paradigm of conversation taking place that day. After a few moments of silence, and a complete inability to answer, I was told the golden rule is: "He who has the gold makes the rules."

Two timeless ideals—open schools and expanding the freedoms of learners—can be considered "golden rules" or principles, that Charles Wedemeyer—a distance education visionary and founding father—advocated. His principles were grounded in educational access and learning opportunities for all people, regardless of race, gender, geographic, or economic circumstance. In 1975, he presented a paper at the ICCE conference on the topic of open learning. At the time, the concept of open learning was new. It had only surfaced a few years earlier when The Open University of the United Kingdom was established. Wedemeyer predicted that technologies and media would change the



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way teachers and students interact (Brandenburg Essays), and his ideals helped shape the distance education and open education movements. Although they are both rooted in similar principles, they represent different education models. According to Wedemeyer (1975),

All open schools have one principle in common: they are to a greater or lesser extent efforts to expand the freedoms of learners.... When the adjective "open" is used to qualify "learning" we have put a name to a process of learning that not enclosed or encumbered by barriers, that is accessible and available, not confined or concealed, and that implies a continuum of access and availability. (Wedemeyer, 1975, p. 2)

Wedemeyer's quest transformed educational landscapes and improved qualities of lives for individuals, and societies at large. Distance education, and open learning experiences reflect these principles as core ideals of democratic society.

INFORMATION ECONOMY: THE GOLD RUSH

As with any concept or word, the way in which it is defined determines the scope of its use, the perceptions surrounding it, and its practical applications. In today's open information economy, change happens quickly. Terms take on new meanings that reflect current phenomenon. The word "open" is a prime example. The term open has been crystallized based on the scope of its use in "market" practices. For instance, *open* is used to describe software products that are attainable at no charge. Open software can be accessed anywhere, at any-time, with an Internet connection. The operational definition of *open* under this circumstance may mean "free" for the user. Other types of software are accessible for trial periods. They are used as marketing techniques and then serve as a gateway for later purchase. In these instances, the oper-

ational definition of "open" would not mean "free," but rather, relate to the concept of borrowing for a period of time.

The concept of open is a trend along the Internet information highway. It is frequently used in the global market place and notable by practices in the software industry. "Open" is also a buzzword in education circles. How does the concept "open" apply to distance education? The answer is not simple, and there are far too many to note within the space of this article. However, the concept should not be disregarded. To the contrary, it should be investigated, and when applications are found to be valid, they can be used to solve problems in distance education; enhancing overall teaching and learning experiences as well as program outcomes.

Distinct operating agendas drive an open information economy. Incentives include intrinsic motivation, socio-psychological motivation, and, of course capital gain (Benkler, 2006). For the purpose of this article, I have selected one open area, because of its rapid expansion. It has attracted global attention and has been directly involved with promoting UNESCO's mission to provide educational access, and information resources to underdeveloped regions around the world. This article will explore Open-CourseWare (OCW) and consider applications to distance education.

THE OPEN MOVEMENT

The first step in understanding OCW is to conceptualize the economic framework of the entire open movement. To establish this background, I refer to Benkler's (2006) book, *The Wealth of Networks*. It suggests that the current economic market is driven through a commons-based, peer-production system that promotes freedom and access based on information incentives (Benkler, 2006). According to Benkler (2006),

The undeniable economic success of free software has prompted some leading-edge economists to try to understand why many thousands of loosely networked free software developers can compete with Microsoft at its own game and produce a massive operating system-GNU/Linux.... Eric von Hippel's notion of "user-driven innovation" has begun to expand that focus to thinking about how individual need and creativity drive innovation at the individual level, and its diffusion through networks of like-minded individuals.... Free software is but one salient example of a much broader phenomenon. (Benkler, 2006, p. 5)

When thinking about the broader phenomenon that von Hippel alludes to, distance education professionals might want to consider how an open market of learning resources might affect distance education. For those paying attention, you will see that it already has.

Learning institutions adopt course management systems or learning management systems at administrative levels. They are then diffused throughout the social networks of faculty, staff and student populations. Decisions to adopt technologies must make sense in order for the organization to sustain, or help improve, existing products and programs (Moore, 2002, p. 50). Institutional decisions related to the types of learning-management systems adopted also reflect institutional policies pertaining to academic capital. Unless an organization is looking to alter revenue streams, change current standards and policies, or adopt new standards, they are generally not interested in adopting disruptive technologies (Christenssen, 1997; Moore, 2002, p. 50). Thus, just as learning management systems and course management systems are integral to a program when adopting distance learning programs, an infrastructure is also needed for OCW because it is an open system.

Adherence to copyright laws, publishing practices, and Internet Protocol has

been carefully factored into distance education programs. Course management systems and learning management systems serve as communication catalyst support systems. They are designed to be aligned with both institutional and legal guidelines. One of the greatest challenges and concerns with OCW entails issues of copyright and intellectual property rights. In attempts to solve this issue, the Creative Commons was formed.

The Creative Commons license reflects a commons-based peer-production model. It allows one to retain ownership of their work or waive those rights for the benefit of others. The open movement has caused greater degrees of polarity between the concepts of academic freedom and academic capitalism. Perhaps the aforementioned golden rule statement, "He who has the gold makes the rules," is merited when exploring the complexities of these two concepts. To evaluate at a micro level, it is important to take note of distinct differences between OCW and distance education.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN DISTANCE EDUCATION AND OCW

Information and communication technologies have been catalysts to growth in distance education. Information technologies have also played the same role in enabling OpenCourseWare landscapes to grow. OCW and distance education are remarkably different. To clarify the distinction between distance education and OCW, it is necessary to take notice of how each is defined. According to Schlosser and Simonson (2006), distance education is defined as, "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors" (p. 1). The OpenCourseWare Consortium defines OCW as, "a free and open digital publication of high quality university-level educa-

tional materials. These materials are organized as courses, and often include course planning materials and evaluation tools as well as thematic content” (OCW Consortium, 2010). OCW is not distance education. However, like distance education, it is a disruptive technology. OCW resources can be used to enhance distance education programs, because they provide access to educational resources. Educators, students, and others who are involved in supporting and facilitating learning experiences can use these resources.

OCW OVERVIEW

In 2001, OCW was proposed and launched at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). According to Slaughter and Rhoades (2010) OCW was designed to place MIT as a technology leader; however, this was “only after deciding they would not be able to generate substantial revenue from selling online education. What was posted on the web were syllabi, lecture notes, reading lists, not course modules, over which faculty retained ownership” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2010, p. 286). Nevertheless, when MIT piloted its first OCW initiative, it was an immediate success. In 2002, the program began with 50 MIT courses. These courses also included Spanish translations (MITOCW). The following year the program expanded to 500 courses and added Chinese translations. Since its inception, the program has grown with hundreds of new courses on an annual basis (MITOCW). According to MITOCW (2009)

More than one million visits-or user sessions-have been recorded on the site from an estimated 800,000 individuals, primary high school educators and students. Top visitor groups include high school educators (34%), high school students (15.5%), and parents of high schoolers (13%).... The site contains notes from more than 1,750 lectures, 9,500 assignments, and 980 exams. (MITOpenCourseWare, 2009)

MIT, the OCW Consortium, and UNESCO are aligned in missions to avail access to knowledge and information via educational channels. OCW is a digital platform that is crafted to achieve this end. Carson (2009) for the global OpenCourseWare Consortium, reports:

Materials from more than 6,200 courses were freely and openly available, and an incomplete reporting indicated that more than 2.25 million visits were paid to those materials each month traffic reporting did not include traffic to more than 1,600 courses available through the China Quality OpenCourseWare programme. (Carson, 2009, p. 23)

Growth is clear. From the time of the programs inception to present, the amount of course material that has become available, in addition to the traffic accounted for in site visit data, indicates that adoption of OCW is underway.

CONNECTING WITH OCW: A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

I have always been drawn to social, political, and economic issues at a macro level. As a long time educator, and now a doctoral student in instructional technology and distance education, not much has changed. Without knowing it, researching Rogers’ (1995) diffusion of innovations, and Benkler’s (2006) peer-production model, led me in the direction of crossing paths with “open learning” disruptive technologies.

As an educator, I have always been aware of the importance of interaction in a learning experience. Becoming an expert in instructional technology and distance education generates new perspectives in terms of just how important interaction is to any learning process. Recognizing that there is only so much one can learn independently behind the interface of a computer screen, I knew that my next step entailed speaking to an expert about OCW.

After doing my homework, I decided to contact Steve Carson.

Steve Carson is the OpenCourseWare Consortium President, and also the Evaluation Coordinator, and Senior Strategist for MIT's OpenCourseWare project. We spoke at length regarding various aspects of MIT's OpenCourseWare. Our conversation afforded me the opportunity to learn more about OCW, and also make tangible concrete connections to some of the information that I had been researching regarding diffusion of an innovation and peer-production, as it pertained to academic freedom and academic capitalism. Highlights reflecting what I processed from our conversation are addressed below.

HIGHLIGHT: STRIKING BALANCE

First, Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health, Tufts University, and Open University of the United Kingdom are all sustaining members of the OCW Consortium, and active participants in the OCW movement. The common thread between these unique institutions is that they all have adopted OpenCourseWare and have distance education programs. Although it is understood that institutions have different goals and objectives, and clearly operate with different business models, all three have not "thrown away the baby with the bath water." Many institutions are fearful that OCW will deplete distance education revenue streams. To the contrary, OCW is not distance education, nor does it present itself to be any form of formal education. OCW is a knowledge-sharing venture, and cornerstones are being turned. Whether or not the concept is appealing to all audiences, OCW has had a positive impact on global audiences. To date there are over "13,000 courses published by 150 universities" (OCW Consortium). At some point soon, instead of asking why organizations *are* participating

in OCW, future questions will emerge and ask the opposite: why *aren't* you involved with OCW?

HIGHLIGHT: GATEWAY

Learning through OCW can be a gateway towards enrollment or towards earning certifications. The concept of OCW as a gateway is much like the software example cited earlier, and it is also similar to CLEP—the College Level Examination Program. The OCW Consortium (2010) reports that at the National Chiao Tung University in Taiwan, "many learners on campus or self-learners outside of school have all taken the test and received certificates" (OCW). Taking a test costs money. Thus, eventually there are cost implications for the learners if they choose to take certification exams. On the flip side, this generates revenue for the institution. At the front end, course materials may be at no charge to the learner; however, at the back end, universities can generate capital from a certification process. In addition, there are potential positive enrollment implications for both the learner and the institution. For instance, once students begin earning credits for the materials they have learned, and have tested and met proficiency standards, students may want to enroll in distance education courses to then complete a formal degree. I place emphasis on distance learning simply because through the process of accessing and retrieving educational resources in a digital environment, learners are already comfortable with some of the technologies associated with distance education. Once learners experience the interactive components of distance education, which is remarkably different than presentations of static OCW material, they will most likely value the formal teaching and learning experience that distance education offers. OCW material enhances the learning experience.

OCW: RESOLVING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

The prevalence of language barriers is an issue within the field of distance education. Many programs are designed in English, yet English may not be the learner's first or second language. This places the learner in a position of disadvantage, and his or her learning outcomes may be compromised due to comprehension issues and communication problems. Hope (2005) points to several disadvantages in transnational education. She notes that "Cultural imperialism as exemplified by the use of English rather than the national language; a standardized curriculum rather than a culturally embedded syllabus; and norms of degrees architecture rather than a local model" (p. 27) illustrate some of the challenges that are prevalent in transnational distance education.

The concepts of no brick, no mortar, and no boundaries are rooted in eliminating structural barriers. The construct of not understanding a language of instruction is a difficult barrier to overcome. Perhaps, layering formal distance education with the support of OCW material, will serve as a means to overcome learning issues linked to language barriers. The OCW (2010) Consortium reports that course materials are available in 16 languages (OCW). Language barriers are documented problems in distance education. Exploring the possibility of a layered approach to distance learning using OCW to facilitate language is an area worthy of research.

EDUCATIONAL VIRTUE IS A GOLDEN RULE

In reality, golden rules are those that guide principles of respect and dignity for all people. The underlying meaning of golden rules is treating others in the same manner that they would want to be treated. Wedemeyer valued education and wanted oth-

ers to experience what he found valuable. Open schools and freedoms of learners were two golden rules that set the stage for distance education and open learning opportunities. These opportunities continue to grow. Allen and Seaman (2010) note that in the United States, "Over 5.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2009 term; an increase of nearly one million students over the number reported the previous year" (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 2). OpenCourseWare's growth has also been remarkable. One of the most recent additions to OCW is the development of an online study group designed by a professor and two former students from Georgia Tech. With the influence of social media, there is no doubt that both distance education and OCW will continue to present remarkable learning landscapes and gateways for educational opportunities. Moreover, the potential for formal distance learning programs to coexist with an OCW platform is not only apparent; the models at Johns Hopkins, Tufts, and the Open University exemplify it. Finally, OCW may serve as a prescription to solve one of distance education's problems related to language barriers. Although there may be truth to the saying, "He who has the gold makes the rules," the greater truth is that education professionals have golden opportunities to share, present, and provide education on a global scale with OCW and formal distance education programs. Education is golden!

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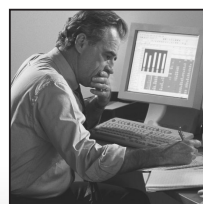
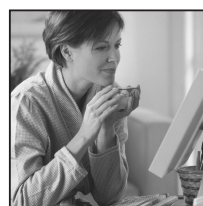
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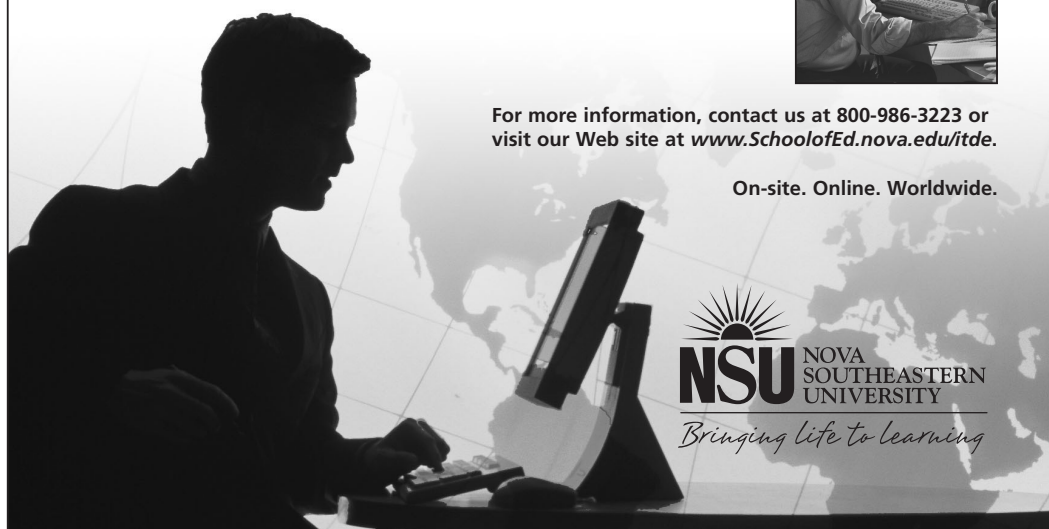
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