The World is Open for a Reason: Make that 30 Reasons!

By Curtis J. Bonk, Indiana University

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The educational world has become filled with millions of pieces of free and open content. The momentum for open education quickly accelerated in the early part of this decade when MIT announced its OpenCourseWare (OCW) initiative and dozens of other colleges and universities around the world joined in the cause. And it's not all just courses. Portals of open educational resources of all types are affecting how and when we learn, as well as the types of information we communicate and share with others.

These open educational resources (OER) have made a huge impact on the educational possibilities of young learners as well as retirees looking to build upon their past educational experiences. Online learning resources are likely to affect you daily, if not hourly. This very article, on an open-access site, is a case in point. You are learning through OER right now!

With the rising cost of higher education, combined with our currently gloomy economic situation, the media seems quite enamored with questions of whether individuals can effectively learn new skills from free and open content and even receive credentials from it.

While questions here remain open, I offer in total, 30 reasons why there is so much excitement for open education today. In this article, I point to 10 reasons a college, university, or other type of organization or institution would share its course materials and other educational contents online. Then I provide a similar list related to the benefits that educators might experience from sharing educational contents that they have creatively designed and used. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I address the learner, both formal and informal.

Flat Vs. Open

This set of 30 benefits and the educational framework that they relate to did not suddenly appear overnight. There has been an evolution to ideas about openness.

Back in the summer of 2005, I was flipping through Thomas Friedman's highly acclaimed book, *The World is Flat* [1], and watched a lecture he had given at MIT (http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/266) earlier that spring [2]. The 10 trends and triple convergence Friedman outlined made sense from a global economic standpoint. However, something was tugging at me as I read the book, that there was another story here.

Early in the book, Friedman touches on several key flatteners that might be easily extrapolated to well known changes affecting education, such as Internet search tools, collaborative technologies, wikis, and open source software. But much seemed left out.

I realized that the parallel trends in education were not really flatteners at all but a series of doors that were being opened for the diverse learners of this planet. As with Friedman's book, I outlined 10 interesting trends or doors in education. They eventually came to spell the acronym "WE-ALL-LEARN."

Ten Openers (WE-ALL-LEARN)

Web searching in the world of e-books.
E-learning and blended learning.
Availability of open source and free software.
Leveraged resources and OpenCourseWare.
Learning object repositories and portals.

Learner participation in open information communities.
Electronic collaboration.
Alternate reality learning.
Real-time mobility and portability.
Networks of personalized learning.

My own research and development efforts during the previous decade related to e-learning and shared online educational resources provided the initial framework, but I wanted to include more emerging trends and technologies related to open education.

The first person I turned to for additional resources and ideas related to my evolving WE-ALL-LEARN framework was David Wiley, then an associate professor at Utah State University. I knew that David had a keen pulse on the tools and initiatives that were leading to a more open and free education.

Within a day or two of contacting David and several of his colleagues at USU, the pool of resources at my disposal was mind-boggling. So much openness! There were open source software tools, open standards, free e-books, open access journals (including The International Journal of Open Educational Resources (http://journal.eduforge.org/index.php/eduforge)), OER, open information communities, and OCW from places like MIT and USU. In addition, I found an emerging suite of tools for learner empowerment within this more open world brought about by Web 2.0.

David and his team at the Center for Open and Sustainable Learning (COSL) were situated at the heart of this open education movement. Unlike most academic programs and initiatives, back in 2005, the COSL staff had developed "superhero" cards and other creative marketing tools that they distributed to get their points across. He was "the opener," or in effect, someone that others could call upon to find out about this open world. At the same time, Shelley Henson played the role of "persuader," Brandon Muramatsu was the noted "maverick," and a fourth member of the team was "Captain Connections." In addition to their marketing skills, they were developing tools for standardizing OCW (e.g., eduCommons), coordinating OER conferences, summits, and online discussions, and recruiting colleges and universities to participate in OCW and open education.

The world was becoming more open before our eyes. All this would eventually lead COSL to produce a free handbook related to open educational resources for educators [3].

With this timely advice from the COSL people, it was off to the 2005 E-Learn Conference in Vancouver to deliver my first keynote talk using my 10-part framework. The talk was titled, "OOPS, Did You Mean to Share That? Opensource, Opencourseware, and the Learning Objects of Tomorrow." The "OOPS" part of the talk was in reference to Lucifer Chu, who was in the audience and would join me on stage at the end to address the audience about what they could do in this more open learning world.

Lucifer, a tall, long-haired gentleman from Taipei, is quite well known for his fortuitous work translating J. R. R. Tolkien's landmark *The Lord of the Rings* books to Chinese within weeks of the release of the 2001 film *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Based on his successes with *The Lord of the Rings* box set sales, starting in February 2004, Lucifer personally designed and funded the Opensource Opencourseware Prototype System (OOPS) with the mission to translate MIT and other OCW into simplified and traditional Chinese, and make it free to the world. Lucifer became a symbol for the free and open education movement worldwide.

Another person in the audience that day was Aidan McCarthy, worldwide industry manager, worldwide public sector—education, from Microsoft. Two weeks later, I surprisingly found myself in Redmond, Washington, presenting ideas about this increasingly free and wide open educational world to Microsoft executives from around the globe.

A year later, I hatched an idea to edit a book with chapters written by people who had changed the world of education to make it more open—the heroes, gurus, and revolutionaries of the shared Internet. As I began to outline chapters and sections for the book, it was suggested that I write it myself and interview the people I had hoped would contribute chapters. So I did.

The World is Open

I spent nearly a year writing _The World is Open (http://worldisopen.com/)_ : _How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education_ [4]. In contrast to Friedman's _The World is Flat_, which highlights global economic levelers, my book highlights the 10 trends that are changing society but from an educational, rather than an economic standpoint. Similar to Friedman's premise, there is a triple convergence underway in education. However, instead of Friedman's focus on new economic players, an equalized playing field, and more flattened management processes, I found a different set of the three 'P's significantly shaping the training and education arena: piping or technological infrastructure, pages of online content (trillions of them), and a participatory learning culture. So much is happening to open and expand education today that there will actually be two books—one physical and the other a free e-book extension of it [5], the latter will soon be downloadable from my site WorldisOpen (http://worldisopen.com/) . All the references and Web links for both books are already posted to that site, along with a short prequel article [6] [PDF download] (http://worldisopen.com/misc/prequel_new.pdf) that explains why those in different educational sectors now praise the sharing of training and education resources, when a decade or two ago they definitely were not.

COSL Card Openness

One question I'm often asked is, "How can people who are affected by the current economic crisis benefit from open education courses and other resources?" At the same time, people want to know, "What are the benefits for institutions and educators who share their content?"

Remember the superhero cards from COSL? They also had other cards and handouts that outlined how OER and OCW could help institutions of higher learning. For instance, they noted that such resources can showcase talented faculty, advance the educational mission of a college or university, enhance a program's or institution's reputation, help with faculty recruitment and retention, and make connections to lifelong learners. At the same time, such open resources could help a professor increase his or her reputation as leaders in the field, leave a legacy, support learning without interfering with the learners' busy schedules, and allow others to more easily build upon their work.

Finally, the COSL cards noted that students and informal learners could learn from supplemental online resources that were free and open, learn what was in a course before taking it, have access to educational opportunities despite having a full-time job or other inflexible commitments, and reacquaint themselves with professors and programs from which they may have graduated while obtaining free professional development updates. COSL staff definitely thought deeply about the implications of open education.

And I continue to think about it. Below is a selection from my upcoming e-book extension of _The World Is Open_, in which I list 10 reasons for institutions and organizations to share, 10 reasons for educators to share, and 10 reasons for people to want to learn from the resources that have been shared.

[Excerpt from the E-Book Extension of The World is Open_]_

> During the past few years, there have been many reports and analyses about the explosion of OER and OCW. These reports list many reasons why institutions of higher learning such as University of Southern Queensland in Australia, Athabasca University in Canada, Kabul Polytechnic University in Afghanistan, Kyoto University in Japan, King Saud University and Saudi Aramco in Saudi Arabia, Inha University

in Korea, the University of Notre Dame in the United States, the Open University of the United Kingdom, and dozens more share their courses online. Ten key ones are listed below.

10 Reasons Institutions and Organizations Freely Share Online Content

1. *Information Dissemination.* Colleges and universities are in the business to generate, archive, and disseminate knowledge. OCW is a highly effective way to accomplish such goals, especially those related to information dissemination. Colleges and universities also benefit by saving time in developing new content, courses, and programs.

2. *Student Assistance.* Help potential students find interesting major and minor areas of study as well as interesting casual electives.

3. *Supporting Alumni.* Retool and provide professional development opportunities for alumni by bringing them back to campus virtually whenever they desire or find the time.

4. *Sharing Teaching Practices and Ideas.* Foster the sharing of teaching approaches and innovations across the campus or campuses, and, thereby, potentially increase standards of teaching excellence. As this occurs, it helps instructors reflect on their teaching practices as well as their underlying philosophies of what makes for effective teaching.

5. *Program, Department, and Institutional Marketing.* Market specific courses, programs, and departments as well as the institution or organization as a whole.

6. *Goodwill and Global Education Efforts.* People in third-world countries might have access to college content that would normally not be available. For example, public health, nutrition, wellness, and family planning courses can be made available to people from Africa or other countries who are in need of it.

7. *Potential Partnerships and Global Education Efforts.* New local and global partnerships and programs may arise from the media and other attention brought about from sharing online content. In addition, free online courses can also be packaged into global and transnational education efforts.

8. *Content and Course Feedback.* People outside the university might lend feedback on the contents that are posted and perhaps even find and point out errors, thereby improving the course content.

9. *Economic Support and Career Options.* These courses might help the country and the world during difficult economic times such as those currently being felt. With OCW, people in tough situations might find career options and valuable new skills.

10. *Set Example and Open Dialogue about Educational Rights.* MIT, Utah State, and hundreds of other colleges and universities around the world have posted their work online as a shining example to others. Through their efforts, the world community can begin discussions about human rights to education. Universal education rights! Conferences can be formed, books can be written, research can be undertaken, etc. And all this is already happening, by the way. Anyone can sign the Cape Town "Declaration of Open Education (http://www.capetowndeclaration.org/read-the-declaration) ," [7] which was drafted in the fall of 2007.

When these reasons are added up, it is extremely difficult to deny the importance of OER and OCW at the institutional and organizational level. Administrators of

higher education and training personal in corporate settings would be foolish not to consider it. However, the motivation to share educational content is also a highly personal and individually enriching matter. Not surprisingly, instructors, tutors, and course designers have specific reasons that they share their content. Many of them simply want to communicate with their colleagues. Other educators have an internal need to test the edges of technology. Still others desire to attract new students or help the ones that they have complete their courses. These are among the 10 motives noted below that instructors have for sharing course content.

10 Reasons Instructors and Course Designers Freely Share Online Content
1. *Marketing Courses or Course Materials.* Some instructors place portions of courses or entire courses on the Web as a means to market their courses. With freely available content, potential students can find information about particular courses and perhaps excite others about such materials. Course information soon spreads virally. There is no need for physical handouts explaining the course. On top of that, physical reading packets have often been totally replaced by online reading lists and Web portals.

2. *Ease of Access.* Another logical reason to place course content online is to make it painless to access. Instructors want students to learn. Placing it online enhances the chances that they will at least be able to find and access it. At the same time, instructors will be able to quickly access that material when necessary. I know from personal experience that online access to course syllabi and content is highly valuable. An instructor no longer has to fumble through a sea of folders in file drawer or stack of papers to find needed information. This saves a huge amount of time!

3. *Content Repetition.* Providing content online allows current and potential students, informal learners, educators, and other interested onlookers to replay lectures, videos, podcasts, animations, and other forms of instruction, and learn the concepts and ideas more completely. Some educators might be learning this material in order to more confidently teach it to others. This might even be true for the instructor who posted it. In contrast, students might be burning the midnight oil with OCW at their side the night before taking AP tests. The ability to replay a creatively performed demonstration of a concept or complex part of a lecture can be highly valuable and is not typically possible in face-to-face instruction. Unlike traditionally set course times and locations, with digitally stored educational resources, each pass through the material costs nothing to the instructor, student, or institution.

4. *Pedagogical Idea Sharing.* Share instruction and pedagogical ideas with other professors and scholars. Sharing one's creative products with other instructors and scholars is part of what it means to be human. It also can elevate teaching practices and standards when instructors share their higher quality materials online.

5. *Extend Class Time.* Instructors can create a base of lectures or podcast performances that students can watch or listen to so that when they come to class, they can engage in extended or higher-level activities. If shared ahead of time and part of course expectations or weekly assignments, instructors could perhaps assume that students have watched the associated lectures or listened to the relevant podcasts for the week and move on to more interactive and engaging experiences during class meeting times.

6. *Expert Feedback Support.* Instructors might share their educational content as a way to garner feedback on the accuracy, currency, or overall quality of the contents.

7. *Standardization of the Content.* The same content or course might have multiple sections with different instructors or varied educational applications. Posting the contents will help standardize the use of it. It might also push instructors to perform at higher levels.

8. *Experimentation and Risk.* Sharing one's content online exercises one's risk muscle. It also forces instructors and course designers to keep course content up-to-date. Risk taking exhibited by one instructor can be observed and internalized by others, thereby extending the course content or even the entire discipline in exciting, new directions.

9. *Personal Growth.* By sharing one's personally created content with the world community or even a small piece of it, instructors stay fresh and energized about the topics that they teach, as well as their profession. My own research in this area indicates that personal growth is a key reason for instructors to post content online. There is nothing worse in life, perhaps, then observing a teacher who is burned out.

10. *Responsive to the Needs of Others.* Sometimes instructors share content simply because there have been numerous requests for it. Many cultures, such as those in most Asian countries, have high respect for teachers and education in general. When someone from Taiwan or Korea requests an instructor to share content, it is a huge compliment.

While the reasons institutions and instructors share educational courses and contents online continues to accelerate and become commonly accepted, there is mounting interest in the reasons why or how someone might want to use free online course contents and materials, especially among those who are unemployed or at risk of losing their jobs. It's a good question. Perhaps journeys into online content will soon end up on resumes and job applications. Such activities may be more common if the economic crisis lasts for a few years. With each swing in the economy, there will be many more citizens of Planet Earth wanting to know the benefits of all this free and open content. Some potential responses to these questions and concerns are listed below.

10 Reasons Potential Learners Might Use Shared Online Content
1. *Searching for a Place to Study.*Those using online content might simply be hoping to find a community college or university to enroll in. Freely available online content provides many clues about the course, instructor, and overall learning environment.

2. *Finding a Learning Passion or Goal.* To find a major or area of concentration that one might be interested in pursuing. In fact, educational resources that are freely available to browse online might offer a glimpse into interconnecting courses, disciplines, or areas of study that others may not be aware of. It is in the intersections of different domains of knowledge or disciplines where creative insight and new ideas emerge.

3. *Acquiring Prerequisite Skills.* Every learning opportunity or opening can be enhanced with previous knowledge and experiences. Free online educational resources can equip adults returning to college or signing up for timely seminars or institutes with a suite of skills that can lend a sense of confidence and capacity to learn at higher levels.

4. *Back-Up Plans.* Open educational resources might prove beneficial to those at risk of losing their jobs. Those worried that they will soon be laid off can explore

free online course materials in one or two areas of concentration that are valued by organizations in hopes of keeping one's job or more readily acquiring a different one. In effect, self-exploration of OCW and OER can better prepare an individual for changes in work environments and act as a safety valve just in case the need for such skills arises.

5. *Professional Development.* Even if one is not at risk of losing a job or seeking further study, OCW and OER can provide free professional development related to one's current job without having to take time off from work. At the same time, those learning from such courses might show initiative and keep them from getting a pink slip. As economic conditions improve or a company expands, the weeks or months of focusing on a particular type of content or domain area found in the open education world could also prepare one for a new job. To be able to say that you learned some technology, leadership, or management skills online is critical. And today it is not only possible, it is happening on a massive scale. But with so much free online content available, new skills are needed in selecting content to learn and how to go through it.

6. *Expert Mentoring and Apprenticeship.* Exploring OCW and OER might lead to a large or more valuable network of instructors and experts in a field or domain. Such experts can apprentice the learner. For this to prove viable and successful, however, the learner must take the initiative to contact the course instructor(s) or designers. Exposure to a set of experts within an emerging or highly specialized field can help transform a career and perhaps even one's life.

7. *Generating a Learning Path.* Having free online resources helps create personal or individualized learning paths. As such content proliferates and people become more familiar with and accepting of it, self-selected informal learning may be the norm in the coming decade. Perhaps it already is and we do not yet realize it.

8. *More Equalized Access to Human Experts and Top Ranked Programs and Universities.* As educational content is freely provided online, one can learn material from instructors at leading universities that were previously unapproachable or beyond approach due to low SAT, ACT, GRE, TOEFL, or other required scores. Anyone can now learn from instructors at Berkeley, Stanford, and MIT. How cool is that? Elitism is fading fast!

9. *Fewer Learning Restrictions.* As with online learning in general, with open educational materials, a learner is no longer confined to a set time, place, duration, and format for learning. In fact, she can learn at the time she wants and at any location with Web access. She is no longer confined to eyeball-to-eyeball or earpan-to-earpan learning [8]. She now has options and flexibility. And she does not have to drive to a campus setting and find parking and fight traffic prior to engaging in learning. Convenience and flexibility are the learning watchwords! Of course, for many, it may be the only option, given work, family, money, etc. As an example, I took television courses and correspondence courses to get accepted into graduate school. Educational resources found online as well as in other media delivery formats (e.g., CDs, DVDs, audiotapes) might provide people with the motivation, skills, and backgrounds to learn new skills or prepare for degree programs.

10. *Life Satisfaction.* The perpetual availability of online contents allows all citizens of the planet with Internet access to reflect on life when nearing retirement or death (or at any time for that matter) and hopefully be content with one's learning journeys. If not, the learning paths one has taken can be instantly changed, accelerated, revisited, or entirely rethought. All learning interests can be pursued. And they can be accomplished on one's own time and terms.

[End excerpt.]

Wide Open World!

As can be seen from the above lists, the world of education is not flat. No, the education world is now open. Wide open! Wider even than it was in late 2005 when I spoke in Vancouver and then in Redmond. In particular, OER and OCW can benefit almost anyone, from the unemployed to those who have an Internet connection. They may need some initial guidance and tutoring in what is available and how to best access and use it. Eventually, however, open educational resources and courses will simply be expected in each sector of education and across all grade and ages levels.

This history of OER is incredibly short. In the summer of 2005, David Wiley and his colleagues helped me to better understand the ramifications of the open education movement. Fast forward to the summer of 2009, David is chief openness officer at Flat World Knowledge, the founder of the Utah Virtual School, and has moved his academic housing from USU to Brigham Young University. So innovative is David that, as I write this article, *Fast Company* has announced that he is in its list of the "Top 100 Most Creative People in Business (http://www.fastcompany.com/100) " alongside the likes of Melinda Gates, J.J. Abrams, Brian Eno, Peter Senge, and Stella McCartney [9].

Open education is making a huge impression on people around the world a mere decade after it first began to surface, first in Wiley's mind and then in educational organizations and institutions around the world. The next decade or two should prove even more transformative for education.

MIT may have been the first to leverage its content for the greater good of all humanity, but it definitely was not the last. Utah State University has been a crucial contributor as well. The emergence of OER and OCW is a key event that people living in the early part of the 21st century can be proud. Each generation is defined by a few select events and accomplishments. As the decades and centuries pass, freely available online educational contents may be the shining moments of our generation. Keep in mind that we are only at the initial stages of this movement and it is already impacting millions. The potential is great. The timing is right. It's now time for everyone to contribute to open education or experience the contributions of others. Open up and say, "share."

About the Author

Curt Bonk (mailto:cjbonk@indiana.edu) is a writer, speaker, and consultant as well as a professor of instructional systems technology at Indiana University. He is the author of three recent books: The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education (http://www.worldisopen.com) *(2009),* Empowering Online Learning: 100+ Activities for Reading, Reflecting, Displaying, and Doing *(2008), and* The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs *(2006). Curt is president of CourseShare and SurveyShare. For more information, visit Curt Bonk's eLearning World (http://mypage.iu.edu/~cjbonk/) .*

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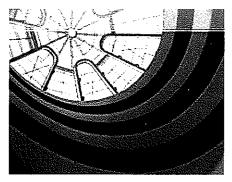### FIVE QUESTIONS...for Michelle Cardinal (6/30/09)

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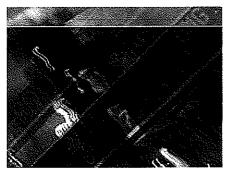
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