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## Free and Open Education Today, Not Like Yesterday by Curt Bonk

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Writing about free and open education is not easy today. Two or three decades ago, such a topic might have amounted to a thin 100 page book. I could have discussed audiotape speeches, encyclopedia giveaways at the local grocery store, educational television and radio programs late at night, correspondence courses, and local community seminars and workshops that had a corporate or other type of sponsor. And much of that was not even free, nor was it open. I know; I am a product of that age.

Back in the early to mid 1980s, I was a bored CPA and corporate controller who desperately wanted something better. Day after day, it was the old grind just like Bill Murray encountered in *Ground Hog Day*. Same trial balances, cash flow reports, budget estimations, and accounts receivable to track. Unfortunately, I never got to design those cool ice sculptures that Bill could in the movie. But at night I could take courses at the local community college and college extension to prepare me for graduate school and a much different life. I could also take correspondence courses and television courses from the University of Wisconsin Outreach and Extension program. And I could also read some 12 different journals and magazines to get my brain thinking about graduate school. Learning. I was learning whenever I could. But I did not have a computer except at work.

Once I arrived in Madison for graduate school, I could help create TV courses for others to take. These were created the Wisconsin way—to provide education via a distance to whoever it might serve. We sent education to all corners of the state, whether I was in Milwaukee, Green Bay, Eagle River, Rice Lake, La Crosse, or Madison. Some of that content spread far beyond state borders. The *Teachers Tackle Thinking: Critical Thinking in the Classroom* course did just that. But it did it through mailed correspondence and TV. Computers were not part of the distribution efforts. Nor was the Internet. We only used that for email and it was just a select few in university settings who did.

Today, with the emergence of the Web, education is sent to all corners of the world. And it happens in a heartbeat, not by snail mail, telex, fax, or prescheduled TV programming. No, today we are in a world where learning, of any type or stripe, is available 24 X 7. And much of it is now free and open. It is as open for you at 6 am as it is for me at 6 pm. It does not really matter much if I am in New York, New Berlin, Newcastle, or some place in New Brunswick or Newfoundland. It is there for the taking. Each of us can now access it.

What will you find? You might be seeking a particular book. If you are, nowadays you can typically explore excerpts of it from the publisher or from Google or Amazon. Often the complete book exists online for personal reading, downloading, or listening to. And some online book services allow you, the reader, to comment on book and discuss it with other readers. Free e-books and similar kinds of content are just the first of the ten openers that I describe in my new book, **The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education** published by Jossey-Bass in July 2009. There are nine more. I also discuss mobile technology like the iPhone and iPod, virtual worlds like Second Life, and collaborative technology that enable people to work on the same document from wherever they are in the world.

But wait, I have only mentioned four of the ten learning openers. There are still six to go! How about one or two more? Well, today, there are hundreds of colleges and universities placing their courses on the Web for free. Yes, hundreds! But there is typically no instructor behind online courses. Such resources are mainly for exploration only. You might be interested in exploring these courses. You are in luck. The world is open.

To help in your quest for an online education which is free and easy to take part in, there are complete lists of such courses and indexes to find them. Among these resources include the OpenCourseWare finder, the National Repository of Online Courses, and the Open Educational Resources Commons. There is also a brand new free university called the “University of the People” that has recently sprung up as well as “Peer-to-Peer University” wherein you can get a tutor or mentor to help you learn from the free content found online. Here are some links you might explore:

1. OCW Finder: <http://ocwfinder.com/>
2. National Repository of Online Courses: <http://www.montereyinstitute.org/nroc/index.html>
3. Open Educational Resources (OER) Commons: <http://oercommons.org/>
4. The Peer to Peer University (P2PU): <http://www.peer2peeruniversity.org>
5. University of the People: <http://www.uopeople.org/>

Are you unemployed or perhaps wanting professional development? Are you looking for more free and open stuff? There are complete lists of the 100 best online courses or podcasts. Perhaps try out some of these links.

1. 100 Best Websites for Free Adult Education

<http://www.onlinedegreeworld.com/blog/2009/100-best-websites-for-free-adult-education/>

2. 100 of the Weirdest Open Courseware Classes that Anyone can Take

<http://www.onlinebestcolleges.com/blog/2009/100-weirdest-open-courseware-classes-that-anyone-can-take/>

### 3. Skip the Tuition: 100 Free Podcasts from the Best Colleges in the World:

<http://oedb.org/library/beginning-online-learning/skip-the-tuition:-100-free-podcasts-from-the-best-colleges-in-the-world>

I discuss such free course content in Chapter 5 and 6 of my book (Openers 4 and 5 related to free online courses and learning portals).

Are you interested in the free community college courses that the Obama administration just announced funding for? Well Foothill-De Anza Community College District in California already has 8 such courses on the Web for free in their SOPHIA project (Sharing Of Free Intellectual Assets; see <http://sofia.fhda.edu/gallery/>). They also are working on free and open textbooks (<http://www.collegeopentextbooks.org/>). Many of us who have children in high school or college are crying out for free and open access digital textbooks (I have 2 in college now...yikes!). Even if you do not have kids, you like are aware that the cost of textbooks has gotten out of hand! The good people at Foothill have created a consortium of community colleges to showcase open educational resources and generally help in these efforts to make education more free and open (<http://oerconsortium.org>).

This is not the same world that I was in back in 1984 and 1985. Back then I struggled to find the courses I needed in psychology to get into graduate school. So much more is available today to learn from. There are YouTube videos as well as videos from CNN, the BBC, and Google Video. There are blogs to reflect on my ideas. There are wikis like Wikipedia to find information as well as contribute to it. In fact, there is so much available today that people are easily overwhelmed by it all. I know I am. I created a mnemonic aid to help people understand the 10 trends or openers of the book. That mnemonic spells "WE-ALL-LEARN."

Writing The World Is Open book and summarizing all the trends in the WE-ALL-LEARN model was a mind-boggling experience. So much stuff to read and try to summarize. I think I went a tad loopy during the process. Now I am taking the 120,000 words that my editor and I cut and smoothing it out and adding new content to it. I am creating a free e-book extension of The World is Open book (see <http://worldisopen.com/>). It will be posted in a couple of months to the WorldisOpen.com website. Already all the references and Web resources mentioned in the book are there as well as a prequel and a postscript. If you explore any of this, your feedback is always welcome. Enjoy the open learning world!

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