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Free Online College Courses Are Proliferating

Asia Has Embraced
 The Global Movement
 To Spread Knowledge

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A revolution of sorts is sweeping education.

In the past few years, educational material, from handwritten lecture notes to whole courses, has been made available online, free for anyone who wants it. Backed by big-name universities in the U.S., China, Japan and Europe, the Open Education Resources movement is gaining ground, providing access to knowledge so that no one is "walled in by money, race and other issues," says Lucifer Chu, a 32-year-old Taiwanese citizen and among the thousands world-wide promoting the effort. He says he has used about half a million dollars from his translation of the "Lord of the Rings" novels into Chinese to translate engineering, math and other educational material, also from English into Chinese.


The movement started in the late 1990s, inspired in part by the "open source" software movement, based on the notion computer programs should be free. Open-source software now powers more than half the world's servers and about 18% of its browsers, according to TheCounter.com, a Web-analysis service by Connecticut-based Internet publisher Jupitermedia Corp. Behind its success are copyright licenses that allow users to use, change and then redistribute the software. Another inspiration was the proliferation of Web sites where millions share photos or write encyclopedia entries.

Educators recognized that open-source software, with its emphasis on harnessing the contributions of volunteers to develop and perfect code, was a great model. "Let's try to build on the momentum of open-source" software, David Wiley, an associate professor of instructional technology at Utah State University, recalls of the thinking among academics in 1998 when he joined up.

The first university to offer course material free online was the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in 2001. Its OpenCourseWare project now offers lecture notes, exams and other resources from more than 1,800 courses spanning the institute's entire curriculum. The material has been accessed by 40 million visitors from nearly every country, with visitors averaging a million a month, according to its Web site. Nearly half -- 49% -- are self-learners; a little more than a third are students; and 16% are educators.

While MIT remains the poster child of the movement, many universities across the U.S. and Europe have similar programs, and in recent years Asia has embraced the initiative. Institutions in Vietnam and Thailand have begun translating MIT and other Western material into local

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languages, and more than 150 universities are linked in a network in China. In April, the Chinese city of Dalian will host the twice-yearly session of the OpenCourseWare Consortium, which gathers more than 100 higher-education institutions from Australia to Venezuela.

Not all initiatives are institutional. Mr. Chu, the "Lord of the Rings" translator, says his Opensource OpenCourseWare Prototype System, begun in 2004 and known as OOPS, has translated nearly 200 entire MIT courses and more than 600 partial courses. He reckons 20,000 people have contributed time. Mr. Chu has traveled to China, Hong Kong, Japan, Canada, Singapore, Thailand and the U.S. to build what he calls a "knowledge liberation army" of specialists on subjects including medicine, nuclear-power-plant construction, satellites and heat processes.

The OOPS example of tapping into a motivated group of specialists could be a model for developing countries without a big budget for localizing courseware, Mr. Chu says. "In the old days, there were very few ways for a white-collar [worker] or a student to use his knowledge to help people," he says. "Now they can use their knowledge not only to earn money for themselves but also to really help others."

At least three Taiwanese institutions now offer courseware online. In Japan, educators established the Japan OpenCourseWare Consortium, which initially translated MIT material but now focuses on Japanese courses, says Yoshimi Fukuhara, secretary-general of the consortium. With 17 member universities, it has translated more than 1,000 courses from Japanese into English and other languages. And in India, a National Knowledge Commission has recommended initiatives that, if implemented, would push India to the forefront of open-source education, says Mr. Wiley, the Utah educator.

Problems remain. Despite comparisons with the open-source movement, there are crucial differences, notes Richard Wyles, whose Flexible Learning Network is working on a national e-learning network in New Zealand. "With open-source software, quality increases as lines of code get fine-tuned and replaced," he says. "With content, that happens far less often. Instead, it increases without any real quality control." That is, after lecturers and teachers have submitted their notes and other course material so that others can access it, there is no built-in way to ensure this material isn't inaccurate or outdated. He is enthusiastic about wiki-based software, which promotes more-frequent revisions.

Then there are issues with overcoming the traditions and entrenched interests of academia, such as the concerns some lecturers have about their livelihoods if they put all their material online.

Mr. Wiley's response: Adjust to the new reality. He points to the almost "pop star" popularity of some who have posted lecture videos online. Some have boosted class attendance and have raised interest in their courses, while others have overhauled and improved material in the process of submitting it. "What it has done is to expose teaching to peer review," he says.

To keep pushing the cause, a coalition of educators, foundations and Internet pioneers in January signed a declaration urging governments and publishers to make publicly funded educational material available free over the Internet. The Cape Town Open Education Declaration has so far been signed by more than 140 organizations and nearly 1,500 individuals. In another promising development, Elsevier BV, an Amsterdam-based publisher of academic journals and a unit of New York- and Amsterdam-listed Reed Elsevier, agreed to relax control over use of its copyrighted images and text in MIT's project.

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