

Notes from a Meeting with Paul Kirschner
Senior Researcher, Research Centre¹
Open University of the Netherlands, 24 January 2006

Background

Following other meetings and a briefing at Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL), Dr. Paul Kirschner and I continued a conversation begun several months ago in Washington, DC about e-learning. Here he describes one of his ideas—making Open University course materials openly available, for example under Creative Commons licenses, to the public.

What Are Open Learning Objects?

Although the term “Open Courseware” has been used to describe Kirchner’s idea, the term has come to have several different meanings that do not apply. He said Open Courseware at MIT means materials first developed by faculty and, with further work—metadata, permission to use or replacement of copyrighted material, and packaging—made publicly available. MIT is clear; the content may not be the full content of the course (this is often due to copyright questions), the content will often not be relevant to those without preparation, the content may differ from the content as the course is given today, and the instructor/university plays no teaching, tutoring or certifying function. The content is typically “resources” that a student would use during studies; the sequencing of instruction is typically represented only by a syllabus. Open Courseware from Utah State University is similar, though more simply presented than MIT’s efforts.

Open Courseware can be seen as supplemental to all class work including class lecture (though often the lectures at MIT are videotaped and thus also available) and discussion and discussion and communication among students in the class.

At the OUNL, learning objects follow a pedagogy—they are intended to teach independent of a classroom experience and face-to-face discussion of students.² Kirschner, one of the founding-fathers of the OUNL pedagogy 22 years ago uses the term “guided independent study” materials. The scope of learning objects, and the time a student is expected to study to master the content, is a fraction of the typical course. OUNL courses typically require 120 or 240 hours; a learning object may require 16 to 32 hours. These are typical “learning units”.

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² Note the critical difference between course materials for distance learning and for traditional classroom lecture. In practice this difference may be disappearing. Now distance learning student can communicate with faculty in conference calls or chat and may watch a faculty presentation with video and two-way audio. Increasingly classroom lectures are supplemented by audio or video and slides from the lectures and discussions.

He illustrated using an example from the technical sciences (Introduction to technical sciences: Engineering) dealing with the engineering aspects of construction where the course would have five modules (for example, 4 hours each for a total of 20 hours for a learning object³) illustrated in Figure 1. He notes that “on demand” learning is often more specific than a “course.” The example he used to illustrate the point would be a lawyer responsible for enforcement of a building code. He may want to know more about insulation practices—Module C, but, at least for the moment, not be interested in how to build a house.

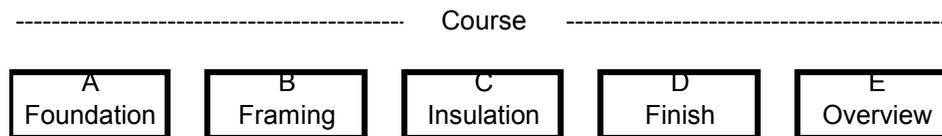


Figure 1 – Course and Learning Objects

Open Learning Objects and Open University Course Offerings

Some comparisons of the proposed open learning objects and courseware are summarized in Table 1. The differences arise from “downloading” the learning object as compared to enrolling in a course. (Here a “course” means a specific offering of the course).

	Learning Object in OCW	Courseware for students
Study time, hours	16 - 32	120 - 240
Human Tutorial support	No	Yes
Technical support	No	Yes
Examination	Personal guidance only	As required
Certification	No	Yes
Pedagogy	Yes	Yes
Peer group	Informal	Enrolled students
Forums	By subject	By course

Figure 2 – Characteristics of Open Learning Objects and Open Courseware

As an enrolled student, tutorial support and technical support would be provided as provided now by the OUNL. The enrolled student would be provided with access to collaboration tools—e-mail, chat, forums, etc.—in the context of students enrolled in the course. OUNL could provide open forums for those using learning objects by general subject area. Use of the forums would be voluntary and not associated with the services

³ Note: This is a recursive process. One can also call each module of 4 hours a learning object containing a learning objective module, a content module, a self-testing module, et cetera. All of these aspects and more are present in many or most OUNL course materials.

provided to enrolled students (e.g., there is no tutor moderation of the forums and thus there are only other participants to answer each other's questions). The peer group for those studying learning objects would be self-forming (online self organizing systems to quote David Wiley); the peer group for a course would be determined by enrollment. The learning objects could and usually does at the OUNL, but need not, include quizzes and tests to advise the student on their progress or perhaps suggest areas for study or, several years from now, resequence learning. Successful completion of a course would provide certification.

A user of OCW could study all of the course modules, or those required to complete mastery of the course content, and enroll in the course taking only the final examination. This would also provide certification of satisfactory course completion.

Implicit in this model, the courseware itself becomes open content—the aggregate of the modules. Examinations for certification, as contrasted to quizzes to guide learning, could not be made available as open content.

What is the Business Model?

What do open learning objects and open courseware do for OUNL? Based on experience, it seems reasonable that open learning objects would increase enrollments.

Comment: The experience of U.S. community colleges supports this argument. A large number of people enroll in non-credit courses because they want to learn. Because these courses are generally not eligible for state funding, the fees (tuition) for these courses is higher than comparable credit courses. Courses in history, geography, cooking, computer use, and health are frequently offered as “short courses.” Similarly colleges and universities are offering “short courses”—from a few days to a few weeks—on topics of interest. The economic success of these academic offerings suggest use of learning objects. There is a demand for this type of education, a willingness to pay, and the likelihood that a student would subsequently enroll in a course.

The U.S. experience also suggests that students may want to participate in courses, but not for certification—as “auditors”—and may want to enroll in “short courses” that the learning objects would support and could be used with the full range of services provided to course enrollments. The availability of learning objects could lead to the “modularization” of learning now found in business training.

When could the Open University make open learning objects and open courseware available?

There is increasing support for making the learning objects available as open courseware. Experience of MIT and Utah State University show that use of the courseware builds

“brand awareness” of the institution’s programs. This is believed to increase both support for the institution and enrollment in their academic programs.

“But,” Dr. Kirschner point outs, “that is different from the Board approving open learning objects.”

“When would that be.”

“There is no way to know. Not likely immediately—several months, several years.”

“If there is anything I can do to help, let me know. Learning materials from the distance learning university could increase the effectiveness of instruction at teaching colleges and universities.”

On Open Courseware

Kirschner said the “process” of creating open courseware can be expensive. He said Utah State University has simplified the process so the investment in conversion of a faculty member’s course materials to open courseware is less complex—and presumably less expensive—than the MIT process. He said Utah State is focusing on transferability of the courseware to other institutions as contrasted to focusing on local utilization. And the cardinal rule – according to Kirschner - is: “Make available what you have and do not create!! When you build a library you don’t begin to write and publish new books. You make that which has been published available to a large public. If a library starts writing and publishing, it becomes a publishing house; when it begins tutoring and coaching, it becomes a university”.