

A Learning Passport for Your Lifelong Educational Journey

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Background

OpenCourseWare (OCW) and Open Educational Resources (OER) are both references to learning materials that have been digitized and made available for free on the Internet. Both concepts emerged around 2002 along with several initiatives to publish and make available college course material for use, remix, and redistribution under an open license such as a Creative Commons license. The most notable initiative is the OpenCourseWare project launched by MIT in late 2002.

Over the next several years, global players picked up the cause of OER and OCW, driving the discussion and practice to new levels. The Hewlett Foundation supported multiple projects, committing their resources and reputation to incubate an environment of experimentation. And over the same period of time, international organizations, led by UNESCO, have created a space for the analysis and understanding of the OER movement as it evolves and develops.

The resulting environment, almost 10 years later, is beginning to yield truly “disruptive” change while opening up world class resources to millions of previously marginalized learners. Importantly, however, the emerging environment has changed the very questions we can ask about learning as we come to understand it as nothing less than a “new ecology of learning”. As is often the case with profound change, people thought in a linear fashion when they initially considered OER, projecting forward the institution of education as it currently exists. In this view, OER and OCW would help current faculty, and current students. And it has done so, richly. But it has also changed the way we think about content, curriculum, and their relationship to both formal and informal learning.

Originally intended to provide lecture outlines and other learning materials to fellow educators, the OCW/OER movement has generated the emergence of several other, unanticipated applications. College students migrate to open educational resources to support their learning from instructor-led college courses. Groups of learners and faculty combine forces to establish new organizations, such as P2PU. And “self learners” – those who just want the knowledge – have emerged as the major users of OCW/OER. While OCW/OER resources don’t typically come with instruction or assessment, many self-learners indicate they would like the opportunity to obtain college credit for the learning they achieve through the study of OCW/OER.

The OpenCourseWare Consortium (OCWC) is a collaboration of more than 200 higher education institutions and associated organizations from around the world creating a broad and deep body of open educational content using a shared model. Formed in 2005 by a small group of early OCW practitioners and incorporated in 2008, OpenCourseWare Consortium is a non-profit organization which has as its mission to advance formal and informal learning through the worldwide sharing and use of free, open, high-quality education materials organized as courses. The OCWC's interest in promoting the development and deployment of the OCW Passport is to extend and to further promote and provide free resources that support this mission.

KNEXT is an independent third-party assessor of experiential learning owned and operated by Kaplan Higher Education, a division of Kaplan, Inc., a world leader in education and training services owned by the Washington Post Company. The KNEXT vision is to create the standard for recognizing and making portable the college-level learning derived from non-traditional sources such as personal and professional experience and self-directed study of OpenCourseWare (OCW) and Open Educational Resources (OER). KNEXT's interest in developing and deploying the OCW Passport lies in connecting self-directed learners using OCW/OER to assessment services, and eventually to college degree programs that will value this form of learning and agree to grant credit for it.

Overview

The OpenCourseWare and Open Educational Resource movement is largely supported, technologically across the Internet, by Content Management Systems (CMS) that serve course outlines as well as learning materials. What makes these "courses" different from online courses is the fact that they are not served using a Learning Management System (LMS), which would deepen the experience through interaction with faculty and between fellow students, as well as the ability to accumulate course work. Colleges and universities use dozens of Learning Management Systems (LMS) to facilitate structured online courses and programs. There is no current universal standard.

While the value to faculty and the value to students is clear, what isn't so clear is what the value is to those describing themselves as self-learners. OCW learners are neither uniform nor predictable in terms of aspiration, motivation, and intention. If gained knowledge is the value, then wouldn't that value be enhanced through more structure in the current environment? Or by interacting with faculty and fellow learners? Or by working towards a particular learning outcome and documenting the progress? Or, perhaps it is all of the above? The current situation seems to beg the question, "what is the real higher purpose for these self-learners?"

For the purpose of this project we are positing that self-learners, especially those who would like to ultimately earn college credit for this learning, will desire all three value propositions – 1) structure around learning outcomes, 2) collaboration with faculty and fellow learners, and 3) the ability to accumulate course work towards meeting course

learning objectives. To solve this problem we propose a new dimension to OCW/OER movement that improves the value to self-learners. We call it the OCW Passport.

OCW Passport

The OCW Passport will be a tool for self-learners to track their usage of OpenCourseWare and other Open Educational Resources. Putting structure around otherwise unstructured learner behavior, the Passport operates like a “mini LMS” for self-learners much like eCollege® or Blackboard® works for students enrolled in degree-seeking programs. Thinking in terms of what a typical student’s Passport might include, the tool was constructed to provide the ability to include digital copies of course learning materials and course outlines, as well as course notes, and assignments completed by the student. Since the OCW Passport is a digital web-based tool, our version of the “student Passport” may include deeper and broader functionality, including the ability to collaborate with other self-learners or the ability for a student to share portions of his or her profile through social networking platforms.

Basic Functionality

OCW and OER users have the ability to create an OCW Passport account by visiting www.ocwPassport.com. In keeping with the spirit of free educational content provided through OCW sites, and open educational resources, there is no charge for an OCW Passport.

Users are classified into three categories: students or self-learners, faculty, and administrators. All users have the ability to create a user profile, which may be private or may be shared with other users. A student or self-learner user profile will contain basic contact information with the possibility of adding more in depth profile data in the future. With the initial launch of the OCW Passport, a user’s profile includes basic contact information including first name, last name, email address, and physical address, as well as limited information about educational history and the ability for a user to upload a photo of oneself. Faculty user profiles include more detail about the user including academic credentials and positions, as well as courses taught and other limited Curriculum Vitae information.

The sole purpose of providing more information about the academic qualifications of faculty users is to present faculty as more of an authority in the Passport environment. Those users with administrative rights are not apparent to the general user population.

Learning Resources

The amount and types of open learning resources available on the internet is rapidly expanding, with an existing base of courses numbering in the thousands from hundreds of different universities both domestic and abroad. Recent attention to open learning, and

the unbundling of higher education, leads us to believe that open resources for education will continue to proliferate long into the future. The challenge is not in the development or identification of resources but rather in the logical organization and access to those materials. The OpenCourseWare Consortium and a few other OCW/OER groups provide entry points via web portals where users can search for OCW courses and OCW websites hosted by colleges and universities. Up until this point, OCW users were only able to track their use of OCW courses by bookmarking the website in a web browser. The OCW Passport changes that.

OCW Passport users, as a core function, have the ability to “add” OCW courses to their electronic OCW Passport. The Passport includes search capability where users can locate courses or course materials by subject, by school, or by keyword supplied by the user. The base of information that is searchable includes all course information and course ware published via RSS – a commonly used data format or web feed used to dynamically provide users with regularly updated content. The decision whether or not to publish OCW or other OER resources via RSS is at the discretion of the source school, however we believe the perceived value of the OCW Passport will drive more schools to publish content via RSS. Currently, approximately 50 OCWC member institutions currently publish their OCW content via RSS.

As will become apparent in the following sections, the purpose of adding OCW courses to a Passport goes far beyond simple personal bookmarking. However, even as a personal bookmark, the Passport includes more robust capabilities. The foremost of these being the ability for users to “rate” courses and course materials they have added to their Passport. All courses and course ware are not created equal. This is our attempt at creating an Apple iTunes®-like environment for the OCW/OER space. For those users who agree to share their Passport profile, the ability to share which courses are in their Passport will help to create more user cohesiveness. The OCW Passport site will publish to all Passport users the top rated courses, and all references to courses will include the current course rating in the course heading. This function is completely dynamic and 100% driven by the Passport user base.

The potential feature set for the organization of learning resources, outside of simple bookmarking and the rating system, is limitless in a Web 2.0 environment. The first version of the OCW Passport includes a few additional features. Users have the ability to tag OCW courses with a progress level – creating a pseudo study plan. OCW courses, once added to a Passport, can be marked “complete” indicating the user believes he/she has met the learning outcomes for the course. Additionally, courses the user is currently working on can be marked “in-progress” and courses the student has not yet started working on, but is interested in, can be marked “planned.” Passport users also have the ability to add Learning Outcomes and notes in a “notebook” arranged in their Passport by OCW courses. For notes or assignments created outside of the Passport, i.e., in other software applications, the user has the ability to upload and attach multiple file formats, including any type of document or media file to a course in his/her Passport.

Study Guides/Faculty

Users qualified as faculty – those users who are interested in creating learning materials – play an important role in the function of the OCW Passport. Faculty users, as mentioned earlier, have a more robust user profile in order to display academic credentials, qualify themselves as faculty, and play a part in helping to structure the learning environment for OCW Passport student users and self-learners. The initial base of faculty users of the OCW Passport are those early adopters who understand the importance of the OCW Passport tool and who want to help transform the OCW/OER space into something greater than it is today. The primary role of the faculty user is to create, and maintain, Study Guides.

Study Guides are an integral component to tracking the learning that results from the use of OCW/OER resources. A Study Guide is an arrangement of OCW courses and/or other open educational resources that together support a defined learning outcome or set of learning outcomes. Faculty users have the ability to create Suggested Study Guides and publish them through the OCW Passport site. Other users have the ability to search, browse and view Suggested Study Guides. If the user likes a particular Suggested Study Guide, he or she can adopt it as one's own. Users can have multiple Study Guides in their Passport, and users have the ability to adopt Suggested Study Guides in their entirety, or modify a Suggested Study Guide to fit their unique needs. Also, non-faculty users have the ability to create their own Study Guides, but may not publish them as a Suggested Study Guides for other OCW Passport users.

Like with OCW courses, a rating system is applied to Suggested Study Guides by the user base thus making it easier for Passport users to search and browse the base of Suggested Study Guides, which could eventually number in the tens of thousands. Searches may be performed by subject, by course, by faculty, or by keyword string. Using the rating system, the OCW Passport site will publish the top rated Suggested Study Guides as well as top rated faculty based on the rating of Suggested Study Guides they create. Again, this function is dynamic and 100% driven by the Passport user base.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a core component to any learning environment therefore we feel it important to include through the OCW Passport the ability for faculty, students and self-learners to collaborate with each other. Collaboration over the Internet is nothing new, and there are thousands of existing methods for collaboration in production today. Adding the ability to collaborate through the OCW Passport is not just adding one more channel for communication. It also does not duplicate any existing method of communication, including forms of social networking. Collaboration through the OCW Passport is unique because users are connected only through commonality created virtually through content they store in their OCW Passport, so long as the user makes this information public as part of one's profile. That is, users are only connected with other users who have the same OCW courses or Suggested Study Guides in their OCW Passport.

For example,

John is a self-learner interested in learning more about computer programming. Turning to the Internet to obtain learning materials, John discovers the OpenCourseWare Consortium, and the OCW Passport. John creates a Passport for himself and adds to his Passport a Suggested Study Guide created by Professor Sarah. John and Professor Sarah may now collaborate with each other in a blog space created to support the Suggested Study Guide.

The Suggested Study Guide, designed to support a learning outcome around introduction to computer programming and computer programming theory, includes OCW courses identified from several different OCWC member institutions. One of the courses included in the Suggested Study Guide is MIT course 6.821 – Programming Languages. As a result, John is now also connected to and able to collaborate with Mary since Mary, as a Passport user, has included MIT 6.821 in her own Study Guide. Mary and John collaborate through a blog space created to support MIT 6.821 and all others users who include this course in their OCW Passport. It is important to note here that Professor Sarah and Mary are also linked together with the ability to collaborate.

As is the case in traditional classrooms, collaboration between individual students, and between students and faculty is intended to promote learning. While the intent here is also to promote learning, the fairly unstructured environment of the OCW/OER space is not conducive to “teaching” per se. Instead it is our hope that student and faculty users alike take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate with each other to freely and openly promote individual learning. Again, this is our effort to put some structure around an otherwise unstructured learning environment.

Future Roadmap

The alliance between OCWC and KNEXT to develop and deploy the OCW Passport as the first user-driven web tool to structure open source learning is not without consideration for the future. The idea was born from the desire of many self-learners to earn college credit for the learning acquired through OCW courses and other Open Educational Resources. The ability to assess the learning documented in the OCW Passport by self-learners is exactly where we are headed with this project.

The second generation OCW Passport, available in late 2010, will include user options to turn OCW coursework into a learning portfolio that may be used to petition for college-level credit. To do this, users will be asked to add an educational goal statement as well as a learning autobiography. For each course contained in the users Passport, a credit request must be added and linked to course and Study Guide learning outcomes. Course work, including notes, assignments, exams, and summative assessments are added to the learning portfolio as documentation to support the learning. Leveraging the form and function of all materials a user has added to his or her Passport in a Web 2.0 environment, the process to transform the Passport into a learning portfolio is relatively

easy.

We cannot address learning recognition and the assessment of prior non-validated learning without also addressing prior validated learning, i.e., learning for which an individual has already received college-level credit. There are over 33 million individuals in the United States alone who have earned some college credit but never earned a degree. We believe the international body of self-learners includes a substantive number of individuals with prior validated college credit. This learning should be documented both to determine applicability towards future college degree plans, and also to avoid counting the learning in the learning portfolio assessment process. The second generation OCW Passport will include the ability to document this educational history on a web-enabled school agnostic transcript.

KNEXT, positioned as a third-party independent assessor of experiential and open-source learning, will provide a fee-based service for those wishing to have their learning portfolio assessed by college faculty, and receive a recommendation as to the award of college credit. Users electing to transform their Passport into a learning portfolio will have their portfolio pushed electronically to qualified and trained national and international faculty, as well as other Subject Matter Experts, from the area in which the learning has taken place. In most cases, claims for credit are routed to faculty who teach the course for which the user is petitioning for credit.

Users choosing this option will be able to port their agnostic transcript to any college or their choosing, for evaluation and recognition. To stabilize and deepen the value of the assessment, however, KNEXT has partnered with Kaplan University, a regionally accredited fully online university, to “warranty” the credit recommendation. That is, Kaplan University will accept the credits recommended through assessment by KNEXT for students who matriculate into a Kaplan University degree program. The award of credit for any previous learning is at the sole discretion of the receiving institution, and students will be encouraged to use the credit recommendation letter as well as the “warranty” by Kaplan University when shopping for degree programs who will accept the credits. It is our hope that other schools – public, non-profit, and proprietary – will join Kaplan University as colleagues in recognizing the portfolio development and assessment process.

Conclusion

We are certain of one thing, at this stage in the development of the Passport. We know the process will be iterative and uneven, leading us to new conclusions and products that we cannot see clearly, if at all, today. In this regard, the OER movement and OCWC within it continue to be a laboratory for disruptive change.