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Places to Go:
OpenCourseWare Consortium|http://www.ocwconsortium.org/
by Stephen Downes

The OpenCourseWare Consortium is a collaboration of over 100 colleges and universities from around the world whose mission is to "advance education and empower people worldwide through opencourseware." (n.d., "About Us," ¶1). The Consortium defines an OpenCourseWare [OCW] site as one that contains high quality course materials available for use and adaptation under an open license, but that does not typically provide certification or access to instructors.

When the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) announced a plan to enable open access to its learning materials—a project that would become the OpenCourseWare Initiative—it was expected that many institutions around the world would embark on a similar program. Last year's announcement that the Open University was undertaking a similar effort reinforced that view. In all, several dozen institutions have launched open access initiatives in the last few years. The OpenCourseWare Consortium Web site is the beginning of a clearinghouse for courseware available from these institutions.

In terms of design, the Consortium Web site is very ordinary, consisting essentially of a set of pages linked together; contrary to expectations, there is no discussion or community component. The thrust of the site is evident in the three major divisions of the home page: Use, Share, and Support. The front page also offers a list of news articles about member institutions' open courseware efforts and the open courseware movement. Available via RSS, the news articles are worth the read for the occasional gem among the publicity pieces, such as an item about Meta OpenCourseWare for Moodle.

The Use section is the most disappointing. The link opens a page that lists participating universities organized by country. Around two dozen institutions are listed, including six from the United States and nine from Japan. Links to individual universities lead to each institution's OCW page, but users are on their own from that point forward. In some cases, the university page offers a list of courses, like on the China Quality OpenCourseWare (CNQOCW) Web site. On others, as on the Tufts site for instance, the link leads to a standard OCW introduction page. The best bet for Consortium readers actually wanting to find and use open courseware is the search link at the upper right. This is a link to a Google search with the "site" parameter set as a disjunction of the participating institutions' open courseware sites. The results from a given search—a search for frogs, for example—are relatively precise, albeit suffering from Google's inability to order results chronologically or by usefulness for educational purposes.

From the home page (and also from the menu bar) is a link to the About Us page. On the left, this page lists the organization members by country. Each of these links points to a page describing the member institution and showing its logo; oddly, no links to the institutions are provided from these pages. The main part of the page describes the Consortium's mission ("to advance education and empower people worldwide through opencourseware") and criteria for institutional membership (the publishing of "at least 10 courses in a format that meets the agreed-upon definition of an opencourseware") (n.d., "About Us," ¶1, 3). Presumably there is more documentation offline, for this page is unfortunately vague, never stating, for example, the "agreed-upon definition."

There is a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page that offers more information, but this cannot be found from the home page or on the About Us page; the only apparent link is from the Feedback page. Elsewhere on the site, access to the FAQ is disguised as a tiny "Help" link at the bottom of the page. The FAQ includes a better description of an OpenCourseWare project ("a free and open digital publication of high quality

university-level teaching materials—including syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, and exams—organized as courses" [(n.d., "Help", ¶3)]), refers back to MIT as the inspiration, and outlines the case for the OpenCourseWare project.

The second major part of the site, Share, presents the case for open courseware on its own page and links to a series of resources describing how to create an OCW project. The How To section is a gateway to a series of pages useful to people new to open courseware projects, including key points on intellectual property, staff organization, and technology. Some of these pages are accompanied by short case studies featuring photogenic professors. There is no list of the case studies.

The third major section, Support, describes ways to help the initiative. There are short sections describing how foundations, individuals, and copyright holders can help, but each concludes with what is probably really the only way to help—to send e-mail to the feedback form. Links to the Hewlett and Mellon foundations, two organizations that have supported open courseware, follow.

The OpenCourseWare Consortium site is useful because it describes an important initiative that is developing rapidly, but an air of exclusivity permeates the site. As with its commercial counterpart, the Open Content Alliance, the Consortium is made up of large institutions and the only means of access to the OCW project is to send e-mail. If there is a community—and one presumes there is—it is well hidden; my searches for traces of a mailing list or Google or Yahoo group came up empty. It is as though these organizations are saying that they will manage open courseware for the rest of us. I do not believe that this is true, but it is unfortunate that the main access point to the OpenCourseWare Consortium is an impenetrable barrier.

The combined knowledge of the world's cultures is entrusted to our universities, but it does not belong to the universities. It belongs to society as a whole. It therefore falls on these universities to be open and responsive to society as a whole, not only with the content of open courseware but also with respect to the development and management of that content. Developing a community and encouraging discussion would be the first step toward honoring this trust.

References

OpenCourseWare Consortium. n.d. About us. http://www.ocwconsortium.org/about/index.shtml (accessed January 29, 2007).

OpenCourseWare Consortium. n.d. Help. http://www.ocwconsortium.org/help/index.html (accessed January 29, 2007).