Mission statement for ccLearn – Summer 2008

Summary

ccLearn, the education division of Creative Commons, is a project devoted to promoting a network-oriented approach to open educational resources ("OER"). Specifically, ccLearn focuses on removing barriers to sharing and reuse of OER. Some barriers are legal; for example, some "open" resources are licensed under widely varying terms, with conditions that are restrictive, hard to understand, or mutually incompatible with those of other OER sites. Some barriers are technical, including OER sites designed around individual ease of use without due regard for enabling the finding, combining, and localizing of materials from other open sources worldwide. And many barriers are cultural, which includes different standards and pedagogies, different motivations for learning and engaging with OER, and generally an absence of a network orientation toward OER.

In response, ccLearn advocates for "interoperability" in each area. In the legal sphere, ccLearn is ideally situated and already engaged in educating and advocating for interoperable licensing terms for open content. To overcome technical and cultural obstacles, ccLearn is providing advice and expertise to the OER community and sharing lessons learned. And ccLearn is actively building partnerships and competitions in order to highlight successful and innovative uses and reuses of OER.

ccLearn was launched in September, 2007, and outcomes planned for the first year already include a report mapping existing legal and technical protocols used by providers of OER, and a "best practices" statement to promote interoperable OER. But ccLearn has already been active beyond these initial goals, responding to community demands to advocate widely for both adoption and reuse of OER, to craft educationally appropriate language to explain license choices and copyright exceptions, and to take a leadership role in developing new technical and archival formats for enabling the search and discovery of OER.

Background

Creative Commons offers free, easily understood, machine readable licenses by which individuals can retain particular rights to their creative work, while sharing it with the world on generous terms. Creative Commons (CC) has always worked on promoting open and interoperable educational resources, and the organization has consulted meaningfully with many different OER projects, including MIT's Open Courseware, Rice University's Connexions site, the Public Library of Science, the Brazilian government's publicdomain.gov educational portal, One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), and many others. Until ccLearn was established, with the generous support of the Hewlett Foundation, no single person or division within Creative Commons had responsibility for education, nor was there a larger strategic plan on how to catalyze, mark, federate, and build the education commons or to expand the community that contributes to it and draws from it.

The basic rationale for ccLearn is simple: To solidify and build on the success of all OER initiatives, the OER community needs greater coordination to harmonize legal and technical protocols to ensure that, from the user's perspective, open content is actually open. In essence, ccLearn is working to ensure that the whole of the OER initiative is greater than the sum of its parts by coordinating with resource providers and by advocating for policies and practices that enable an accessible, interoperable, global educational commons.
The establishment of ccLearn in this capacity appears to have been particularly timely. Recent reviews of the OER movement (e.g., Atkins et al. 2007, OECD 2007) noted that the uptake and impact of OER for formal education was lacking, despite the phenomenal growth of open educational resources themselves. At the same time, the internet itself is changing, from a relatively static digital archive (Web 1.0) to a relatively dynamic social networking space (Web 2.0).

The reviews and technical developments suggest a common path forward: building communities of practice around the generation, adaptation, and evaluation of OER and tracking positive impacts on learning, which is the overarching goal of the OER movement. Since CC licenses are fundamental to this movement, acting as an infrastructural glue that binds otherwise disparate initiatives, ccLearn is ideally positioned to remove additional infrastructural barriers to the realization of OER as transformative elements for global education. In this capacity, ccLearn is looking to the "plumbing" of the movement, taking a bottom-up view of the digital and social infrastructure common to everyone. But ccLearn is also playing a significant and growing role as an advisor for the various people and organizations involved with OER. Our interest in growing the whole movement, with all of the advantages of encouraging a diversity of approaches, lends itself naturally to this overarching "umbrella" function. Other than perhaps the Hewlett Foundation itself, there is no other organization that is both supporting and analyzing the movement from these two different perspectives.

The common framework for these activities revolves around the concept of interoperability. ccLearn already advocates for interoperability among those committed to openness in the educational sector, and we are working with partners to make interoperation part of the daily educational process. In addition to our work breaking down legal barriers to the formation of the global educational commons, we are also working to seed or jump-start particular initiatives and demonstration projects, to "federate" or "network" existing efforts, to offer interoperable and open tools for marking, searching, and reusing content, and to bring to educational material some of the entrepreneurial, creative, distributed, and open attitudes that characterize the free software community, Wikipedia, or the Creative Commons itself. ccLearn is poised to more fully assume these roles, akin to that of a public servant for the OER movement, and the timing is perfect for integrating key infrastructural elements into developing OER projects and communities of practice so that we get a maximum return on our efforts to make things more interoperable.

Theory of action

The Internet offers the possibility of universal access to free, high-quality educational material wherever there is a network connection. Yet despite notable particular successes and remarkable institutional innovation, the promise of OER has been only partially fulfilled. The theory behind

ccLearn is that the problem of unfulfilled potential of the OER initiative derives from an absence of a true network orientation, which affects the ways in which these resources are designed and the legal and technical terms under which these resources are provided. We are still a long way from the dream of a national and international community of engaged teachers and students, at every level of education, contributing to a global commons of educational material that can be customized to local languages, needs, and educational requirements. Nor does one find an extensive practice of innovation and experimentation with other open content drawn from the Internet, rather than innovation only in the provision of one's own material. By contrast, witness the fruitful experimentation involved in Google Maps mashups, or the thriving musical remix, or open source software communities. There it is precisely the openness and interoperability of the material that allows others around the world to experiment with presenting it in new ways, or turning it to new ends. In the educational context, such experiments are much rarer.

Fortunately, things are beginning to change. Creative Commons is currently drafting a new tool, called CC Zero, which will enable dedication of content to an unlicensed state (i.e., in the public domain) on the internet. This tool would also satisfy those members of the OER community that have been advocating for an "educational" license where there are no rights reserved. Similarly, it was recently announced that the Wikimedia Foundation has agreed to resolve the GFDL (a copyleft license) to interoperate with the CC-BY-SA license, which has heretofore been one of the most intractable incompatibilities (in terms of licensing) for the OER community. And there have been gatherings of leading OER organizations to discuss, and hopefully take action on, technically interoperable formats that will substantially increase the likelihood that new and useful tools for the OER community will leverage all of the available resources, not just those of the originating organization.

But there is still much to do. Within copyright, there are still many international variations on copyright to resolve, and there is the constant effort needed to educate people about copyright and Creative Commons licenses in particular. In addition, limitations on copyright – such as fair use, fair dealing, and the right of private copying – vary considerably around the world; thus, great legal sophistication is needed to harmonize presentation. There are cultural and social impediments to the adoption of open licenses as well as fears about loss of control, liability, and copyright infringement. Some of these fears are reasonable, others unjustified. ccLearn can also educate the funding community about the importance of mandating openness from the beginning. It makes no sense for philanthropic and governmental efforts to create silos of "open" content that are actually mutually inaccessible as a legal matter, or where permitted uses are simply unclear. There are large potential benefits of breaking down some of these barriers, such as: a widening of the pool of available materials, saved cost and time from the avoidance of duplicative effort, and increasing returns to scale characteristic of network effects. One person who knows about Vikings is just that. But connect that person with a global network of people with every possible type of specialized knowledge and you have a global encyclopedia that benefits everyone – including the expert on Vikings. The same type of increasing returns to scale have yet to be realized in the educational field.

Many of the lessons learned from the creation and improvement of the Creative Commons licenses themselves can be brought to bear on these issues in the educational space. ccLearn is

already on track in developing language and technical tools that will enable learners and educators to learn more about copyright, openness, and interoperability, and ccLearn is consulting directly with dozens of organizations who are interested in open educational resources and would like to get involved. However, by positioning itself both as an advice-center of the OER community and as an enabler (and advocate) of that community, the demands on ccLearn have far exceeded the initial vision for the organization. Among other things, ccLearn is now actively engaged in the following projects:

- Managing the theoretical and practical elements of designing a functional (and ideally web-scale) search engine for open educational resources, in collaboration with OER Commons and several other education and search organizations.
- Beyond creating a map of the open educational landscape, building a space where organizations can collaborate and synthesize their efforts more effectively, which is a logical extension of the role ccLearn already plays in building dialog among different organizations.
- Ensuring equity of access and participation in the creation and use of OER internationally, which is particularly challenging given the variation in legal regimes and disparities in technical infrastructure and sophistication worldwide.
- Tackling other areas of needed interoperability, such as standards of instruction for K-12 education, compliance with ADA (or international equivalents) guidelines, norms of practice for different educational and scholarly communities, and metadata standards for OER that will enable platform-independent identification of key attributes (including license-status) of the resources.
- Building interest in and enabling scholarly research and evaluation of the impacts of OER on learning gains, and then disseminating that information to build capacity and awareness for the OER movement as a whole.
- Creating as many exemplars (or proofs-of-concept) for OER creation and reuse as possible, for all different types of media, in all the different domains of education. Currently, one of the biggest barriers we face for increasing rates of participation in the OER community is simple lack of understanding about what is entailed, and what is possible. ccLearn strives to advocate in such a way that the movement as a whole benefits, not just a single OER initiative.
- Working with commercial enterprises and existing leaders in “traditional” education to develop new models for sustainability, content-delivery, and enhancement of student access to high-quality learning opportunities.

These tasks are clear and necessary paths that we must take if we are to build a collective (and interoperable) vision for the OER community. ccLearn is working to establish sufficient internal capacity to engage other partners and funders to extend these key initiatives in new and fruitful directions. There is no shortage of opportunities, but it is important that ccLearn continue to act on behalf of the community, which is a significant challenge when the bulk of the funding that is available is for project-specific needs. In terms of overall strategy, ccLearn will offer solutions (legal, technical, and social) to key barriers to openness in education, which will serve as catalysts and exemplars for the OER community to then adopt, improve upon, localize, and otherwise appropriate to the benefit of everyone. ccLearn is keenly aware of the balancing act that must be maintained, where on the one hand we need to bring the barriers to interoperability

to the forefront of the community's collective mind, but on the other hand we will be seeking solutions such that most users and creators of OER need never be concerned with these issues. Creative Commons already operates in that space for copyright generally, so ccLearn is in an excellent position to do the same within education.