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Internet facilitates continued learning

Readers of these pages are no doubt familiar with the phrase of “life-long learning.” The idea is that individuals can structure their learning in ways that benefit themselves and their organizations, even long after the completion of a diploma or degree. One might even interpret life-long to mean before or during the completion of a traditional diploma or degree. At root, a life-long learner leverages intrinsic motivation to learn from a variety of experiences and materials. With respect to the latter, the World Wide Web (WWW) can help facilitate access to a broader and deeper set of learning materials.

Recently, some colleges and universities have embarked on a strategy that is referred to as “Open Courseware” (OCW). Broadly, OCW is an umbrella program to publish the curricular details of one or more courses directly on the WWW. These web sites are University-managed and publicly-available.

One of the originators and key leaders in the OCW movement is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). As of August, 2008, the MIT OCW site (<http://ocw.mit.edu>) provides the syllabus, calendar/outline, readings, lecture notes, assignments and related materials for more than 1800 courses. These are not special courses, but rather the same courses that have been recently offered to existing undergraduate and graduate MIT students. The Sloan School of Management at MIT offers course materials on topics ranging from accounting, finance, system dynamics, and economics to communication, human resources, law, and innovation.

The University of California at Berkeley (UCB) also posts course materials on the WWW, but with a twist. UCB posts the full audio and video of selected courses online (<http://webcast.berkeley.edu/>).

It should be clear that accessing online learning materials is not the same as obtaining a university degree. However, as the OCW movement catches on at other universities, the amount of high-quality learning materials available online to motivated learners at no charge will increase dramatically. In turn, “learning how to learn,” and the business equivalent, learning how to improve the economic returns and social/environmental impact of an organization on a continuous basis, may well become the centerpiece of an educated individual.