

Open Content and Open Technology for K20

Moderator:

Mitch Weisburgh

Panelists:

Martin Knott, Moodlerooms

Josh Marks, Curriki.org

Mike King, IBM Ed Industry

Josh Marks began the discussion by talking about Curriki.org, which provides both open source and open content software. Open content means that a piece of content is produced and subsequently released into an open source license (range of options to release content under license). Open source, alternatively, means a variety of things. He asked “how open is open”?

What is the difference between Open and Free? An open source product, the panel replied, is free to the public and downloadable. Users can take it, use it, change it, and take derivatives off of it, but they can't abuse it. They must notify people of where it originally came from and credit the creators. As an example, the panel cited Louisiana State University, where modules are being created; these will have been built by LSU and given to the open source community. Open doesn't mean free, the panel reminded the audience—it is a legal licensing around making source code available. They cited two areas, areas, copy left and copyright. There are many difference licenses, they said, and some are more commercially friendly. From the vendor's perspective it's free as in free speech, not as in free beer. Finally, they said, open source creates tremendous commercial opportunities by creating standardization in the community. (IBM investing in Linux, Eclipse, etc.)

Can you describe an example of making money in open source? Mike King of the IBM education industry, advised companies to first lower development costs, which doesn't make money, but retains it; second, he cited the different marketing and sales benefits, mentioning that there is already an open source community out there. Martin Knott from Moodlerooms said that his company has 25k developers globally. Knott described Moodlerooms, which has successfully produced ten versions in five years of business, as a vehicle where code comes from bottom up; instead of blindly dictating what the customer wants (i.e. top-down system), the people who are using the tools tell the company what they need. GPL open philosophy.

Can you explain the licensing?

General Public License (GPL) is a share-alike provision. Companies can do whatever they want, so long as everything they do with it is released under the same license. Alternatively, a Lesser General Public License (LGPL) can be used to commercialize derivative work and can maintain proprietary interest. The benefit in this case remains the value to customer. Can make money to sell support, etc.

Curriki.org's source code is LGPL, Marks mentioned, and the user determines which restrictions they want to put on their content. There is a struggle with compatibility of license issues.

Copy left- share alike

Creative Commons- Attribution non-commercial, etc.

If a company uses open source, the panel reminded listeners, it needs to pay attention to

what kind of licensing the initial producer used; however, if that same company is the first publisher, it decides how to publish the content and determines the nature of the publishing terms.

For Curriki.org, Marks said, content is the purest place for value proposition of open source. In a generic sense, it makes sense if a company possesses people with common self-interest.

Knott noted that other companies use Moodle for learning systems—this system has created new looks and integration tools (i.e. ability to integrate between Cisco and salesforce.com) for Moodle. It is Moodle's responsibility, he said, to give educators access to their content.

Marks noted that if three districts need to employ a new math program, they can either do a traditional purchase or each one could pony up a third of the cost and put their best teachers and developers on this task; the case of the latter, we will all get as many copies of it as we want. Next year we can go back and develop ancillary materials, etc. As a result, programs improve and costs get lower.

What are some of the benefits of open source for educational technology companies? Customers, the panel said, don't get locked into a single vendor. They encouraged listeners to open things up, as the cost of buying software is cheap, but switching software later is expensive. Producers should think of customers as their partners. Instead of building something to sell them, companies should work with them to create something they need and must provide value-added services for them. Schools are not in the business of making things and selling them, so tech vendors need to think of themselves as service providers, not as IP holders, partnering with customers to create and then re-churning the effects for others.

Open source is free like a puppy in that it must be fed and trained, but proper care yields a life-long relationship with the puppy. Properly-maintained open source does things for companies that cannot be purchased. Companies that are willing to invest in open source can get much better value.

Do you face accuracy issues with open source curriculum/content? The panel cited the classic comparison between real content and Wikipedia; however, in reality, the two are like apples and oranges. Community, they said, yields new definitions and new objects. Theoretically, Wikipedia could become more accurate than Encyclopedia Britannica over time and the peer-review trend is catching on: Curriki.org, Marks said, has embedded peer review processes to ensure accuracy. In the same vein, education institutions that adopt peer review programs will also refer to their own committees and processes to maintain accuracy.

Question- It is a fallacy to think that one way to make this new world is to turn school district into vendors. Where is the evidence that getting 20 best teachers together = as good as content as 200 team at a publisher?

Marks replied that the team wouldn't simply include 20 teachers, but that plus 20 plus 20 plus 20 plus an editor, layout person and other professionals. This combination of teachers and educational technology professionals, he felt, would inspire higher-quality products. The audience disagreed for the most part, stating that a professional model curriculum has many complicated variables.

What has the feedback from teachers been regarding the time it takes to create open content material?

One of the things they do, Knots responded, is join with their peers and ask questions such as, "I am trying to do _____ with my class and struggling. Do you have any ideas?" They don't build content in Moodlerooms, he said, but rather repository for content. The vast majority of teachers, Marks said, don't have the time, expertise or willingness to contribute—10% of users contribute to the content, and 90% simply use it. The model will not work until educational institutions support teachers in these efforts. The real value property is ownership on the part of the teacher; that is, if they have created it, they will better understand and utilize the pedagogy and methodology, which will result in more efficient learning.

Nature of change- does it happen slowly or all at once? At what point does the education system have to fundamentally change? Change comes faster when customers believe in the value of the product. If they don't, then the change won't happen. King admitted that IBM was way behind in the education industry; presently, they don't don't do much to remediate kids who are falling behind or to give gifted kids opportunities. While they have the technology to deliver personalized learning, they aren't using it. The business model provided by open approach enables a company like IBM to innovate more easily.

How do you go from selling content to giving it for free? King warned that a company must make this transition or perish, as ultimately, customers will stop buying from a company that does not do this. Marks then cited the wireless generation, which took back catalog that they had to write off, repackaged it, made it such that teachers could make modifications and were able to sell it to Florida. Knots reminded the audience to look ahead, since, after all, "It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark".

The panel then provided some specific recommendations for publishers. First, they encouraged publishers to think about OEM open source technology and to refrain from building a learning management system. Publishers should commoditize content and invest in things that differentiate and add value. Lastly, the said, vendors need to aim beyond commoditization cycle in open world.

How well do your users understand the licensing issues and how much time do you have to spend keeping non-open content there? Marks replied that Curriki.org makes licensing information readily available to users; in fact, they can't sign up for Curriki without agreeing to the terms outlined by said information. When publishing content, users must select a license type. Curriki's only obligation as a service provider is to remove content upon request. They look at everything created for safety purposes and look for clearly copyrighted materials. If necessary, Curriki will take down content (take-down notice) proactively. The company, however, has yet to receive a take-down notice.

Private equity firms are not interested in companies unless they believe that the company will draw \$500 million in revenue before the five-year mark. How can a company do this with your model? King told listeners to service their clients, as word of good customer service will spread through the industry. There is business-servicing open content he said, and there is hope to achieve \$500 million in revenue.