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The price of free software: Labor, ethics, and context in distance education

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Abstract

The use, development, and dissemination of open-source software (OSS) appears to be more in line with the liberatory, collaborative, epistemological ideals of institutions of higher learning than does commercial software. However, our primary and secondary research reveals that due largely to institutional pressures and labor issues, open source software options are often not explored or considered when teaching distance-learning writing courses. In this article, we compare open source and commercial content/course management options and demonstrate the benefits and problems of specific applications. Additionally, we discuss our results from case studies of four instructors who teach distance-learning writing courses. We detail what types of applications they use, the level of institutional support they receive, and the motivations for their choices of applications.

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1. Introduction: Distance education, technology, and labor in higher education

Most teachers of writing who are permitted to select their own texts assert that their choice of books depends largely on their curricular and pedagogical goals for a particular course. In a field as seemingly committed to political struggle as composition and rhetoric, we would like to think that our choice of technologies also originates from ideological and pedagogical concerns. However, when examining the reasons that writing teachers of distance-learning classes select their course software, we learned that personal labor practices and institutional business decisions have a much greater influence over which tools are chosen than do ideology or pedagogy.

Open-source technologies, which allow for open access and collaborative development and innovation, appear to reflect certain positive values of the educational commons: Knowledge

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is shared, and advancements result from the work of many constituencies, all of whom are equal players and can participate fully in developing shared tools and technologies (Hepburn, 2004; Jesiek, 2003). Also, because open-source code is freely available and customizable and the resulting products are accessible to all without the burden of royalty fees, it helps to advance the educational commons (Hepburn, 2004; Jesiek, 2003). Furthermore, open-source technologies facilitate a commitment to open-content, making the knowledge and information contained within and delivered by technologies, such as course management software and web sites, available to all. Thus, as Gary Hepburn (2004) has argued, “Unless there is an excellent reason, the open-source software should be used due to its overall suitability, low cost, and better alignment with educational values” (para. 6).

Despite the fact that open-source tools seem better aligned with the critical and liberatory pedagogies that many scholars and writing teachers espouse, few instructors teaching at a distance are using such software. Instead, due to time constraints, inadequate technical expertise, and institutional mandates, both proactive and implied, many instructors select commercial courseware—such as Blackboard and WebCT—when teaching their distance-learning courses. Our analysis in this article explores the labor issues (both individual and institutional) related to open-source software (OSS) and courseware, provides insights into the pressures influencing instructors’ decisions regarding tools for distance-learning, and reflects upon the ramifications of those choices for writing instruction in this format.

2. Open-source labor issues for teachers of writing

To begin with, we would like to examine some of the labor issues at stake for teachers of writing through the OSS framework. Specifically, we will consider the differences between open-source and open-content, as well as some motivations for the use of open-source and their relation to faculty and their institutions. We will then consider some specific, possible labor implications for the use of open-source, which have perhaps been lost in the rush to emphasize the egalitarian and liberatory nature of the model. Finally, we will offer some brief thoughts on the relationship of open-source and open-content models to nonprofit universities’ frequent public missions.¹

2.1. *Open-source versus open-content*

The open-content model has been a natural outgrowth of the OSS model, because both are fundamentally concerned with intellectual property. The choice of OSS as a delivery method for distance education courses creates a framework for one set of issues, though, while choosing

¹ We will not recap the history or specifics of open-source software development or the open-source software movement. There is much good work on this done already, and we will assume readers know enough of this to have a feel for what open-source is all about. See, for instance, Charles Lowe’s (2001) article on the history of open-source, which provides a concise summary with relevance to composition and rhetoric. Also, Taylor, Laurie, and Riley, Brendan (2004) provide an excellent summary of open-source issues as they relate to composition and rhetoric. For more in-depth studies outside of composition and rhetoric, see Raymond, Eric (2001), Moody, Glyn (2001), Joseph Feller and Brian Fitzgerald (2002), and/or DiBona, Chris, Ockman, Sam, and Stone, Mark (1999).

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