

## Charles Vest, “Disturbing the Educational Universe: Universities in the Digital Age – Dinosaurs or Prometheans?”

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### Background

In 2001 MIT Announced that it would use the internet to provide open access to all of its courses. Several universities and foundations joined together to create the Open Knowledge Initiative. Technology enabled active learning (TEAL) was also developed to more fully engage students in course materials beyond lecture. Dinosaurs or Prometheans was given to lend validity to the openness argument in higher education and provide instruction on how to apply it. MIT President Charles Vest explores a fork in the road – will the future of education belong to the age of machines or will it remain in the realm of human connection? The answer to both, he says, is a resounding YES!

The last 14 years have been the most significant, prolific, and highly experimental years of the OCW movement. In just over a decade, thanks to the internet, the information democratizing and education proliferation has exploded. MIT has been at the forefront leading the way. In this article Vest shares an inspiring vision of technology allowing education to be libre/open to students around the world, connecting students and professors globally to the best resources.

### Key Points

Practicing openness increases learning, while closed education stifles learners and prevents them from fully opening their minds. Free education is, therefore, a service to society; The spirit of open courseware means that both content, and content repositories need to be open. The Greek myth about Prometheus tells how he stole fire from the Gods to give to the humans. Such is the story of this article, however in the case of open “sharing” is preferred to theft. MIT became a group of what the author calls prometheans when they decided to share their courses openly. Universities that refuse to adapt are compared to dinosaurs, in danger of extinction. Every institution must decide how it will play in the digital age, both strategically and tactically. Adaptive universities are not in danger of extinction. They will continue to play an important role in providing the most intense, advanced, and effective education. At this early stage he submits that we must experiment to figure out what will work best. We live in a time of substantial experimentation and calculated risk taking in terms of the use of digital media in education.

Vest then introduces the principle of openness, specifically open courseware and open systems. Since “the glory of American higher education is its democratizing reach,” the quality of American education has grown as materials have been produced and people with knowledge have gone out to share what they have gained. The internet is shortening the cycle time. “MIT OCW is different [from earlier distance education models] ... It is a form of sharing among institutions. It is a form of academic publishing more than of teaching. It puts materials in the hands of others to use as they see fit.”

Several universities and foundations joined together to create the Open Knowledge Initiative. The goal was to build an environment to develop an open architecture for learning management systems.

New media allows us to teach at a distance and to bring far flung experiences to our students. Movement in this sphere is both outward (e.g. teaching students on campus and in other countries within the same course) and inward (e.g. students getting feedback on projects from people in industry overseas). It also promotes sharing “laboratories, libraries, and lectures” as all of these can be and have been moved online. Some are very difficult to build online, so different institutions will need to collaborate and share.

Vest indicates that open courseware will fuel innovation within participating institutions as technology expands possibilities for teaching and learning on campus. He concedes, however, that there are issues with the current intellectual property environment. The needs of the entertainment industry have guided the development of laws that govern all electronic media, but these laws don’t necessarily work for other industries. MIT OCW raises questions about who owns course materials, especially when MIT resources were used to create a course. As we navigate this issue he maintains that licensing is a more open avenue than subscription.

Vest concludes by looking toward the future. He advises the reader to expect increased collaborative activities and electronic learning communities and to look to new interfaces and means of human-computer interaction for development. He also predicts a future of heavy digital use in education and online educational communities, on-the-job, just-in-time learning becoming the norm in many industries and cost-effective education spreading throughout the world until education will no longer be an economical consideration, because online educational resources will flow like water.

## Discussion Questions

1. Are we past the point of experimentation yet? If not, how do we know when we will be? Will we ever be truly past experimenting?
2. The author says: “The glory of American higher education is its democratizing reach.” Is this still true today (especially when compared to other developed nations)? Was it ever true?
3. The author discusses laboratories, libraries and lectures online. What else has been moved online since? What else could be moved online?
4. Charles Vest addresses the complexity of intellectual property law, which has advanced since this writing. How has that affected OWC’s legal issues?
5. What is your institution doing specifically with OpenCourseWare? Is there anything like an MIT equivalent?
6. Vest says: “A meaningful set of changes and exemptions must be worked out in Washington if digital libraries are to realize their promise for research, scholarship, and education.” Is anything being done here? Has any progress been made? What changes would you suggest?





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