MIT'S OpenCourseWare Experiment

MIT caught distance educators by surprise in April 2001 when it announced plans to post the content of some 2,000 classes on the Web, saying it hoped to spur a worldwide movement among educators to share knowledge and improve teaching methods. In a world where most institutions are seeking to squeeze a few extra bucks from their Internet activities, here was a preeminent university willing to give it all away for free. "It's a profoundly simple idea that was not intuitive," says the manager of the MIT OpenCourseWare project. "At the time, the world was clamping down on information, limiting it to those who could pay for it." In September, MIT will officially launch OpenCourseWare with 500 courses, but during the past year's beta phase, it's already learned a few lessons, such as how do you discourage Third World scam artists from hawking MIT degrees as if they were Rolex knock-offs? Despite these problems, the test was hailed a success, and OpenCourseWare is now set to expand its outreach by offering translations of 25 courses into Spanish and Portuguese, courtesy of Universia, a Madrid-based consortium of universities. Similar offers from the Middle East, the Ukraine and Mongolia are under consideration. The real test, however, will be whether the project will sprout the online communities needed to support individual courses. "We'd like to see self-managed OpenCourseWare communities," says the manager. "Our vision is to have this open source software on the site, as well as information that helps people build a learning community, whether it's in Namibia, Thailand, whatever."

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