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Taking Notes Beyond the Classroom

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In 2001, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology announced an [OpenCourseWare](#) system that would post videos and other course materials for virtually all MIT classes online for the world to see, thereby starting to break down the traditional barriers to higher education.

Eight years later, we may be seeing the student response.

The development of free note sharing Web sites, where students upload their class notes to share with their peers, has begun to create an open stockpile of downloadable information that some say is further leveling the academic playing field. With an influx of note sharing sites -- from the innocuous sounding [GradeGuru](#) to the most "college" sounding [isleptthroughclass.com](#) (soon to be relaunched as Wise Campus) -- many of them advocate the spread and collaborative use of knowledge beyond the classroom and university.

"The movement very much spouted from an academic spectrum with professors sharing materials, and spilled over into students sharing materials," said Emily Sawtell, founder of GradeGuru, a subset of McGraw-Hill Companies, for which she is the director of new business ventures. "MIT started a tidal wave with open sharing and more will [come of it.]"

The possibilities are great for "open educational resources," like note sharing, said Steve Carson, external relations director for MIT Open Courseware, but one must differentiate between sharing information from credentialed teachers at accredited institutions and sharing student notes that are not verified or fact-checked. Note sharing could lead to issues of questionable factuality similar to those that arise with the user-updated Wikipedia.

And because of the controversial nature of sharing notes, these Web sites have raised eyebrows across academia, especially with regard to professors' intellectual property. Some, too, have expressed the concern that these websites blur the line between cheating and doing one's own work, which could be seen as propagating laziness among students. And some professors worry that these sites could devolve into gossipy commentary on the course.

Despite mixed reactions, note sharing has continued to grow in popularity. "Broadly, what we're seeing is a trend in the increase of recognition that learning is collaborative. We've often treated what students do as private segments, they just go back to their dorms and study, when in fact they study together a lot," said David Parry, assistant professor of emerging media and communications at the University of Texas-Dallas. Parry is also part of McGraw-Hill's Academic Advisory Committee. "We've seen Facebook and MySpace collaboration to share information. There are opportunities for [the note sharing] Web sites to play that role for students."

The Players

The growth of the note sharing industry has certainly attracted its fair share of small time entrepreneurs looking to cash in on a growing trend in higher education. But it has also attracted heavy hitters in academe like McGraw-Hill, which started GradeGuru as a home-grown project. Sawtell said that the Web site was spawned from McGraw-Hill's own research into study habits, in which students were asked to videotape themselves while they were studying. The video responses often featured two students in the frame, suggesting that collaboration was more prominent than the researchers had anticipated. So, they set to work developing Grade Guru to bring the age-old practice of sharing notes into the 21st century.

GradeGuru features a star rating system in which users can tell the note provider how good their notes are. The best notes are displayed more prominently, a feature that Sawtell said allows students to "build reputations" on the site. Plus, students get paid for uploading their materials depending on how good they are.

So where does the funding come from? As with many Internet ventures, a solid revenue stream has yet to be put into place. But Sawtell said GradeGuru provides a forum in which McGraw-Hill can observe how students study and develop products to better help them.

"From our perspective, we see note sharing as evolving into a more collaborative community of notes, more real time discussion, students helping each other in more real time," Sawtell said. "If other social networks should be taken as an example, that is what may ultimately play out."

ShareNotes.com was developed about three years ago by a couple of University of Texas medical school students who wanted an easy way to pass around notes within their own classes. Now, the mission has come to be more like that of GradeGuru -- pay students to upload their notes while at the same time "building a community and helping it grow," said Bill Novak, the CEO.

[ShareNotes.com](#) has not yet instituted a viable business model either. However, Novak said that once the Web site -- which has about 10,000 users rights now -- attracts enough participating schools and notes, it could become a subscription service.

islepthroughclass.com advertises notes for students who just couldn't quite make it to their 8:30 lectures. Despite the name of the site, Allison Barber, director of marketing and public relations, stated in an e-mail that, "we have found that the most active members on the site are among the top of their class and enjoy the educational and community aspects of the site more than finding it a perpetuator of laziness."

The Web site itself, however, features a promotional video with a student diligently taking notes, while two others drink beer on a porch, apparently missing class. Because of the negative image portrayed by the name, the site is relaunching as Wise Campus. "The reason for the relaunch/rebrand was to counteract the sometimes negatively perceived attributes given to the site.... We are looking to do a little more partnering with universities and the islepthroughclass brand would never be supported by them," Barber stated. Instead, the site's name will better match its goal of intellectual collaboration and community, she said.

Andrew Magliozzi, a Harvard graduate who founded a tutoring service right out of college, decided to start [FinalsClub.org](#) after becoming increasingly disconcerted with the barriers to attaining knowledge. His Web site, now up and running, features notes and commentary on Harvard courses posted by other Harvard students. Magliozzi hopes that FinalsClub.org, the only not-for-profit note sharing site, will spread to other schools as well. He also hopes to expand the services offered on the site in order to move it forward.

Other note sharing sites include [knetwit.com](#), [koofers.com](#), [coursehero.com](#), [studyblue.com](#), and a handful of others.

Doubts Amidst Development

Note sharing technologies have [undergone a good deal of scrutiny](#) as they've increased in popularity. Some skeptical professors see them as a forum for plagiarism, prompting many if not all of these sites to prominently display warnings against the practice. One source of dismay is that certain Web sites go beyond note sharing -- delving into the world of problem set answers and old test dissemination. Sites like [PostYourTest.com](#) and [koofers.com](#) allow users to access old exams and quizzes, which is why [PostYourTest.com](#) has a [petition](#) for permission to use the site that students can present to their professors.

Michele Tillman, coordinator of academic appeals at Oklahoma State University, says that her office has dealt with students who have gotten in trouble through misuse of note sharing and other information sharing websites, but that such can happen through university course Web sites as well. Most recently, one student posted a paper for a course on a university site that was then handed in by another student with minor changes. The issue becomes more widespread with online courses, she said. The academic integrity handbook at Oklahoma State has provisions for use of information sharing websites -- generally allowing note sharing, but prohibiting the spread of information about what might be on an exam or paper -- but discretion on what is and is not cheating is usually left up to the professors.

Most of the note sharing Web sites have their employees read the uploaded notes before publishing to make sure that none of the information would be considered cheating.

"It was something I found concerning, but when I think about it ... it all depends on how any particular student decides to use it," said Karen Pressley, professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Springfield and chair of its academic integrity council. She emphasized that while students should avoid posting old tests online, professors have equal responsibility not to give out exams and

then use them over and over again in a way that provides room for cheating.

Another distinguishing factor between acceptable and unacceptable use of the note sharing sites is the type of lecture material being shared. "Whether or not it's undermining education has to do with the understanding between teacher and student," said Teddi Fishman, director at the Center of Academic Integrity within the Rutland Institute for Ethics at Clemson University. "If it's just sharing notes, it probably accomplishes the same purpose as students [sharing] notes [in person]. But it probably undermines what the teacher is trying to do when the purpose of the activity is for students to have some sort of process-based activity [in which they must engage with and analyze the material], and it's not a flat transfer of information."

Intellectual property issues have also come to light as note sharing has gained traction. "Are you going to profit off my intellectual property?" is one of the key questions professors ask about the site, said Magliozzi, who has met with a number of professors at Harvard while getting FinalsClub.org off the ground. Furthermore, sharing knowledge developed and prepared by a professor raises the question of who in fact owns the knowledge.

Pressley did not see an issue with intellectual property on note sharing sites. "I kind of consider information not really mine. It's the information I give in class, once I impart it to students, it's theirs." Fishman said that while she did not know of any professors who had problems with the intellectual property aspect, many certainly exist.

Because of discontent from professors, FinalsClub.org instituted a new policy whereby each note uploaded to the site gets sent to a professor for approval. Some notes are open only to other Harvard students, while others are available for anyone to see, depending on whether the professor wants their lecture shared. That policy was put into place after the Web site ran into trouble with professors who felt that their intellectual property was being violated.

Another concern about online note sharing is the fear that it is essentially spoon-feeding material to students and propagating a culture of laziness. However, supporters of the sites say they attract ambitious students, rather than class skippers. Keith Hampson, director of digital education strategies at Toronto's Ryerson University, who is also part of McGraw-Hill's Academic Advisory Committee, said that his original sense of skepticism has dissipated. "The more I've looked into this, the more I realized that the people who are using [note sharing sites] are proactive students. They want to have their notes in their hands before they enter class, they may want two or three copies of those notes when studying for an exam."

Fishman added that, "If all they're getting from the content is notes, that would be a sign to me that we need to spice things up."

But one of the biggest issues, at least according to Magliozzi, is that many professors feel like these sites could become forums for negative commentary about their courses. "Professors are most scared that this is going to be a Gawker-like thing in their classroom," he said, referring to the New York-based gossip blog. Especially with the advent of sites like ratemyprofessor.com -- whose mission is in part to provide a forum for criticism of professors -- sharing notes could be construed as further politicizing the course. "I think the biggest thing people are wary of is invading the sacred space of the classroom," Magliozzi said.

Classroom 2.0

Despite challenges, many of the Web sites' creators are lauding note sharing technology as the next step in taking down the ivory tower of academe. Whereas OpenCourseWare started knowledge dissemination from the top down, Magliozzi said, note sharing and, more broadly online knowledge collaboration, is helping to spread knowledge from the bottom up, further increasing access to educational materials.

But even with tools like note sharing, students are continuing to reinvent the wheel, as the saying goes, every time they produce their own set of notes. So where does note taking collaboration go from here?

Magliozzi envisions that as technology develops, integrating note taking across the classroom will become easier and easier. He is working to come up with a system -- propelled by collaboration technologies like the forthcoming [Google Wave](http://google.com/wave) -- that will allow students to produce one set of "ubemotes," instead of multiple sets of mediocre notes. With technology that allows a document to be constantly updated on multiple computers, one student can write down what the professor is saying while another can go through and correct errors. A third student can follow up and create diagrams within the notes while another can find links and images to add in. All of this can be supplemented by audio and video recordings of the lecture so that by the end, a couple of students have created a detailed copy of the material imparted that can be shared with the rest of the class and world with the click of a button.

Meanwhile, the rest of the students in the lecture can focus on digesting and applying the material, rather than simply copying it down. Note taking would be supplemented with chatroom-like forums throughout the class where students can ask questions that other

students can vote to agree with if they also don't understand that material. Questions would eventually get answered by the professor or teaching assistant. In such a way, professors "get real time information on how well they are conveying the information."

Last month, a new book by the former *Wired* magazine editor Chris Anderson called *Free: The Future of a Radical Price* (Hyperion Books) hit bookstores. Anderson asserted in his work that the consistently decreasing cost of Internet bandwidth, along with other converging factors, is trending toward a "zero cost economy." In other words, soon enough companies will make the most money by charging nothing for their products. The sharing of notes and free course videos may be the first step in bringing the cost of college-level knowledge down to that same accessible price, according to Magliozzi.

"I suppose as this goes on, it's all going to be free, we're going to give away an education to every school. You'll never get a diploma - you've got to get admitted and pass all the courses [for that]. It's never going to be quite as good as going to the school. The reason you go to school is to learn, there's a lot more to going to university than just that," said Magliozzi, noting that even if the cost of an education becomes free, the university experience probably never will be.

Even if technology brought down the cost of knowledge, universities could stop all of this information sharing at their will. For example, according to Magliozzi, they "can say you cannot bring computers into class," which would put a serious damper on information sharing. And with the questions raised, in essence, by making information disseminated by professors entirely free, the idea of knowledge sharing will likely be met with some resistance.

"I think there's a real divide in higher education as to how we ought to be teaching, how students ought to be learning," Hampson said. However, he acknowledged that whichever direction education moves in, change is inevitable. "We are obviously moving towards a more active and collaborative style of learning. These social technologies and practices enable to us to do this on a much grander scale."

— Ben Eisen

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