

MERLOT

Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching

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Introduction

MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching) is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating a central clearinghouse for college-level peer-reviewed online learning modules. The review rating process combined with an easy-to-use database structure will allow faculty to easily locate high-quality digital learning materials with evaluations and guidance for use.

A strategic priority of MERLOT is the peer review of online learning materials, a process that will help ensure that learning materials within the MERLOT “collection” are contextually accurate, pedagogically sound, and technically easy to use. In addition, the review panels will assist in providing relevant learning assignments where appropriate.

Another MERLOT priority is to engage faculty in online publication in a collaborative and cooperative environment and to provide a mechanism for professional recognition for the faculty developers. This “community” of active scholars will be able to both offer and receive constructive feedback concerning the MERLOT learning modules.

Since its origin, MERLOT has grown to include twenty-three sponsoring organizations (primarily university and community college systems) and twelve major disciplines. During 2000-2001, discipline teams will be implementing the peer review process in music, mathematics, biology, business, psychology, physics, foreign languages, history, information technology, teacher education, chemistry, and health science/nursing.

A Brief and Simplified History of MERLOT

Since 1997, the California State University Center for Distributed Learning (CSU-CDL at www.cdl.edu) has developed and provided free access to MERLOT (www.merlot.org), an open source collection of over 3700 web-based learning materials and over 2,000 profiles of people

who have joined MERLOT as individual members. MERLOT is modeled after the NSF funded project, "Authoring Tools and An Educational Object Economy (EOE)," led by Dr. James Spohre and hosted by Apple Computer and other industry, university, and government collaborators. The EOE develops and distributes tools to enable the formation of communities engaged in building shared knowledge bases of learning materials. (www.eoe.org).

In 1998, a State Higher Education Executives Organization/American Productivity and Quality Center (SHEEO/APQC) benchmarking study on faculty development and instructional technology selected the CSU-CDL, under the direction of Chuck Schneebeck, as one of six best practices centers in North America. Visits to the CSU-CDL by higher education institutions participating in the benchmarking study resulted in interest in collaborating with the CSU on the MERLOT project. The University of Georgia System, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, University of North Carolina System, and the California State University System created an informal consortium representing almost one hundred campuses serving over 900,000 students and over 47,000 faculty. SHEEO was the coordinator for the cooperative of the four state systems.

In 1999, the four systems recognized the significant benefits of a cooperative initiative to expand the MERLOT collections, conduct peer reviews of the digital learning materials, and add student learning assignments. Each system contributed \$20,000 in cash to develop the MERLOT software and over \$30,000 in in-kind support to advance the collaborative project. The CSU maintained its leadership of and responsibilities for the operation and improvement of processes and tools.

In January, 2000, the four systems sponsored 48 faculty from the disciplines of Biology, Physics, Business and Teacher Education (12 faculty from each of the four systems) to develop evaluation standards and peer review processes for on-line teaching-learning material. In April, 2000, other systems and institutions of higher education were invited to join the MERLOT cooperative. In July, 2000, twenty-three (23) systems and institutions of higher education had become Institutional Partners of MERLOT. Each Institutional Partner contributed \$25,000 and in-kind support for eight faculty and a project director (part-time) to coordinate MERLOT activities.

It is recognized that the scope of coordination activities and the requirements for sustaining MERLOT is rapidly increasing and a new, neutral coordinating organization needs to be established. To that end, the plan is to establish MERLOT.org as a non-profit organization to advance the current collaborative framework and sustain the project.

About MERLOT

MERLOT, Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching, consists of several interrelated parts. The key features are the abilities to browse/search materials and members. Visitors can locate learning materials within their disciplines as well as locate colleagues who share their discipline/interests.

MERLOT is a place for teachers and learners worldwide to join an academic discipline-based online community where they can:

- Discuss teaching and learning issues with colleagues located anywhere
- Collaborate with colleagues by creating and sharing materials, comments and reviews
- Find learning materials for teaching and learning
- Find learning materials that have been peer reviewed
- Find learning materials that have assignments attached
- Find learning materials that have user comments attached
- Add learning materials
- Add assignments to learning materials
- Add user comments to learning materials

Why MERLOT?

The heart of MERLOT is the collection of learning materials and the communities of people.

The collection of learning materials is constantly growing. To ensure high quality items, these materials are reviewed by discipline faculty using review techniques based on the peer review of scholarly materials model. Eventually, the peer reviews will be added to the learning materials screen. Other features that help in the selection process are the assignments and user comments. As faculty use the learning materials, successful assignments can be added to the learning material thus sharing “what works” with the MERLOT community.

Also, faculty, students and others can add user comments to share their experiences of how effectively the learning material worked for them. All of this information assists the user’s decision to select items.

People are also an important aspect of MERLOT. Members can find others with similar interests and skills to share information, discuss strategies, and exchange experiences. Discipline communities are forming to facilitate communication among members. These communities will allow discipline-related materials, papers, news, and events to be shared. Going beyond the scope of an individual campus increases the possibility of discovering the very best in teaching and learning materials as well as the best strategies available.

Why join?

As a member, you cannot only locate teaching and learning materials within your discipline as well as locate colleagues who share your discipline/interests, but your colleagues can also find you. Becoming a member increases dialogue, discussion, and debate among discipline community members. You can also contribute materials, add assignments, and add user comments. If you have created a learning material or have used an educationally effective web site, you can share that item with the educational community through MERLOT. As materials are developed, used and/or tested, effective assignments for a specific level can be shared. Also, you can attach comments on the quality of content, effectiveness, and usability of any used learning material.

Where do the learning materials come from?

- Individual web site developers
- MERLOT member contributors
- MERLOT staff contributors

What are MERLOT's policies?

The information within MERLOT is public and open to anyone. The links to the learning materials are in MERLOT to help users find these web sites. MERLOT is not responsible for the content or the practices of these sites. Anyone can join MERLOT. To become a member, only your last name and e-mail address are required. Minimal other information is optional; it is designed to give other members a sense of your role and your subject interests in the educational community. This information is posted on each member's profile and in that way is public. MERLOT does not share this information beyond this use.

Who is MERLOT?

MERLOT is YOU. Become a member and become an active part of the ongoing creation of high-quality teaching and learning materials and communities.

How did MERLOT get started?

In 1997, MERLOT started as an idea to respond to academic technology initiatives of the California State University (CSU) system: the Distributed Learning and Teaching Initiative and the Multimedia Repository Initiative. The CSU's Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) was given the responsibility to implement these initiatives. MERLOT is a derivative of the NSF funded project, "Authoring Tools and An Educational Object Economy." In 1998, a State Higher Education Executives Organization/American Productivity and Quality Center benchmarking study on faculty development and instructional technology selected the CDL as one of the nation's six best practices centers. This selection initiated the current collaboration among the CSU, University of Georgia System, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, and University of North Carolina System, creating a consortium. MERLOT continues to grow, adding more partners and becoming a non-profit organization with the CSU/CDL providing the core operational products and services for the digital collection, user-interface, and peer review processes.

For more complete information on the planning and development process, you can access documents at MERLOT'S tasting room: <http://taste.merlot.org/>.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is MERLOT?

The Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and On-Line Teaching (MERLOT) is a high quality collection of interactive learning materials, assignments, reviews, and people. MERLOT is also a national network of online discipline communities that will be selecting

and peer-reviewing learning materials in their specific disciplines. MERLOT serves as a national gateway to web-based peer-reviewed learning materials.

What is the value of MERLOT to individual faculty?

Most faculty do not have the time to develop electronic content; nor are they interested in adopting a complete pre-packaged course. MERLOT provides them a way of easily and cheaply incorporating material into their course and syllabus. MERLOT may also eventually provide faculty a more systematic way of documenting their contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

How is MERLOT different than other Internet "gateways?"

Most web search engines (e.g., Yahoo) can lead you to sites on a particular topic, but rarely to the depth of information teachers and scholars need. MERLOT collects web-based materials from selected disciplines, evaluates them, and attaches assignments, reviews, and other information necessary to integrate them successfully into faculty curricula. By searching through MERLOT, faculty members can easily identify materials that are appropriate for them to assign in their courses.

Is MERLOT a repository?

It functions as a repository, but goes much further by adding assignments, ratings, peer-reviews, and discipline communities. It currently includes more than 2,000 modules from many institutions. An important part of the project is to find additional material and systematically add to this collection. In this process, critical shortages in learning materials can be identified and faculty and/or publishers can then be encouraged to develop materials. In addition to functioning as a repository, MERLOT facilitates communication and collaboration among people with common interests. Initially, online "communities" will be formed in four disciplines.

What are "learning materials?"

Learning materials can be used as components of a course, but are not complete courses. Learning materials found through MERLOT include high quality simulations, animations, tutorials, exercises, and other organized learning material.

How will users know if the material they are accessing is of high quality?

The organization of MERLOT consists of a national network of online discipline communities. Within each discipline, MERLOT faculty expert reviewers have formed panels that select and evaluate the learning materials. Each panel is in the process of (1) developing professional standards for online learning materials, (2) engaging in peer review processes similar to those used for scholarly works, and (3) providing a mechanism to validate and share high quality work. Also, to assess usability and to evaluate effectiveness, user comments from faculty, students, and other members can be added.

What disciplines are scheduled for initial peer review?

A consortium of four lead states have chosen to review Biology, Business, Physics, and Teacher Education materials as the first step in the peer review process.

Who are the key players in MERLOT project?

The California State University developed the prototype for the national MERLOT project, and plays a key role in the project's technical design, implementation, and user evaluation. The State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) helped to launch MERLOT and serves as a liaison to state boards and systems. The National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII) of EDUCAUSE supports the project through its national meetings and events. During the pilot phase, state systems of higher education will be the primary vehicle to solicit and coordinate faculty participation. For the first half of 2000, four state systems will participate in MERLOT: The California State University, The University of North Carolina, The University System of Georgia, and The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. Additional multi-campus systems, consortia, and institutions are invited to join the project beginning in July 2000.

For more information about MERLOT, visit <http://merlot.cdl.edu> or contact Rhonda Epper at repper@sheeo.org, 303-683-0778.

What are the advantages to institutions and states for participating in MERLOT?

Many institutions and states have invested significant dollars in faculty-developed products for teaching and learning. These materials can now be shared through the Internet, thus adding value to the initial investment. Before additional investments in product development are made, MERLOT can provide a way for institutions and states to assess the current availability of materials and their quality.

How can I get involved in MERLOT?

The learning materials listed on MERLOT are available to faculty and students throughout the nation and world. The materials can be used in traditional classroom settings and in web-based courses. Anyone can post a module, along with a sample assignment, to MERLOT after becoming a member.

Conclusion

MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching), consists of several interrelated parts. The key features are the abilities to browse/search materials and members. Visitors can easily locate high-quality peer-reviewed learning materials within their disciplines as well as locate colleagues who share their discipline/interests.

MERLOT is a place for teachers and learners worldwide to join an academic discipline-based online community where they can:

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- Collaborate with colleagues by creating and sharing materials, comments and reviews
- Locate or contribute learning materials for teaching and learning
- Locate or contribute learning materials that have been peer reviewed
- Locate or contribute learning materials that have user comments attached

MERLOT is free and open to the public and invites all faculty and students to become members.