Freeing Your Materials

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The problem in the education world is that teachers and professors spend hours upon hours every year writing tests and homework that only get used once, in one classroom. Teachers go to great lengths to develop high quality materials, but sharing them takes extra time, and so we don't. I think teachers ought to put a stronger emphasis on collaboration. First of all, we should post our work online. Second, we should freely license it. When teachers work together to freely license and share their materials with others, we can build on each other's' work. This gives teachers greater access to high quality materials, which in turn makes for a better educational experience.

Sharing your own work is easier than you might think. If you have a website, upload your work there. If you have videos, which you often use in the ESL classroom, post them to YouTube or Vimeo. All sorts of files can be shared using [Dropbox](#) or [Google Drive](#). I prefer [Archive.org](#), but in any case there are thousands of sites where you can upload your work.

Why should you bother? Well, imagine you've put together a nice lesson plan, and you have some associated files — a worksheet, a slide show, several audio clips of conversations, and a video. You can upload it to your website and email the link to your colleagues. They'll take a look, and if they like it — or if they teach the same course next term — they'll make use of some of what you made. If the quality is good enough, they'll send the link in turn to their colleagues. If the materials you create are high quality, you'll develop a reputation for them.

Just posting your work online helps you and other teachers, but it has limits. Suppose you posted some materials to your website as described above, and you shared the site with a colleague. They liked it, and they want to build on what you made. At the moment, that's not possible, because copyright law gets in the way. Your colleague can download your materials and even make other materials that go with it, but what your colleague cannot do is upload the entire bundle to their own website. After all, they don't hold copyright over anything you made, so they can't upload it without getting your permission.

When people have to get permission to do things, they often do something else instead, and this stifles sharing. Imagine you're web surfing, you find a nice worksheet on some website, and you want to make a second one. Are you going to email the author and ask permission? You might, if it's someone you know, but if it's a stranger, probably not. And even if you email them, how long will you have to wait for a reply? Most of the time it's sensible to forget about it and start writing from scratch.

If we want teachers to share their work online, we should look to successful collaborative sites like [Wikipedia](#), [Wikimedia Commons](#), and [OpenStreetMap](#) and see what they've done right. There are many reasons those sites are successful, but one crucial factor is the use of Creative Commons licensing. A Creative Commons license is a kind of promise. It says, "You can take this work and do all sorts of things with it, and you don't ever have to ask my permission." When users don't have to ask permission, and when they can build on each others' work, they often just go ahead and do it — and make great things as a result.

Here's how the Creative Commons Attribution license works in education. Imagine I write a test for a class. I post it online, and in the description I add the following sentence. *This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#)*. Other teachers who see that sentence know that they're allowed to modify, reuse, and redistribute the file, as long as they cite the source. Perhaps one teacher creates an MP3 for the listening section of the test. Perhaps another teacher creates several review sheets for the test. Because the original test is freely licensed, these teachers can post all of these materials to their own websites. Over time, the test that I wrote grows into a collection of materials that go together with the test, and because the work is shared, this can all happen without any single person investing long hours in the process. As teachers adjust to creating and working with freely licensed materials, we spend more time polishing and making refinements and less time reinventing the wheel.

ESL is behind the curve when it comes to Creative Commons materials. In 2012, the state of California passed legislation for Creative Commons textbooks for popular university courses, but no ESL courses were included. A search of the [Merlot II materials](#) for ESL textbooks under a Creative Commons license comes up empty. In comparison, consider an introductory economics textbook, "Principles of Microeconomics" by Rittenberg and Tregarthen. This book is used by Matthew Holian, a professor at San Jose State University. Holian [praises the book](#) and its free licensing. "A major motivation for me was ... to save students money. However, I also want to make the material easy to access, i.e., by sending students PDF documents, or by copying and pasting sections of the text into emails and so on."

There are dozens of examples of university courses with freely-licensed materials, but to date very few of those are in the ESL field. If we switch our focus to media that we can include in our own ESL materials, there is a lot to be found. For photography, [Wikimedia Commons](#) is a great resource. If you're looking for an example of a specific vocabulary word used in context, [Tatoeba](#) has hundreds of thousands of sentences in dozens of languages. For video, both [YouTube](#) and [Vimeo](#) have Creative Commons search filters. The raw materials are there, and it's up to us to put them together.

When you start using Creative Commons materials, you soon find that the walls between user and creator are blurred. If you want to make a slide show with nice graphics, grab some pictures from [Wikimedia Commons](#) for your slide show, use it in class, and then turn around and upload the slide show to your own website. In the long run, this approach benefits everyone. Teachers share the best of what they've made, other teachers take that, build on it and make it even better, and our students get to learn in classrooms filled with excellent educational materials.

References

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