The Evolution of MERLOT

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Abstract

MERLOT (www.merlot.org), the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching, was launched more than 16 years ago as a project of the California State University System, but has evolved significantly since its inception. The first rendition of MERLOT was simply a repository of fewer than 4,000 learning materials. Today MERLOT is a multi-service resource, with a collection of 42,000+ carefully curated and peer reviewed materials at its nucleus, serving an international community of 120,000+ members, and supporting more than 50 unique academic and Partner Community teaching and learning portals. With the collection repository at its nucleus, MERLOT supports a variety of social networking services that encourage discourse and communication among all users of Open Educational Resources. Since the launch of MERLOT II in October, 2013, the community has improved access to the many new services described in this presentation.

Keywords

History of MERLOT

MERLOT, the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching, began more than 16 years ago as a project of the California State University. The objective of the project was to create a repository of peer reviewed, open resources, discoverable and reusable by instructors searching for materials to use for teaching with technology. 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 project as one of six best practices centers in North America. Shortly thereafter, four American university systems created a partnership that broadened the project beyond the California State University System. Since that time, MERLOT has evolved significantly from being simply a digital repository for a handful of universities, to a worldwide community of students, faculty, librarians, and administrators, all of whom wish to use the repository and to share their teaching and learning experiences. (More information regarding the history of MERLOT can be found here.)

Since its early inception, MERLOT’s registered membership has grown from 2,000 to almost 120,000. The repository has also grown substantially, from 3,700 to more than 42,000 materials. MERLOT does not host the materials, but is instead a "reforatory" containing metadata linking to materials hosted elsewhere. The materials in the repository are categorized by more than 25 academic disciplines, a significant growth since the project first began. The metadata available to describe each learning material have evolved from simple descriptive items to now include new media types, mobile learning, open courses, Open Access journal articles and textbooks, and Open Educational Resources (OER) in general.
Communities and Peer Review

The MERLOT community too has expanded significantly. Each of MERLOT’s 25 academic disciplines is supported by volunteer faculty from around the world. Each discipline is managed by a volunteer faculty editor and editorial board, all of whom are responsible for the curation and peer review of materials contributed to the collection. Each editor is supported in the management of the peer review process through an online system called Workspace. Workspace allows editors to manage the workflow of all reviews in process, including communication with "authors/developers" of submitted material, contributors, reviewers, etc. MERLOT’s unique peer review process has also evolved dramatically over the years; all peer reviewers must attend a formal training program called GrapeCamp before they are assigned learning materials to review. MERLOT is currently working with Quality Matters to develop and extend MERLOT’s peer review rubric for online courses.

Registered members of MERLOT who wish to understand and learn more about the use of open learning materials in their own particular discipline can visit any of the 25 academic discipline portals that focus on teaching with technology in each particular discipline. In addition, MERLOT has extended the communities to include administrative support portals, and Partner portals (see Figure 1). The former are similar in nature to the academic discipline community portals, focusing on particular administrative matters related to teaching with technology. The latter are unique to the dozens of Partners from around the world that MERLOT now supports.

Figure 1. MERLOT Communities Page

The community nature of MERLOT is now supported through a variety of social networking tools and services. MERLOT has recently added and is supporting a monthly blog, a Twitter account, and a Facebook account. More recently, with the release of MERLOT II, registered MERLOT members can enter into a discussion with other members of MERLOT about every
material in the collection. Registered members can also rate every material in the collection, enabling users to view both the opinions of subject matter experts (peer reviewers) as well as the crowd-sourced opinions of real users of materials. Figure 2 shows a “Material Detail Page” for one of the learning materials in the MERLOT repository (Computer Knowledge Virus Tutorial). This page provides information about the learning material, including its peer review status, user ratings, and a link to the threaded discussion for the material.

![Figure 2. MERLOT Material Detail Page](image)

MERLOT has established a website called **MERLOT Voices**, built upon a Ning platform, enabling members of the MERLOT community to create communities of interest wherein they can share resources, documents, links, discussions, comments, etc. about matters related to the technology of teaching and learning.

Among the new resources offered by MERLOT is a **YouTube channel** supporting various training aspects regarding the use of MERLOT. MERLOT also has established the quarterly, Open Access, peer-reviewed journal called **JOLT – the Journal of Online Learning and Teaching**. Beginning in 2014, the journal will publish papers on a rolling monthly basis, collecting them into quarterly issues.

**MERLOT Content Builder**

MERLOT has added to its repository services a learning materials construction tool inherited from the Carnegie foundation. This tool, called the MERLOT Content Builder (CB), is an up-to-date rendition of the Carnegie Foundation’s KEEP toolkit. CB is now integrated into MERLOT, allowing registered users to create websites for teaching and learning, based on the use of a library of templates. Unlike the metadata in the repository describing learning materials hosted elsewhere, materials created in the Content Builder are hosted by MERLOT. Content Builder
websites can contain text, images, audio, and video. The only requirement by MERLOT for this hosting is that when the author makes the website/material available to someone else or to the public, that the material contain a Creative Commons license. Such materials can also be posted automatically to the MERLOT collection, or exported to other Web applications in HTML or Common Cartridge formats. It should be noted that MERLOT is a strong supporter of Creative Commons, and materials with or without Creative Commons licenses may be searched for in the collection.

![Figure 3. MERLOT Content Builder](image)

**The New MERLOT**

In October of 2013, a brand-new version of MERLOT, called MERLOT II (Figure 4) was released at the annual Educause conference. This new version of MERLOT provides users with a dramatically new interface that makes it easier for them to use all the MERLOT services. Over the years a great deal of useful functionality has been added to the system, but not always in a clearly discoverable fashion. Based on a careful analysis of Google analytics regarding visits and clicks on the old MERLOT website, the system was completely disassembled by MERLOT designers and developers and repackaged and reformatted with an entirely new look and feel. Many of the functions described above are new, and many existed in the previous system but were practically undiscoverable. Early Google analytics results appear to indicate that the redesign of the system has facilitated user access to all of MERLOT services to provide the community with a satisfying and useful experience when they search for learning materials to use in the room teaching and learning, and when they wish to reach out to the worldwide community of MERLOT users.

MERLOT has developed a variety of APIs or Web Services to enable MERLOT partners, similar to those who were part of the original MERLOT partnership, to interface to MERLOT services through localized web applications wherever they may be, and in whatever language suits them. It should also be noted that the current, newly released version of MERLOT allows users to translate their MERLOT access experience into any one of more than 140 languages.
Conclusion

The MERLOT community, founded in 1998, has survived many of the economic ups and downs that have forced other OER repositories to terminate their operation. During that time, the MERLOT community has thrived and the repository has become an integral and necessary resource for students and educators around the world. The new MERLOT II, which is only a few months old, is continuing to evolve and will continue to serve the education community for years to come.