My fave two reasons not to release OpenCourseware

We're having a workshop about Open CourseWare (OCW – AKA Open Educational Resources or OERs) here at USQ soon, organised by Michael Sankey. I'd like us to talk about some of the potential costs and benefits of going OER from the points of view of Students, Staff and the University as well as the external stakeholders, independent learners (potential students of USQ) and our broader society. I'll post on that soon.

In this post I want to mention my two favourite objections to going open, which come up every time I start talking (ranting?) about OCW and OERs at USQ.

1. If we release our best stuff then that's the **end of our business!**

2. And if we expose **poor quality courseware**, won't that hurt our brand?

There are other more legitimate concerns like the amount of copyright material that is embedded in our materials; both licensed stuff, and stuff that is not licensed properly. Actually, the licensed stuff represents an opportunity, and with the unlicensed we really don't know the scale of the problem, if there is a problem at all. I'll return to this issue. But now for those two objections.

Poor quality materials are embarrassing

This one's easy.

> "So it's OK to give these less than perfect materials (if indeed they exist) to the students, as long as your peers and the rest of the world don't see the less than perfect content you/your staff/those other faculties have been teaching with?"

Let in the sunlight I say.

The sky is falling!

My favourite frequently heard objection is that somehow our enrolment revenue depends on keeping our high-value course materials locked up. I like it because it encapsulates so many assumptions that need to be challenged. This one came up again when I was talking to a very senior USQ person, as-in reports to the Vice Chancellor kind of senior. It went something like this:

> **Me:** So one of the things we might see, is funder mandates that educational resources have to be open, the way we are starting to see in the research space. The government is paying us to write this stuff, they might like to reduce the amount of redundant work in the same way they don't want to pay for the same old research more than once, they want to pay for new research.

> **X:** Oh. If that happens we can kiss our business goodbye. That's the end of us.

> **Me:** I see. If we release our best-of-breed distance-ed materials then we're finished. So what happens if someone else releases courseware of the same or better quality. Isn't our business over then too?

> **X:** I see the point you are making, Dr Sefton.

> **Me:** Which is happening, as you know. We can sit here like the newspapers while our 'business' dissolves or we can do something NOW.

> (Me again) **If we're afraid** that the self-directed learners are going to get what they need out of our stuff without bothering to enrol, because they are learning on their own or in a community of their own

making, then we need to:

i.   Accept that this is a new trend.

ii. Find the price point at which some learners pay for assessment-only enrolment and look for offerings
     that will entice them into the USQ experience. There's clearly room for lots of different levels of
     engagement with different kinds and cohorts of users.

iii. Work out ways to mobilise volunteer labour to assist the independent learners (Prof Jim Taylor
     continues to explore ways to do this at USQ).

iv. Release **our** materials **first** with **our** copyright, on **our** terms and have © USQ materials be the ones
     that start undermining other people's 'businesses' – each one carrying an 'ad' for USQ in the form of
     the copyright statement and (at least) an 'attribution required' license. The OU has already made a big
     move here, so if the fear is well founded then we're doomed unless we join in the cannibalism of our
     old 'business'.

v.   Be among the first (at least in Australia) to start learning how to operate in this new environment.

From there we moved into the broader discussion about how going open might work as a 'business' model.

Come the revolution, we'll get over this 'business' stuff.

Note that I don't believe for a minute that OERs and self directed learning would kill-off the traditional high-
touch models we use now, although they will probably erode them more than a bit in some circles, notably
with postgrad learners, I'm just following through the argument that keeps coming up about why we can't
release our stuff, because when you follow it through, the conclusion has to be **release early and learn**
rather than cower in fear and hope you've retired before things change too much.

The cost of the current attitude

Above, I was really talking about two fears:

1. **Fear of exposure** – I have usually heard this directed at other people's materials.

2. **Lack of confidence in what it says in our strategy**, that USQ is a relationship brand and we are all
    about the student experience that we can deliver to our largely-off campus learners.

    (cf MIT's confidence that releasing its curriculum materials (not distance stuff – at least not so far, but
    read on) and video lecturers doesn't undermine the MIT experience. And happy tenth anniversary
    OCW@MIT!)

This attitude that sharing is too risky, lives hand-in-hand with the fear that getting any substantial change in
policy, and getting the grass roots support from teachers is going to be too hard. And this attitude is costing
us, NOW.

I wrote a about this recently, Cheap laugh #1. Suggest opening up courseware just a little. That piece was
about opening up access to all our courseware to all our students, so they could, like, see what we had and
you know, enrol in things, thus bringing us **revenue**, and revise prerequisite subjects they may or may not
have done thus improving their result, **improving our retention rate**. With many other colleagues, I am
trying to get these ideas considered, but it's hard work.

The good news is that ADFI's new Executive Director, Prof Gilly Salmon, who will start in January 2011,
reports that at Leicester where she's currently working, once OERs got started, lots of objections and fears
melted away. I'm sure she'll join us in pushing (at least trials of) OERs at USQ.

Finally note that MIT is going to start creating the kinds of OERs that are USQ's core territory:

This fall, OCW will begin to introduce course materials designed specifically for use by independent
learners, which will include complete sets of content, increased focus on problem-solving, and additional

self-assessment opportunities. Through these and other pilot programs, the OCW team hopes to develop a better understanding of how to increase the benefits for this varied global audience.

http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/329/5991/525

Now we can all be afraid. There goes our business!