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# Enhanced Courses Using Teacher-Tested Modules

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# Enhanced Courses Using Teacher-Tested Modules

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## Abstract

University faculties are under increasing pressure to do more with less. They are expected to continuously improve educational experiences to more students at less expense. Without help, the increasing demands and decreasing resources may prove too great.

*Merlot* is a project designed to provide quality, online exercises to enhance the learning experience. The materials in *Merlot* are peer reviewed by both experts in the discipline and users of the materials. Quality of content, potential effectiveness as a teaching tool, and ease of use are the key areas of review process. This paper provides an explanation of *Merlot*, the peer review process, and examples of *Merlot* modules in business.

## Introduction

University faculties are under increased pressure from legislatures, students, the community, parents, and other constituents to continually increase teaching quality. This becomes increasingly burdensome when added to existing teaching loads, research to increase intellectual capital, and service to school and discipline. Faculties no longer have the time to develop unique experiential exercises each semester for all of their courses. Consistent with the need to enhance learning, a portion of a faculty member's responsibilities is to identify, select and assemble educational objects to provide a quality learning experience to students.

This is particularly true for exercises related to technology. Versions of software can mandate changing exercises. When faculties change a text they often change their experiential exercises to materials provided by the publisher. Frequently, the faculty wishes to use exercises not directly related to the text. The requirement for more independent online learning resources points to a need for a general body of exercises that enhance the students' learning experience. The body must be academically enriching and provide challenges to the student beyond the standard lecture material of the class.

*Merlot* (<http://www.merlot.org>) is a collection of high quality, interactive, online learning materials. Many of these materials include assignments and peer reviews. *Merlot* contains materials on a wide variety of disciplines, but we will focus on disciplines pertinent to courses taught in schools of business.

*Merlot* is a consortium of state higher education systems. Its goal is to provide high quality online learning materials to faculty members who are using the world wide web for both traditionally delivered courses and distance learning courses.

A key component of the *Merlot* concept is the peer review of materials. There are literally millions of sites on the Web which contain material which might be useful in a class. Assuring the quality of the Web-based material can overwhelm instructors. *Merlot* materials are reviewed by peers; both experts in the discipline as well as fellow instructors who have used the materials and commented on their effectiveness. *Merlot* materials are rated as to quality of content, potential effectiveness as a teaching tool, and ease of use.

## The EOE: Forerunner to *Merlot*

The Educational Object Economy Foundation (founded by Dr. James Spohrer, visit <http://www.eoe.org>) is an early investigation into authoring tools for faculty. In 1996 the focus changed to online community tools for faculty. A brief quote from the history of the Educational Economy Foundation's site expresses its goals concerning "online community tools" for faculty. The *Merlot* initiative draws from the first four aims.

"The EOE site becomes the focal point for discussions of web-based resources, metadata for educational resources, component-software approaches in education, open source communities, intellectual capital appreciation licenses, new economic models, and explorations of internet-age cooperatives. These efforts lead to the creation of the Generic Object Economy (GOE), a web-community template formed around an online database, which is freely shared to allow others to set up their own EOE-style communities."<sup>1</sup>

The home page of the Educational Object Economy Foundation Web page is shown in Figure 1. Its motto is "building communities that build knowledge" and it provides announcements for events and news as well as content for coursework. *Merlot* and other initiatives are the progression from earlier initiatives such as EOE.

Figure 1. Home Page for The EOE Foundation at <http://www.eoe.org>

# The EOE Foundation

Building Communities that Build Knowledge

- Current Projects
- History
- FAQs
- Who We Are
- Sponsors
- Contact Us

- Develop and disseminate the learning-community model
- Build tools to build communities
- Promote Java in education
- Test-bed support for metadata standards
- Tools for community-based distributed learning
- Open-source and intellectual-property innovations
- Component-based software development in education
- A web-community sharing 2,600 Java applets for educators

Visit the Educational Object Economy!



Learning Community

- News and Events
- 4/4/2000 [EOE Open-Development Speaker Nancy Glock-Grueneich](#)
  - 3/29/2000 [xmlconnect releases free xml server software](#)
  - 4/2/2000 [Library & Information Science "Clinic" on IT](#)

Current Feature:



[An EOE in Brazil](#)

## Enhancement to Coursework

Supplemental materials are nothing new to higher education. The widespread use of standard texts is an example of material supplementing the role of the instructor. As students become more technologically sophisticated, university level courses must increase their technology component. Exercises enhance the student's learning experience by challenging him/her beyond the classroom to apply class-based materials. Keeping the student challenged keeps the student motivated and primed to learn.

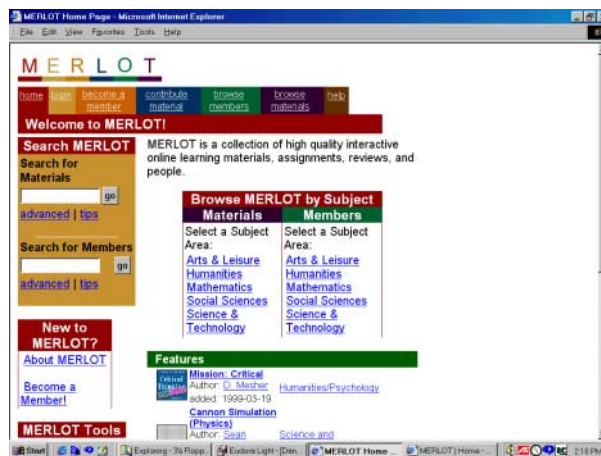
Many online materials from *Merlot* offer interaction with 'real world' resources such as published trade journals, professional society resources, and collections of research data. Current financial data for companies and stock information are available for downloading into computer-based models that can be used to extend the student's learning experience. Students learn that they can gain access to a much larger information resource online than they can access from the confines of a classroom. They also learn how to learn from experiences without direct instructor supervision.

The value to the faculty is enormous. Although the online materials may never outweigh the benefits from the instructor delivered materials, the online materials often add spice to the course. The variety provided by online materials tends to make the student remember the lesson long after the course is completed.

## Merlot Examples

To access Merlot go to its web portal at [www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org) (Figure 2).

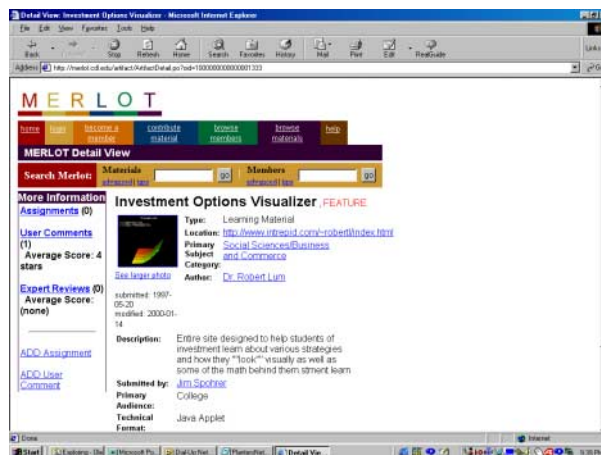
Figure 2. *Merlot* Home Page



You can then navigate to find modules to meet your instructional needs. You can search by subject, author, or category. The following are examples of *Merlot* modules available for integration into university courses.

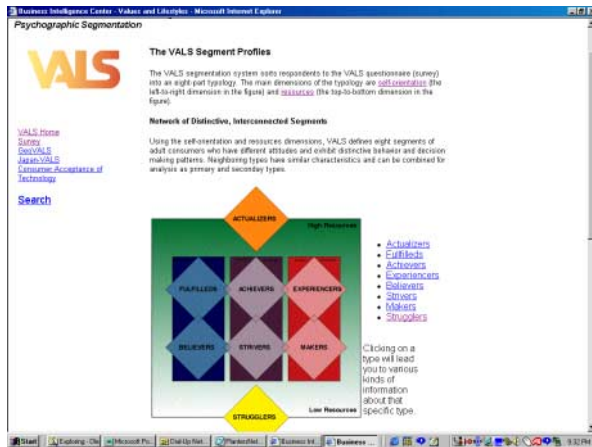
Figure 3 provides a *Merlot* reference to the Investment Options Visualizer, a module designed to support the finance area.

Figure 3. Investment Options Visualizer Page



Finally, Figure 4 provides an example of the actual module. In this case it is the VALS module provided by SRI, an excellent module for use in marketing courses.

Figure 4. VALS Learning Module



## Conclusion

*Merlot* fills a very real need for online exercises to engage students in learning. The exercises are ready made and have been crafted by other instructors that understand the university learning environment. Peers, both experts and users, rate the exercises according to quality of content, potential effectiveness as a teaching tool, and ease of use. Instructors can rely upon the validation provided by their peers. There is significant benefit to instructors already stretched to provide continuously improved learning materials.

*Merlot* is an emerging project. It began the review of online materials for business in January 1999. The initial members of the *Merlot* team responsible for peer review come from the California State University System, the University System of Georgia, the University System of North Carolina, and Oklahoma State Regents. The cadre of expert reviewers is expected to grow beyond members in these four states.

The role of assembler of educational objects is becoming more important to instructors. Instruction beyond the classroom setting and beyond the direct supervision of the instructor is beneficial to students. High quality, peer reviewed online materials can enhance the student's learning experience and help keep the academic experience interesting and alive for a significant length of time.

## References

1. "On-Line Community Tools," <http://www.eoe.org/foundation/history.htm>, (Current May 5, 2000).