



## Free Software and Information Sources for E-Learning

*"...the free/open software movement ...is about taking advantage of the unprecedented opportunities we have today to learn, create, share, communicate, and progress culturally and intellectually."*

Rebekah Baglini, Quoted in ["From the Campus to the Commons,"](#) *Wiretap*, 12/20/04

In no year since the inception of the Internet has there been as much sharing of both information and software technologies as there was in 2004, and the trend continues in 2005. This issue examines the free/open source software movement that is providing an increasing number of tools for use in the e-learning arena, as well as more and more free sources of valuable information on the Web. For fans of BEEP's Best Bets, note that this month we add a new category, Assistive Technology, to our list.

### Free/Open Source Software

- ["Amazon: Giving Away the Store."](#) Article by Wade Rose in *Technology Review.com*, January 2005, about how Amazon's application programming interfaces (APIs) are accessible for free through [Amazon Light](#) and other [Amazon Web services](#).
- [Blogbox](#). Website with free and simple-to-install software that allows users to add photos, sounds, clocks and expandable lists of links to any non-commercial website, Wiki or blog. Similar is [Freshcontent.net](#), which provides free, self-updating, subject-specific, news feeds.
- [Ciphire Mail](#). Free email encryption application developed by a Swiss-based company.
- [Download.com](#). Website with links to downloadable software, including what it calls "freeware."
- ["Firefox Eats More Microsoft Market Share."](#) Article by Thomas Claburn posted on *Internet Week.com*, 3/18/05, about the growing popularity of Mozilla's free Internet browser, [Firefox](#).
- [Free Software Foundation \(FSF\)](#). Website of an organization that for 20 years has promoted "computer users' rights to use, study, copy, modify, and redistribute computer programs."
- ["From the Campus to the Commons."](#) Article by Michael Gaworecki, *Wiretap*, 12/20/04, examining the Free Culture movement, a national, student-based, organization with the goal of keeping art and culture digitally available to everyone without cost.
- [Google Open Sources Code](#). Article by Matt Hicks in *eWeek*, 3/17/05, describing [Google Code](#), a new Website with software development source code released to the open source community.
- ["IBM Gives Open Source Developers Free Access to 500 Patents."](#) Associated Press release in *Technology Review.com*, 1/11/05, about the largest release of patents of any kind to date.
- ["Linux: Fewer Bugs Than Rivals."](#) Article by Michael Delio in *Wired.com*, 12/14/04, about the advantages of [Linux](#), a free Unix-type operating system that has been competing successfully with companies like Microsoft for the past few years. (A dissenting view of Linux's quality can be found in an [article](#) by Robert Brumfield in *eSchool News*, 4/7/05.)
- [Open Source Initiative \(OSI\)](#). Website for "a non-profit corporation dedicated to managing and promoting the Open Source Definition for the good of the community, specifically through the OSI Certified Open Source Software certification mark and program." Contains a comprehensive list of links to many quality open source products.
- [Open Source – Opens Learning: Why Open Source Makes Sense for Education](#). White paper by Chris Coppola and Ed Neelley, Summer 2004, for the [R-Smart Group](#), that offers "a simple yet thorough definition of open source in the context of education, describes the new market models and dispels myths..." For a look at those myths, see ["OSS Myths Debunked,"](#) an article by John Robinson, founder of the R-Smart Group, in *Campus Technology*, January 2005.
- [Sakai Project](#). Press release, 3/5/05, about the latest version of open source course management software (CMS) developed by a collaboration of the University of Michigan, Indiana University, Stanford University (CA), and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Similar but lesser known free CMS products are the multi-lingual [Moodle](#) and Utah University's [Eledge](#).
- [SurfYourWork](#). Secure Web-based School Management System developed by a Canadian high school student. It allows students to submit homework electronically and teachers or administrators to post homework, schedules, events, files, and more online for student and/or parent review and download. Chosen as one of the top ed-tech stories of 2004 by *eSchool News*.

## Free Sources of Information

- **Best Educational E-Practices (BEEP).** Several previous issues of BEEP have been devoted to the subject of free or nearly free sources of information for e-learners. Numbers 10, [Selected E-Sources for Online Learners](#), 7/1/01, and 26, [Academic Freebies on the Web](#), 11/1/02, offer a variety of sources, most still active. Check also the [Free Information Sources](#) section of BEEP's Best Bet Archives, a feature that appears in every BEEP issue, including this one.
- **Google.** This premier supplier of free information services just keeps providing more. Within the past year, Google has released the Beta version of [Google Scholar](#), a specialized search engine that limits results to academic literature. In addition, Google has launched a [free desktop search tool](#) that can search its host computer for hard-drive files, emails, recently visited Web pages, and Instant Messenger chat. Finally, in October 2004 the company unveiled [its plan](#) to work with five major libraries, including Harvard (MA), Stanford (CA), and the University of Michigan, to digitally scan their collections so that the books can be searched and even read online free. (Interesting sidebar: In March 2005, French president [Jacques Chirac vowed](#) to do the same in Europe, claiming Google's effort will favor English-speaking cultures.)
- [Science.gov Alert Service.](#) The latest of free federal information sources. Delivers news of customizable current developments of a scientific nature via email to subscribers.
- ["The NY Public Library's Digital Gallery."](#) Article by Jim Reagan, *Christian Science Monitor.com*, 3/21/05, about the Web release of 275,000 public domain images for general use.
- [S\\*](#). Pronounced as "S Star". A collaborative effort of eight universities worldwide (the [S-Star.org Alliance](#)) that has successfully created a globally accessible free online course for training in bioinformatics and genomics.
- [Wikipedia.](#) Arguably the best example of a [wiki](#) (a Website that allows users not only to read the content posted on a given subject, but change it as well). Contains well over one million articles in excess of 100 languages, with more than 13,000 contributors, and, of course, it's all free.

## BEEP's Best Bets

### Administration

- [Educating the Net Generation.](#) Free online book edited by Diana G. and James L. Obinger (Educause, 2005), that explores the "Net Gen" and the implications for educational planning.
- ["New Test Gauges ICT Literacy."](#) New standardized test created by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) designed to measure literacy in the digital age.

### NEW CATEGORY Assistive Technology NEW CATEGORY

- [AccessDL.](#) Website of the National Center on Accessible Distance Learning, a DOE-funded organization that shares guidance and resources on making e-learning courses accessible to students and instructors with disabilities.
- ["Access for All: How Distance Education Addresses Learning Needs."](#) Column by Candice Kramer in *WEDU PBS Campus*, February 2005, discussing the advantages of e-learning in addressing barriers to learning. With a long list of resources for online assistance of all kinds.
- ["Algorithm Box Smooths Hand Tremors on Mouse."](#) IBM's new assistive mouse adapter can be adjusted for tremor severity and to override unintended multiple mouse clicks by filtering out high-frequency motion. A similar algorithm helps people who have trouble double-clicking.
- [Bookshare.org.](#) Nonprofit digital book service that allows downloading of thousands of titles for blind and learning-disabled students for as little as \$6.00 per text. Chosen as one of the top ed-tech stories of 2004 by *eSchool News*.

### Associations and Organizations

- [New Media Consortium.](#) International nonprofit consortium of nearly 200 leading learning-focused organizations that explore and use new media and new technologies.

### Laws and Legislation

- [Interactive Guide to Using Copyrighted Media in Your Courses.](#) Free guide for faculty.  
[www.spcollege.edu/eagle/research/BEEP/BEEP44.htm](http://www.spcollege.edu/eagle/research/BEEP/BEEP44.htm)

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