

## Yochai Benkler, “Common Wisdom: Peer Production of Educational Materials”

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### Background

This paper was commissioned by The Center for Open and Sustainable Learning at Utah State University. It was first presented at Advancing the Effectiveness and Sustainability of Open Education, the 17th Annual Instructional Technology Institute at Utah State University, September 30, 2005.

### Key Points

Yochai Benkler is answering the question: is peer production suitable for educational resources? He discusses the limits and the barriers to creating educational resources. He also talks about the strategies and innovations that might improve development. The two main reasons he supports this are to provide education everywhere and especially in the poorest countries.

There are two different types of production that he addresses. Commons-based and Peer-based. Commons based is when inputs are received from the commons and no one has exclusive rights. Peer-based production is similar but it adds an element of coordination.

Discrete learning objects is the term he uses to describe the most basic educational resource. He says that the reason that peer production of these objects is because of three reasons. Cost reduction, diverse motivations, and cheap, ubiquitous internet access. Because the creation of these objects is so easy the problem is sorting them so they can be useful. This problem can be solved by a system that has self-archiving and tagging tools. Or it can be done through peer production.

Higher order materials such as textbooks are harder to make in this fashion because they are not as modular. Wikipedia is a good example of a higher order material but it is an encyclopedia and not a textbook. A textbook requires themes, approaches and theories to run through the material.

WikiBooks tried to use their model to create textbooks but they have had little success because textbooks aren't as modular as an encyclopedia. People have tried to write open textbooks collaboratively but they haven't succeeded because once broken down to smaller levels of granularity textbooks can't be put back together because they are too granular and the transaction cost is too high.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why have textbooks historically been more difficult to create by means of peer-production? What do you think is the ideal contribution size to successfully peer-produce an open textbook?
2. When might commons-based production be more valuable than peer-based production? Why?
3. How would the creation of a tool that can successfully create open textbook through peer-based production change education?



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