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Richard Stallman, "What is Free Software?"

Read the article at https://edtechbooks.org/-awLr

Background

The term open education refers to the application of open source philosophies and practices in the field of education. The open source movement and many of its philosophies can be traced back to, and grew out of, Richard Stallman's ideas about free software. The concepts discussed in this reading are in many ways the germ from which open education would eventually evolve. Stallman's explication of the nature of free ("free as in speech" not "free as in beer") has heavily influenced definitions of open (open as in accessible to reuse and remix, not open as in "free beer") as it is used in both the open source and open education communities.

Key Points

Free Software is focused on liberty, not price. Users are free to run, copy, distribute, study, change, and improve free software. Thus, "free software" is a matter of liberty, not price.

An "unfree" program constitutes an instrument of unjust power. Either the users control the program (free), or the program controls the users (unfree) while the developer controls the program.

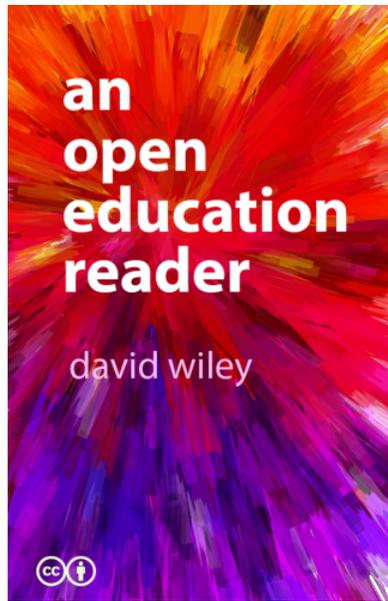There are four essential freedoms of free software:
0. The freedom to run the program as they want to, for any purpose.
1. The freedom to study how the program works, and change it so it does what you want. Must have access to the source code.
2. The freedom to redistribute – to help your neighbor.
3. The freedom to redistribute copies of modified versions. By doing this you can give the whole community a chance to benefit from your changes. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

When users don't control the program, Stallman calls it a "non-free" or "proprietary" program.

Discussion Questions

1. What about people without the interest/prowess to contribute to free software? Are they being unjustly acted upon?
2. Why is a non-free program necessarily "an instrument of unjust power"?

3. What is inherently "unethical" about non-free software? If someone wants to make money from their efforts in writing software, is that wrong?
4. Does teaching your children computer skills, such as photo editing, using non-free software create an unhealthy dependency (like giving them tobacco might)?

Wiley, D. (2016). *An Open Education Reader*. EdTech Books.
https://edtechbooks.org/openedreader