

Example Open Courses of Graduate School of Instructional Systems at Kumamoto University

Katsuaki Suzuki, Junko Nemoto, Keiko Unaka, Akiko Takahashi, Akie Yoshida
Graduate School of Instructional Systems
Kumamoto University, JAPAN
ksuzuki@kumamoto-u.ac.jp

Abstract

This paper describes a case of open courses provided by an online graduate school that the authors of this paper belong. Currently there are three courses offered as open courses, two of which are in both English and Japanese. The English version of the third course is now under preparation. The intents of opening these courses are different: (a) opening for the publicity's sake, (b) providing self-study opportunity for incoming students prior to the start of the graduate program, and (c) archiving an older version of a course. Benefits of online programs to provide open courses and future directions are discussed.

Introduction

Opening up educational resources has gained high interests in higher education institutions with many organizational efforts^[1]. Kumamoto University just joined the Japan Opencourseware Consortium (JOCW) in recognizing such trends with a hope to contribute to the open educational resources. This paper describes a case of open courses provided by an online graduate school that the authors of this paper belong, by taking an advantage of the fact that almost all of its activities have been carried out online. The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the reasons behind opening up each of the three courses and foresee what might happen in the future.

Graduate School of Instructional Systems

Kumamoto University established Graduate School of Instructional Systems, as a fully online graduate school for fostering e-learning specialists, in 2006^[2]. In the Master's program of the graduate school, competencies or expected skills to be learned by the students through the

program are explicitly defined and made public, then practical curriculum has been designed based on the competency list for the graduates.

Since the program is fully online and targeted toward working adults who need flexibility in their learning environment, almost all the learning and teaching activities are happening online asynchronously. It includes provision of learning materials, quizzes for confirming the students' comprehension of the materials, and discussions on online discussion boards among students for completing required assignments in the courses. Master thesis writing is also guided via discussion boards so that the interactions between students and professors can be seen by all other students who are writing theses, resulting in a virtual version of weekly thesis writing seminar of on campus programs.

The graduate school also has the program for international students from developing countries with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which provided us with

the fund to translate all the contents of necessary courses. Thus, fifteen of the thirty courses have been offered both English and Japanese.

Opening Courses

In 2008, opening some courses on the official Website of the graduate school was proposed upon the graduation of the first cohort from the Master's program. In April of 2009, the first course "Special Research I" was provided in both English and Japanese from the official Website, by copying all the contents of 2008's course on a learning management system (LMS) to static html files. In July 2009, the second course "Foundations of Pedagogy" was opened in both English and Japanese. In April 2011, the Japanese version of "E-learning Fundamentals" was provided as the third open course. As of this writing, the English version of "E-learning Fundamentals" and "Foundations of Information Technology" (both in English and Japanese) are in preparation to be added in the open course offerings.

Opening courses have been planned and decided by the faculty meeting of the graduate school, in which the first author of this paper is serving as a program chair. Then a conversion team was formed, led by the second author and consisted of the rest of the authors of this paper. All the contents of the target courses were taken as was from a particular term, including all the materials in the courses. A thread was chosen from each of the discussion boards to represent interaction among students and instructor, then personal information was eliminated for anonymity. It can be said that a duplicated course written in a static html is resemble to the original course on LMS, trying to imitate what you would see if you registered to the target course in the target term when the course was completed at the end of the

term.

The English top page of the open course "Special Research I" is shown in Figure 1. Under the title of the course, such information often seen in syllabus as names of instructor, prerequisite courses, synopsis of the course, course construction (three blocks of materials in this case), textbooks, and assignments and grading policy are shown. When you click on one of the blocks, titles of sessions, together with the assignment associated with the block, will be shown, from where the students are to choose a session to start studying. A total of 15 sessions is available to meet the government standard of a two-credit hour course.

In order to imitate the interactive feature of the discussion board, it was planned to integrate an SNS function to the static html pages for those who want to write and exchange messages in the discussion boards. However, it was decided not to activate the SNS function for a while, thus only browsing through the contents was permitted at this point.

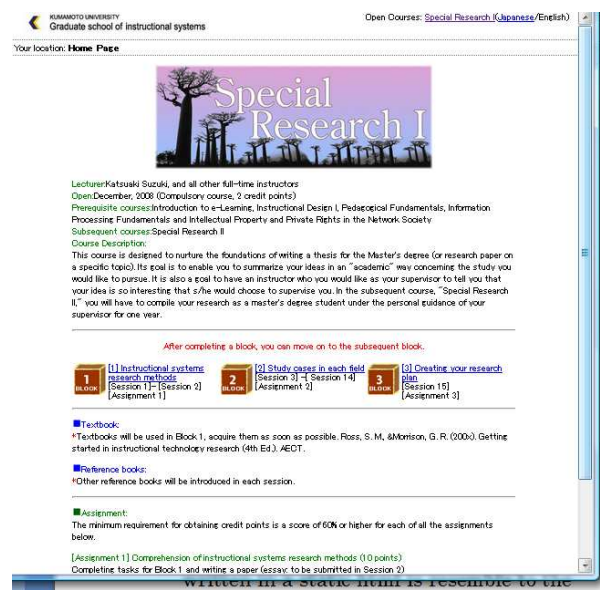


Figure 1: Top page of an open course

Different Purposes of Opening up Courses

The first course “Special Research I” was decided to make it available on our official Website for publicity’s sake. This course is to be taken in the second semester of the Master’s program as an introduction to thesis writing. It consists of introductory methodology to coming up with research ideas (Block 1), followed by sample research cases directed by each of program’s faculty (Block 2), then completed by proposing students’ own idea for their Master’s thesis (Block 3). It was thus decided to be an ideal course to introduce what can be done if somebody will be enrolled in our Master’s program.

By offering this course as an open course, more detailed information of our faculty was to be provided, in terms of who they are and what they would like to show as samples of their directed theses in the past. The faculty’s short vita, the syllabus of their courses, and their messages for prospective students were already provided in our official Website. However, it was intended to provide more information in terms of their research interest at Masters’ thesis level, trying to draw interests of the prospective students to whom they can ask for help in relation to their research interests.

The second course “Foundations of Pedagogy” was made available on our official Website so that incoming students can start studying it prior to their official entry to the program (i.e., being allowed to use our LMS with their ID and password). The master’s program is targeted to those who has background knowledge in either education or information technology (IT). So both “Foundations” courses (one in Pedagogy and the other in IT) are offered to fill up the gap in the not-yet-studied area(s). For example, if a student has been studied Education, s/he would be expected to take the “Foundation of IT” to fill in

foundational knowledge and skills at undergraduate level (e.g., how to create a static Website). If another student majored in business and is not familiar with both areas, s/he is expected to take both courses.

So, by offering “Foundations” courses, it is expected that they can study basics of their unfamiliar areas, just after (or even before) being permitted their admission, but before they are given the ID and password to log in our LMS. With the completion of another foundation course, “Foundations of IT,” which is under preparation, to be added to our open course repertoire soon, this purpose will be fulfilled. Both courses are offered in the curriculum, as two-hour credit courses as prerequisite to other courses, but not counted for the fulfillment toward a Master’s degree.

Another intention of making “Foundations of Pedagogy” is rather controversial, in that the instructor of this course (first author of this paper) declares this course trying to capture essentials of three teacher training courses at undergraduate level, all in one course: Educational Philosophy, Educational Psychology, and Educational Methodology. If a student entering the Master’s program with teacher license, s/he will be exempt from taking this course. However, the instructor invites those students, even with a teacher license, to experience how the essence of these courses can be recaptured and taught as the basis of instructional design when an experienced designer does the work right. It has been long said that the teacher preparation programs are not very well taught (not practicing what they preach), which was publicly challenged by making this particular course open.

The third and last course of our current open courses is “E-learning Foundations,”

which was made open at the time of major revision of the course contents. It was, in other words, aimed at publicly archiving the old version of the course, when it was not longer to be used actively.

“E-learning Foundations” was originally prepared in 2003, as an experimental graduate-level course to be offered as an open and distance course by National Institute for Multimedia Education (merged into Open University Japan in 2009). It then became the core of the professional certificate program by Japan e-Learning Consortium (eLC), which was in turn used as one of basic courses of the Master’s program from the start in 2006. It was in use until 2009, when major revision and change of instructor occurred. It was decided to renew the course to meet the requirement to be judged as equivalent to the e-Learning Professional Basic Certificate of eLC.

So the new “E-learning Foundations” followed the requirement of eLC’s Basic Certificate, covering wider area associated with e-Learning than the old version, by including such elements as trends of IT, intellectual property issues, and the concept of project management. It was then decided to make the older version of the course available on our Website so that anybody who was interested in the course with “historical value” can examine what was like before the renovation. Some elements may be obsolete, by rapid changes in the field of e-Learning, but many contents are still of current value to the beginners into the field. It was also intended to give it publicity’s sake, because the more you make resources openly available, the more people may be interested in what we offer internally.

Conclusion

This paper described a case of open courses provided by an online graduate

school. The intents of opening these three courses are different: (a) opening for the publicity’s sake, (b) providing self-study opportunity for incoming students prior to the start of the graduate program, and (c) archiving an older version of a course.

Converting learning materials on an LMS to static html files was easy, because of the nature of online programs. All contents were already there, as well as archived learning activities that took place during a particular semester. The intellectual property was already handled so that the program did not violate the copyright. Even within the closed areas with limited access, it is required to get permission to the copyright holders. Thus, it was just a matter of converting the materials from one platform to another. The viewers of the open courses can have a virtual experience as if they were inside of the LMS environment.

However, we may not be able to keep opening up all the contents of all the courses we have, because we do not want to lose interest of our potential students applying to our program. We must know when to stop offering more courses, while considering new features such as an SNS to be added to the already opened courses.

References

- [1] Iiyoshi, T. & Kumar, M. S. V. (2008) *Opening up education*. MIT Press.
- [2] Suzuki, K. (2009). From Competency List to Curriculum Implementation: A Case Study of Japan’s First Online Master’s Program for E-Learning Specialists Training. *International Journal on E-Learning*: 8(4), 469-478

Related Web sites

Open Courses from Graduate School of Instructional Systems, Kumamoto University: <http://www.gsis.kumamoto-u.ac.jp/en/opencourses/>