



Back to school... FOR FREE!

MIT offers its entire curriculum online

When I was a kid I, used to dread seeing the first “back-to-school” ads this time of year. It was as if the vice principal somehow piped the school PA system into your summer vacation and summoned you to the office.

Even now, I get a touch of the summertime blues when I see those ads. They are an inevitable and unwelcome reminder that the glorious days of summer will soon come to an end, and we’ll all have to get serious again.

There are, of course, those rare souls who eagerly await the start of the new school year. If you’re the type of person who loves to learn, but you’ve already finished your formal education, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has a website for you.

The site, MITOpenCourseware, at ocw.mit.edu, offers MIT course material for most of its undergraduate and graduate subjects for free. You can’t get any credits, interact with faculty, or earn a degree from the site, but you have access to the educational materials from one of the most prestigious schools in the world.

Many choices

There are 2,000 courses on the site covering subjects such as architecture, engineering, sciences, humanities, arts, social sciences, management and more. The courses vary in what they include, but some of the common elements are syllabi, video lectures, assignments, problems and solutions, tests and answers, suggested readings and more.

The video lectures have transcripts that you can save or print. Many of the projects have examples of work done by MIT students who actually

MIT’s top 10 picks

1. Introduction to Solid State Chemistry
2. Visualizing Cultures
3. Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab Executive Training: Evaluating Social Programs
4. NextLab I: Designing Mobile Technologies for the Next Billion Users
5. Principles of Computer System Design: An Introduction
6. Advanced Strategy
7. Experiencing Architecture Studio
8. Chandra Astrophysics Institute
9. Chinese I
10. Digital Lab Techniques Manual

took the classes. The tests are, of course, a good way to review what you’ve learned after doing the reading and assignments.

The individual courses are listed under their main subjects, or you can use the search function to look for a specific course. There are also lists of the “Most Visited Courses,” “Editor’s Picks,” “Audio/Video Courses,” “Translated Courses,” and “New Courses.”

Courses are added and updated every year. While you don’t have to register to take any courses, you can sign up for an RSS feed or an e-mail newsletter to let you know when subjects of interest are added.

The courses are all free but the site does make a pitch for donations. It costs MIT about \$3.5 million annually to run the site. Site operators claim each course costs \$10,000 to \$15,000 to put online, with video courses costing twice as much.

There is a “Highlights for High School” section designed to help high school students and teachers prepare for exams or get a better grasp on a subject. There are courses designed

specifically for high schoolers, as well as, labs, competitions and video demonstrations on subjects as diverse as robotics, furniture making and designing stage scenery.

There’s a brief history of the site in the “About” section that highlights its debut in 2002 with 50 courses offered. The next year they had 500 courses. The timeline chronicles its growth to 2,000 courses today, as well as, translations to other languages, new features and partnerships with other organizations, such as YouTube and iTunes, along the way.

There are also profiles of students, educators, self-learners and supporters of the site who come from all over the world. The “Site Statistics” section details the number of users, where they come from, how they use the site and more.

Knowledge for all

One of MIT’s goals is “advancing education around the world” and this website was produced to further that mission. In 2008, the nonprofit OpenCourseWare Consortium was incorporated in conjunction with the site. It is an organization of over 250 universities and related entities that share the goal of advancing education. There are more than 13,000 free courses offered in 20 languages through the consortium.

MITOpenCourseware is an impressive site. It’s well organized and easy to navigate. You might think it would be a bit overwhelming due to the nature of the material, but the framework of the site is actually fairly thin. The bulk of the content is the actual courses, which are neatly tucked away under their subject headings. The result is an easy-to-use site with a wealth of information. That’s just the ticket for summer vacation.

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