

OpenCourseWare Update

What Was it Like Working with OCW?

IN 1985, I COULD NOT find a course anywhere that linked negotiation theory with conflicts within the workplace. So I set out to apply the theories of my Sloan colleague, Bob McKersie, to my work as an organizational ombudsman. Most of the theory and practice of modern-day negotiation draws on the 1960s work of Richard Walton and Robert McKersie. Their theories have been widely applied – to world peace, the martial arts and modern dance, corporate strategy, courtship, and real estate transactions – but my course appears to have been the first on “Negotiation and Conflict Management.” In the spirit of McKersie’s work, “Course 15.667: Negotiation and Conflict Management” was designed to deliver theory to practitioners and to develop theory from practice. And, following McKersie, my course deals with intangibles (how do people feel about the negotiation, about the conflict) as well as tangibles (what will they get). The course is realistic (and messy) since my cases are drawn from real life. (There are no “optimum solutions,” just ranges of better and worse solutions depending on the negotiators and the setting). In the spirit of MIT, I have taken an integrated systems approach to organizational conflict management. Over the years, I have contributed a bit, here and there, both to negotiations theory and conflict management theory. Fortunately, this subject matter turned out to be very popular. However, like other long-term faculty, I now get calls and e-mails from colleagues all over the world. Having my course published on the OpenCourseWare Website lets me just refer many teachers, practitioners, students, alums, and perplexed negotiators to OCW. So, what was it like, working with OCW? I figured the process of publishing would be awful. I mentioned that the course is “messy,” and so, I thought, were my files. I have revised the course ~20 percent each year, so my computers were full of stuff – cases, brief negotiation “recipes” I had developed, outlines for lectures, an Introductory Test, instructions for a “Negotiations Journal,” and advisories for negotiators. I thought gloomily that it would take a year to organize these course materials into a coherent Website. My spirits sank lower when I got a call from OCW asking, “Could you deliver 15.667 in a week?” I thought this was hopeless. Maybe I would get it done in 2010? But a long-suffering OCW department liaison – a recent MIT alum with good negotiations skills who could not be discouraged – came and downloaded everything, and then organized it overnight into the distinctive OCW template. Presto! The course looked much better than ever before. I edited, over a weekend on e-mail, with the patient OCW wizard who kept indefatigably encouraging me. It got done. (Of course it is never done. But I now have an exceptionally useful framework for my teaching notes, and for adding new material. And some of the burden on our wonderfully able office assistant has been lifted – I am no longer asking her quite as often how to find something.) In the last several months since 15.667 was published on OCW, I have welcomed new colleagues who visit or call from around the world, having found the course on OCW. (These are people I wanted to meet – OCW takes care of random e-mail). A few cloned courses are springing up around the world. Students use fragments from the site. Some MIT alumni tell me they are happy to see 15.667 course materials available for them to teach, and use, at work. OCW has also saved many hours that would have been spent in correspondence with conflict management practitioners and their senior managers. I was concerned about intellectual property. To my relief, this concern disappeared with all the others. OCW took care of the permissions process for third-party materials I had borrowed for the course, just as Graphic Arts had done for me in the past. In addition, I am also happy about the fate of my own intellectual property. I am suddenly getting more credit, including acknowledgement for a number of my ideas from the past. So one happy outcome was that I found one can actually get more recognition for one’s work via OCW. Moreover, people are much more likely to find something I have written on OCW than on my office Website. (Of course this new recognition is sometimes expressed in quixotic terms – “you mean you came up with that concept?”) So – overall – what was it like working with OCW? I have great respect for OCW. For a member of the faculty

getting started or an instructor who is really working to pull together a life's work, this seems to me a very unusual gift from MIT.

If you are interested in participating in the OCW, please contact Jon Paul Potts, OCW communications manager, at jpotts@mit.edu or 617-452-3621.