In 2001, Charles Vest, then President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, announced that MIT would make most of its course material freely available online. Browsing the Web site of MIT’s Open Courseware (OCW) project (http://ocw.mit.edu), you feel the stirring of a “my God, it’s full of stars” transformation: you can borrow material for your courses, study other teachers’ teaching methods, maybe even retake college courses you regret having slept through! Remarkably, OCW is just one highly visible part of an “open education movement.” The essays collected in Opening Up Education, edited by Toru Iiyoshi and M.S. Vijay Kumar, describe ways in which individuals and institutions intend to exploit digital communications technology, develop innovative and freely redistributable educational methods and resources, and improve education at all levels throughout the world.

But what does “open education” really mean? What is “closed” about education? Should education be free as in no cost, or is there something about education that needs to be freed as in freedom? This sort of ground is already well-trampled by debates about two better-known “open” predecessors, open-source software and open-access publication, and it is instructive to make the comparison.

In software development, almost everyone recognizes the power of sharing, verifying, reusing, and improving source code. At the same time, developing software takes time, which means that it’s expensive. It’s not obvious that you can give people the right to see, modify, and redistribute your source code without torpedoing your business model. The best open-source advocacy seeks new business models for openly sharing source code without impoverishing software development. The better we reconcile this tension, the better our software will be. The same sort of tension underlies open access. We need computational indexing, that can be readily copied.

So, while I like storming the establishment with pitchforks and torches as much as anyone, when I picked up Opening Up Education (or rather, when I downloaded the PDF to my Kindle), I was looking for pragmatism, not utopianism. After 500 pages of “the silos we all know about in higher education are under assault in the new world,” the “hated textbook publishers,” the “epistemological hegemony of higher education,” and the “noble philosophy” of making everything free—“traitors” and “patriots” and “communists,” oh my!—my hopes were beaten down. Many of the 30 essays in this collection are more manifesto than explanation, and many of the 38 authors are writing more for their fellow revolutionary comrades than for us.

The collection’s editors—Toru Iiyoshi, a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and director of the Knowledge Media Laboratory; and M.S. Vijay Kumar, senior associate dean of undergraduate education and director of the Office of Educational Innovation and Technology at MIT—gathered the authors at a 2006 conference sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, which is one of the main philanthropic supporters of open-education initiatives. Iiyoshi and Kumar have organized the essays roughly evenly into three sections: Technologies, Content, and Knowledge.

The Technologies essays are mostly about creating open-source software to serve educational purposes. For example, to assist teachers in posting
course materials on interactive Web sites, you’d want to deploy some sort of easily customizable course management software in your institution. Several such open-source projects are described, including Bodington (http://www.bodington.org), the Sakai Project (http://sakaiproject.org/portal/), and Moodle (http://moodle.org). The goals of course management overlap with even more ambitious goals of visual learning environments such as Visual Understanding Environment (VUE) (http://vue.tufts.edu), which aim to enable novel visualizations that accelerate learning. One interesting essay described the MIT iLabs project (http://icampus.mit.edu/ilabs/), which aims to make laboratory instrumentation accessible for student experiments via open-source, web-based middleware, standardizing the connection of a professor’s laboratory experiments to the Web.

The Knowledge essays are about ways to improve dissemination of teaching methods by enabling better communication among teachers. One of the better essays here, from Randall Bass and Dan Bernstein, points out that professors tend to be isolated from others’ teaching experiences (certainly true, in my experience), and they discuss interesting ways to create peer feedback communities. This is all well and good, but there is no tension to resolve with an “open” movement. No one is opposed to better communication, and nothing was really closed by design.

The heart of the book is the Content section, which describes open educational resources. This is where the interesting, real-world tension around educational material and intellectual property restriction arises. We would surely be better off sharing and remixing the best course materials. The trouble is, educational sharing and remixing the best course arises. We would surely be better off and intellectual property restriction tension around educational material open educational resources. This closed by design.

This confuses ways of sharing and pioneering initiatives described in this collection, building landing strips to receive open educational content will not be enough. More attention must be paid to the fact that someone still needs to spend time painstakingly developing artful ways to make difficult concepts understandable—to teach!—and that it will take even more time (thus money) to render these hard-won ideas using multimedia web technology compared with writing textbooks. Success hinges on the adoption of open licensing by the professionals who make digital educational resources, and on finding ways to finance their work.