

MERLOT: You Get As Good As You Give

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Abstract

The Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and On-line Teaching (MERLOT) provides a gateway to peer reviewed on-line resources identified as appropriate for use with college and university students. MERLOT has the characteristics valued for professional publication and more. Not only is it peer reviewed, but MERLOT also indexes and links all of the learning objects listed, provides opportunities for college faculty to contribute lesson plans to use with the indexed learning objects, supports comprehensive search capabilities, allows for reviews by other professionals who have used a resource, and supports a community of college and university educators worldwide. MERLOT also automatically creates an electronic portfolio for contributing educators. With over 8,000 objects currently linked and cataloged in MERLOT, it is arguably the most useful on-line collection for college and university faculty.

There are approximately 1,028,000 college and university faculty in this country alone (National Center for Education Statistics). What if each of us could make just one of our favorite and most effective lessons using on-line educational resources available to our peers? Over one million of the best lessons using on-line educational resources from college or university classes would be readily available to college and university faculty worldwide. That is the potential of MERLOT.

Virtually all universities in the U.S. have intranets - local networks on which their faculty can share resources in a closed gated community protected from hackers and unavailable to the outside world, including faculty from other campuses. MERLOT provides the tool to facilitate those resources being available in an open environment where all of us have access to them.

MERLOT also provides a nationwide directory of faculty in your field readily available whenever needed. You can contact members personally about his or her contribution. Learn why and how it was developed, how it was originally used. What were the learning outcomes for students? You could identify his or her particular expertise, consult or request a consult.

MERLOT also has "how to" resources about [Assessment and Evaluation](#), [Instructional Material Design](#), [Learner Support](#), [Policies](#), [Scholarship in Teaching and Learning](#), [Selecting Technology](#), [Best Practices in Teaching](#), and [Websites](#) available on-line, most at no cost, from one location.

What is MERLOT?

The Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and On-line Teaching (MERLOT) is an international cooperative for high quality on-line resources to improve learning and teaching within higher education. The cooperative connects systems, consortiums, and institutions of higher education, professional organizations of academic disciplines, and individual members to form a *community* of people who strive to enrich the teaching and learning experience.

The resources in [MERLOT](#) include:

- * links to thousands of learning materials
- * sample assignments, which show how the materials could be used in the classroom
- * evaluations of the learning materials by other individual users and panels of faculty
- * links to people with common interests in a discipline and in teaching and learning

“MERLOT is a *free* and *open* resource. Information hosted in MERLOT is free to use for educational, non-commercial purposes, and materials linked through MERLOT have a range of agreements from public domain to commercial. The links to the learning are in MERLOT to help users find these web sites.” (MERLOT Tasting Room, paragraph 1-3)

In MERLOT’s first five years it has grown to include over 8,000 learning objects contributed by faculty world - wide. The resources can be used to enhance traditional classroom activities in conjunction with web-enhanced course software, or as a component of a completely on-line class. MERLOT is arguably the best available tool to facilitate teaching and learning with technology in higher education today and probably for the foreseeable future.

The Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and On-line Teaching, or MERLOT, is an index, a database of hyperlinks to learning objects deemed to be useful for teaching in higher education. What are these “learning objects?” The Learning Technology Standards Committee of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) defines a learning object as “any entity, digital or nondigital, that may be used for learning, education, or training” (2001, Section 1.1). David Wiley of Utah State University defines a learning object as “any digital resource that can be reused to support learning” (2000, p. 7). Regardless of which definition you accept, learning objects listed on MERLOT include simulations,

animations, tutorials, drill and practice activities, lectures, quizzes, tests, collections, case studies and other learning materials.

Learning objects submitted to MERLOT are reviewed by a peer review committee and rated on a five-point scale. The ratings are listed along with the learning object. It is possible, however, to limit your searches only to reviewed objects. The limited number of reviewers leaves many objects as yet unreviewed and the process of [recruiting reviewers](http://taste.merlot.org/projects/peer_review/) (http://taste.merlot.org/projects/peer_review/) is ongoing.

Members of MERLOT have the option of commenting on learning objects. This is particularly helpful when a learning object is still unrated. And members are encouraged to attach lesson plans they have developed and used with available learning objects.

While MERLOT does not maintain the computers that store the learning objects, it does make an effort to maintain up-to-date links, unlike other on-line search engines. Should users find broken links they may contact MERLOT that will make every effort to determine the current link and has been known to correct information within hours.

Who is MERLOT?

MERLOT currently has twenty - three Institutional Partners who collaborate with one another to make MERLOT work. Institutional Partners pay \$25,000 per year and must commit to supporting six to eight faculty to participate on MERLOT's Editorial Boards. The MERLOT Editorial Boards provide the peer reviews of learning objects submitted in their respective academic communities. The University of North Carolina system is one of the original four Institutional Partners and supports the Teacher Education community. In addition to this formal administrative structure, MERLOT is 9,000 registered faculty and student members who contribute to and/or use its resources.

A Brief History of MERLOT

In 1997 California State University Center for Distributed Learning ([CSU-CDL](#)) found itself with a collection of learning objects resident on a computer that was inaccessible to anyone. They initially created MERLOT to make those objects readily available to any educator who could use them. In 1998,

the CSU-CDL was selected by the State Higher Education Executives Organization/American Productivity and Quality Center as one of the six best practices centers in North America. Resulting visits to the CSU-CDL by representatives from other university systems led to a consortium of four institutions: the University of Georgia System, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the University of North Carolina System and California State University System. In 1999, the consortium formalized a peer review process and the ability to add student assignments to the MERLOT database.

In 2000, twelve faculty from each of the four university systems and representing the disciplines of Biology, Physics, Business and Teacher Education developed evaluation standards and a peer review process for reviewing learning objects submitted to MERLOT. By July of 2000, twenty-three university systems and institutions had become Institutional Partners. Each institution contributed additional funds and faculty time. Disciplines in MERLOT expanded to include Chemistry, Engineering, Health Sciences, History, Information Technology, Mathematics, Music, Physics, Psychology, and World Languages (A Brief and Simplified History of MERLOT, 2002).

Alliance Organizations

MERLOT has begun to collaborate with professional organizations that have already begun a database of on-line resources in their discipline. In the future users may be able to search both MERLOT and other databases at the same time. Organizations currently working with MERLOT include:

[SMETE – Science, Mathematics, Engineering and Technology Education](#)
[NEEDS – A Digital Library for Engineering Education](#)
[Merit Network, Inc. and Michigan Teacher Network](#)
[HEAL – Health Education Assets Library](#)
[The Eisenhower National Clearing house for Science and Mathematics](#)
[Project Kaleidoscope](#)
[Education.au limited](#)
[American Association for Physics Teachers](#)
[National University of Rwanda](#)

(MERLOT, p. 7).

What is available on MERLOT and how do I get there?

Your first stop at MERLOT ought to be the [Tasting Room](#). Here you will find a lot of basic information about MERLOT. You will find more information about MERLOT's history. There is a link to the PowerPoint presentations made at the 2002 MERLOT International Conference.

It is not necessary to [become a member](#) of MERLOT in order to use it, but membership is available at no cost and does have its privileges. Only members may submit websites for listing in MERLOT. Only members may attach comments to objects or submit assignments for learning objects they have used. Only members can take advantage of MERLOT's portfolio service to track their on-line contributions.

On the [MERLOT home page](#) notice the tabbed menu near the top. It says "MERLOT Home." In the upper left hand corner is a search box. You can search the entire database from here or you can narrow your search down with the use of "communities." On the tabbed menu "Communities," clicking on the tab brings you to the list of academic communities organized by disciplines. The menu bar now says "[MERLOT Community Websites](#)." Here you find a list of the fourteen disciplines currently included in MERLOT. Click on any one and it takes you to a list of sub-disciplines. As an example, click on "Teacher Education" and it brings you to a list that includes:

[Classroom Management](#)
[Diversity and Multicultural Ed](#)
[Educational Foundations](#)
[Educational Psychology](#)
[Educational Research](#)
[Instructional Technology](#)
[Special Education](#)
[Student Assessment](#)
[Teaching Methods](#)

The search box is still in the upper right hand corner of the page, but at this point it will search only in the Teacher Education section of MERLOT. (Unlike Google, Yahoo and numerous other internet search sites MERLOT does not require that you wade through a list of sometimes millions of unrelated sites found to meet your search criteria.) Included in the fourteen disciplines are over 500 sub-disciplines. As you progress through this hierarchy, the breadth of the search narrows accordingly. You can narrow it even further in the advanced search function which allows you to specify the type of material you are seeking, the primary audience, technical format, whether there is a cost for use and other criteria for your search.

If you would like to view some award winning sites, check out [MERLOT's Awards Program for Exemplary On-line Learning Resources](#).

My discipline is not listed in MERLOT. What's in it for me?

Take a look at [MERLOT-TWO](#) (Teaching Well On-line.) It is an on-line searchable database that includes tools faculty can use to develop quality on-line resources (ABOUT MERLOT-Teaching Well On-line, 2001). For example:

1. Are you having to put your class on-line? Here you can find sample [policies](#) regarding on-line classes, computer use, accessibility issues and promotion and tenure from other universities and government organizations.
2. Want some information about [instructional design](#)? Find help with using Flash, multimedia portfolio design, use of learning objects, preparing a class syllabus, teaching well on-line, web based instruction, on-line design and many others.
3. Need more information on cooperative learning, lecture and presentation, or problem-based learning? Find it on [Best Practices](#).
4. Would you like to explore alternative assessment methods including standards-based assessment, conducting student assessments of classroom experiences, evaluation of distance learning, or web based assessment? Check out the [Assessment and Evaluation](#) section of MERLOT TWO.

MERLOT at WCU

In December of 2001, Debra Randleman of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at WCU emailed an invitation to all faculty to attend MERLOT training at the *Teaching and Learning Collaborative* in Greensboro, NC. Six Western faculty accepted. We were impressed enough to return to Western, establish ourselves as a Task Force, and begin telling other faculty about MERLOT. With help and guidance from Dr. Fred Hinson and Dr. Alan Altany, we succeeded in establishing the MERLOT Committee under the auspices of the Coulter Faculty Center.

- We have conducted workshops to familiarize faculty with MERLOT, and will continue to do so.

- We are available to discuss and demonstrate MERLOT with your department's faculty.
- We have created a MERLOT at Western website. You can access that website at <http://facctr.wcu.edu/merlot/wcumerlot.html>.
- Dr. Tom Franke has agreed to work with us to establish computer space for learning objects created by Western faculty and indexed by MERLOT that would be accessible to those off campus.
- We have begun a dialogue about the role of digital scholarship in the tenure, promotion and review process at Western Carolina University.

MERLOT, the Place to Be

While their review process can not keep up with demand, as Jeffrey R. Young stated in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "MERLOT is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to create a standard format for reviewing on-line-course components." Young (2002) goes on to say, "The peer-review process is modeled after that of peer review for academic journals." In these efforts MERLOT is working to provide college and university professors with a method to obtain credit for digital scholarship in their respective tenure and promotion processes. Though on-line learning has developed rapidly over the last ten years, many of us are just beginning to examine and incorporate it into our classrooms. MERLOT is working to provide easy access to learning objects suitable for our classrooms and to provide information and tools that will allow maximizing student learning through the use of those tools. The potential for incorporating on-line learning and the effective use of appropriate learning objects is clearly part of the future of pedagogy; and, in that respect, MERLOT is the place to be.

If you wish to contact a committee member about MERLOT, email us.

Chairperson, Valorie Nybo, nybo@wcu.edu
Secretary, Irene Mueller, imueller@wcu.edu

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