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Copyright Doesn't Cover This Site By Michelle Delio

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As courts continue to review the fine ethical line between sharing and stealing over file-swapping networks, some universities are adding anti-plagiarism software to their budgets and putting limits on the amount of data students can download.

But one new media program is trying to send students a very different message. At the University of Maine, Orono, "cheaters can prosper," according to professor Jon Ippolito.

To prove that open sourcing any and all information can help students swim instead of sink, the University of Maine's [Still Water](#) new media lab has produced [the Pool](#), a collaborative online environment for creating and sharing images, music, videos, programming code and texts.

"We are training revolutionaries -- not by indoctrinating them with dogma but by exposing them to a process in which sharing culture rather than hoarding it is the norm," said Joline Blais, a professor of new media at the University of Maine and Still Water co-director.

"It's all about imagining a society where sharing is productive rather than destructive, where cooperation becomes more powerful than competition," Blais said.

Whether it's really cheating to share information is debatable. And other universities have set up their own projects, including the [Swarthmore Coalition for the Digital Commons](#), a student-run program centered on maintaining free and open standards for information, and [Creative Commons](#) at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, which is building a body of creative works that are free for copying and reuse.

But open sourcing creative work is still a daring leap into waters muddied by content producers' own conflicted feelings about copyright and ownership.

"Many professional creative people are really struggling to sort out their own ideas about copyright and how it impedes the free flow of information," said Andrew Folkston, a retired Toronto journalism professor.

"For example, in the media community you have people who are by their nature compelled to share information, but who also feel they must guard their sources and their work in order to remain competitive," Folkston said.

Still Water students know all about that dichotomy.

"We don't all agree on how open projects should be at any given level of development, or what powers the original author should be able to maintain.... We've talked about some of these issues for months without any sort of resolution," said John Bell, a new media major at the University of Maine.

"That's why there are so many options for licensing and reuse terms available to Pool contributors," Bell said. "We recognize that individual authors will have their own ideas about what the right balance between sharing and hoarding is and allow them to set permissions as they see fit."

The Pool emphasizes distributed creativity, a concept similar to a cluster computer for the media world. Users can dive into the Pool and search for visuals or audio tracks to use with their own projects, find

collaborators to work with or ask for feedback from their peers.

Contributors also can propose a concept for others to implement, or respond to invitations to explore, debug, re-edit or remix existing works.

The Pool's structure is designed to make it easy to track the "wake" left by a contributor's idea as it gets picked up by new artists or rendered in new mediums or is accessed by different users with different technologies over subsequent years.

"After each semester's worth of work, the projects I've done have ended up either in the trash or crammed in my portfolio," said Justin Russell, a University of Maine new media major. "The Pool shifts that life span to a point where a project will never die. In theory, students in the next semester could use my work (along with the work of others) to create a new or improved piece for their class."

But if one of its primary creators has her way, the Pool may not be permanent.

"In 10 years we hope the paradigm will be so well-established as a social practice that the Pool will either be ubiquitous or unnecessary," said new media professor Blais.

"We hope that the practice of cooperation will empower communities and individuals to the point where they can surpass the productivity and influence of corporations," Blais said.



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