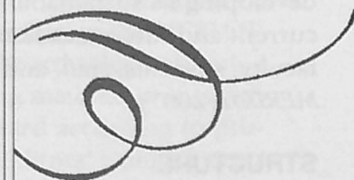


# MERLOT: A COMMUNITY-BASED WEBSITE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

by Susan M. Frey



**C**hoice describes MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching) as “an extensive collection of [peer-reviewed] online learning materials (Nowicki, 2008, p.963). This is true. MERLOT offers an impressive, international collection of readily available materials for teaching and learning, many of which are useful to librarians. The database is searchable by keyword, title, author, material type, and a host of other characteristics. The basic search box is conveniently available at the top right corner of the MERLOT screens. There is also a link to an advanced search page. But MERLOT is so much more than a clearinghouse of learning materials. Navigating the MERLOT website will reveal that it provides users with rich professional development, service, and research opportunities. Becoming a member of MERLOT is easy. To join, all that is required is free registration on the MERLOT website. If you haven’t already investigated this exciting online environment, pursuing the MERLOT homepage (figure 1) will help get you started. This paper will also help you quickly learn some of the many advantages and opportunities that MERLOT has to offer. Most of the information in this paper is from the MERLOT website at [www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org).

## HISTORY

In 1997, the California State University Center for Distributed Learning (CSU-CDL at [www.cdl.edu](http://www.cdl.edu)) developed and provided free access to MERLOT which was modeled after the National Science Foundation (NSF) funded project, “Authoring Tools and an Educational Object Economy (EOE).” The EOE developed and distributed tools to enable the formation of communities engaged in building shared knowledge bases of learning materials. In 1998, a State Higher Education Executives Organization/American Productivity and Quality Center (SHEEO/APQC), benchmarking study on faculty development and instructional technology, selected the CSU-CDL as one of six best practices centers in North America. Visitations to the CSU-CDL by higher education institutions participating in the benchmarking students resulted in interest in collaborating with the CSU on the MERLOT project. The University of Georgia System, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, University of North Carolina System, and the California State University System created an informal consortium representing almost one hundred campuses serving over 900,000 students and over 47,000 faculty.

In 1999, the four systems recognized the significant benefits of a cooperative initiative to expand the MERLOT collections, conduct peer reviews of the digital learning materials, and add student learning assignments. Each system contributed funds to develop the MERLOT software to advance the collaborative project. The CSU maintained its leadership of and responsibilities for the operation and improvement of processes and tools. In January 2000, the four systems sponsored 48 faculty from the disciplines of biology, physics, business and teacher education (12 faculty from each of the four systems) to develop evaluation standards and peer review processes for on-line teaching-learning material. In April 2000, other systems and institutions of higher education were invited to join the MERLOT cooperative. In July 2000, twenty-three systems and institutions of higher education had become Institutional Partners of MERLOT. MERLOT continues to invite Institutional Partners and profes-

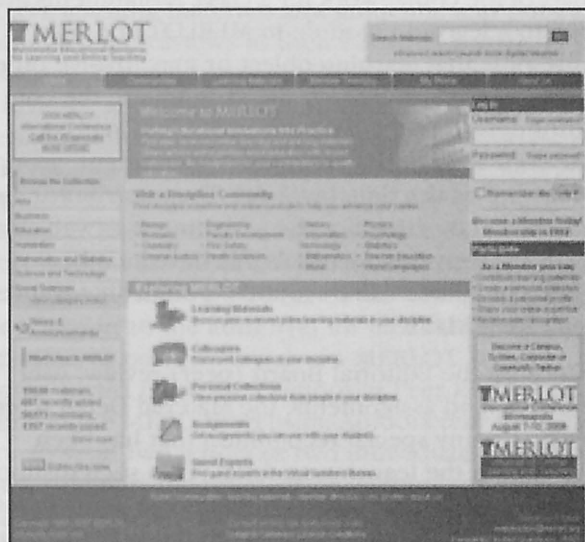


Figure 1. MERLOT's homepage

sional discipline organizations to join the cooperative endeavor and is advancing the current collaborative framework, exploring a variety of business models, and developing its sustainability plan so it can serve the current and future academic technology needs of faculty, students, staff, and institutions. (*How did MERLOT*, 2007)

## STRUCTURE

MERLOT's sixteen Editorial Boards are grouped by discipline. Each board is responsible for expanding and managing the collection of online learning materials and managing the peer review process for materials in its discipline. The sixteen boards are: Biology, Business, Chemistry, Engineering, Faculty Development, Health Sciences, History, Information Technology, Library & Information Services, Mathematics, Music, Physics, Psychology, Statistics, Teacher Education, and World Languages. Editorial Board members are faculty with expertise in the scholarship of their field, experience in using technology in teaching and learning, and experience in conducting peer reviews of online learning materials. In addition, since MERLOT is considered to be an online community, board members continually find ways in which to reach out to the community of educators in its discipline. Complimenting each Editorial Board is a discipline community. These subsets of the MERLOT collection are administered by the Editorial Boards. Users can find peer-reviewed materials in each of these sixteen academic communities.

MERLOT's Editors Council is comprised of all of the editors of each Editorial Board and provides the leadership for the Editorial Boards. The Project Directors' Council is comprised of all of the Project Directors (System Partners) and Campus Liaisons (Individual Campus Partners). Project Directors have critical responsibilities in managing their institution's participation in MERLOT and MERLOT's connection to their institution's academic technology initiatives. Responsibilities of Project Directors include participation in MERLOT's governance activities, selection of Editors and Editorial Board members, supervision of Editorial Board members, and management of their institutions' partnership with MERLOT. The Advisory Board is comprised of representatives of some MERLOT Partner organizations. The Advisory Board is responsible for the development and implementation of the MERLOT business plan and has created the rules and procedures governing its operations and deliberations. The Advisory Board sets the direction for MERLOT in the future and determines what major projects will be implemented. MERLOT is also supported by a staff of full-time professionals and scholars.

## THE COLLECTION

MERLOT's online collection of guides, tutorials, courses, workshops, simulations, animations, case studies, presentations, tests, learning objects, and reference materials do not reside on a MERLOT server. Instead link(s) to the original location of the learning material is provided. There is a Material Detail screen (figure 2) for each learning material in the collection. This screen contains a link(s) to that material, a description of the material, copyright information, authors' and submitter's names, and the peer review ranking of the material. Anyone can submit material to MERLOT. Sometimes people submit their own material, but submissions can come from a third party who finds the material so useful that they wish it to become a part of the MERLOT universe. Once submitted, the appropriate Editorial Board then reviews the material and contacts the author with the review. Material not yet reviewed by the appropriate Editorial Board is still available for users to view. In such cases "not reviewed" is indicated on the Material Detail screen.

If this was all that were available on the Material Detail screens, then MERLOT could be called a digital library or online repository. But MERLOT has so much more to offer. On each Materials Detail screen there are user comments. Comments are observations of members who have either used the learning material or just viewed it. MERLOT is an open environment. Any member of MERLOT can make a comment. The contributor of the comment is asked to rate the material from one to five stars and is also asked to indicate if it has been used in the classroom. A comment requires remarks as well as the star rating. Materials that have member comments posted can be found through an advanced search in MERLOT.

Also on the Material Detail screen are assignments. Assignments are projects, papers, or activities that can be part of the coursework for a class. Assignments are linked to a learning module in MERLOT and may involve only that learning object or may involve other activities as well. In writing the assignment, the contributor describes the type of activity (i.e. in-class, homework assignment, individual assignment, group, etc.) as well as the time involved. The contributor also can identify objectives for the assignment as well as any assessment activities. Materials that have member assignment posted can be found through an advanced search in MERLOT.

Besides the Editorial Board (peer) review, user comments, and assignments, the Material Detail screen will also list any special recognition that has been bestowed on the learning material. Two such distinctions are the *MERLOT Classics* and the *Editor's Choice* awards. So the Material Detail screen is more than just



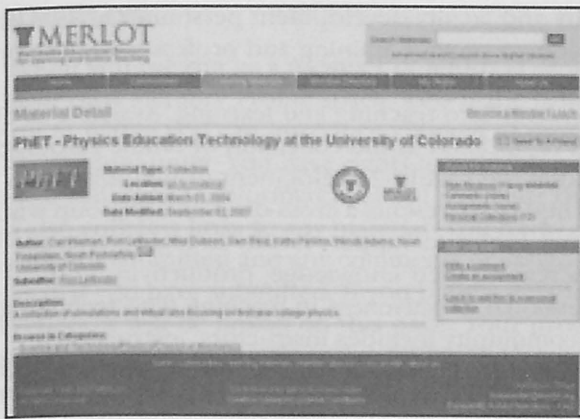


Figure 2. Material Detail screen for PhET

a landing page for the material's URL. It affords users many opportunities to not only read others' assessment of the material but to also comment on the material themselves. This opportunity for communication on each material raises MERLOT from the level of an online repository to a truly collaborative environment of professionals offering advice and analysis on the collection.

## PEER REVIEW PROCESS

The peer review process for evaluating the teaching and learning materials in MERLOT follows the model of the peer review of scholarship. The MERLOT Administrative Team provides the Editorial Boards with a framework of evaluation criteria which is based on quality of content, potential effectiveness as a teaching tool, and ease of use. Review teams typically use the following two-stage triage review process: Stage 1) Cursory Review to Identify Worthy Candidates and Stage 2) Intensive Review of Worthy Candidates. Two peer reviewers each use their Editorial Board's review procedures, forms, and evaluation standards as they independently review the material. Reviewers write peer review reports using the evaluation criteria for MERLOT learning materials as a guideline and publish these individual reviews in their Editorial Board Workspace. If there is any significant disparity in the two reviews, an editor or associate editor assigns the material to a third reviewer. The editor or associate editor reviews both individual reviews and creates an integrated or Composite Peer Review Report on Workspace. The "author" of a Composite Peer Review Report is listed as "MERLOT [discipline] Review Panel." The Editorial Board sends the Composite Peer Review Report to the author(s) for feedback and permission to post the review on MERLOT. The Editorial Board posts the Composite Peer Review Report on the MERLOT website. Authors may ask the editor to send two letters to two individuals of their choice, summarizing the peer review process and including the Composite Peer Review Report (*About the Peer*, 2007).

Each year, awards for exemplary online materials (figure 3) are presented to authors of peer-reviewed learning resources. The awards honor the authors and developers of these resources for their contributions to the academic community by conferring the MERLOT Classics Award. Each Editorial Board selects an outstanding peer-reviewed learning material in its discipline to receive the Classics award according to program criteria. In addition, the Editors' Council, composed of the editors of the Editorial Boards, further reviews the Classics awardees and selects among them the resource or resources they consider to be exemplary models for all disciplines. These resources receive the highest award of honor, the MERLOT Editors' Choice award (*MERLOT Awards*, 2007).

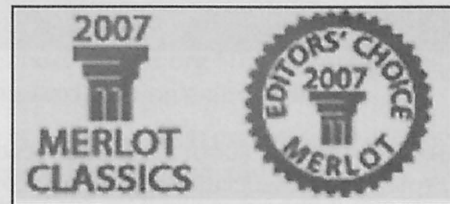


Figure 3. The 2007 Classics and Editors' Choice awards

## PUBLICATIONS AND MEDIA

The MERLOT *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching (JOLT)* is a peer-reviewed, online publication addressing the scholarly use of multimedia resources in education. *JOLT* is published quarterly in March, June, September, and December. *JOLT* welcomes papers on all aspects of the use of multimedia educational resources for learning and teaching. Topics may include, but are not limited to: learning theory and the use of multimedia to improve student learning; instructional design theory and application; online learning and teaching initiatives; use of technology in education; and innovative learning and teaching practices. To submit a paper to the journal, visit <http://jolt.merlot.org/callforpapers.html>. In addition, MERLOT also publishes a quarterly online newsletter called *The Grapevine* which is sent to all MERLOT members. The first issue was released in October 2005. MERLOT also offers a collection of videos available in Real Media, Windows Media Player, MPEG, and QuickTime formats. Podcasts are also available. To link to the videos and podcasts visit <http://taste.merlot.org/merlotvideos.html>.

## MERLOT COMMUNITIES

MERLOT has created a variety of Community Portals categorized by discipline and program area to provide users with online centers for a broad spectrum of resources related to online teaching and learning. Community Portals provide MERLOT members with

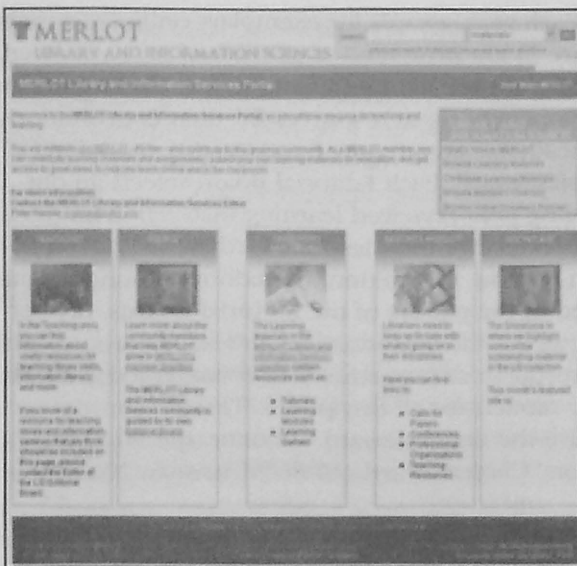


Figure 4. The LIS Portal

differentiated information about exemplary teaching strategies professional associations, journals, conferences, and other resources for continuous professional development. MERLOT categorizes the portals as: Discipline Communities, which are the portals to the sixteen academic disciplines; Workforce Development Communities, portals exploring resources supporting professional and applied programs; and Partner Communities, offering resources supporting MERLOT's Partner Communities and groups (*Communities*, 2007). Currently, the Library and Information Services (LIS) Editorial Board is building the LIS Portal, (figure 4), located under Discipline Communities at <http://libraryandinformationservices.merlot.org/>.

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The annual MERLOT International Conference is a venue for learning about shared content, peer reviews, learning objects, standards, and online communities by: showcasing how authors and faculty use MERLOT learning materials in their classrooms; enabling discipline communities to share information on teaching and learning with web-based material; identifying, using and evaluating digital learning materials in practical, hands-on workshops; promoting discussions among shared content providers; sharing information on various technology tools for teaching and learning; providing a forum for presentations by organizational affiliates and institutional partners of MERLOT; disseminating information about MERLOT. For information on the conference, visit <http://taste.merlot.org/mic.html>.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Faculty development is a critical strategic initiative for MERLOT and its partners. As a benefit of membership, the MERLOT Administrative Team works with

faculty and faculty development personnel of its partners to provide training and professional development in the use of MERLOT and how to integrate technology into teaching and learning. Available to all users of MERLOT is the collection of online resources found in the Faculty Development Community. This community represents a cross-disciplinary group whose primary goal is to support faculty in higher education by increasing their knowledge, productivity, and professional effectiveness in teaching with technology. The community includes instructors, instructional designers, faculty development officers, and technology support providers. This collection contains resources of best practices, instructional support ideas, and resources and materials that advance the pedagogical understanding of teaching with technology, whether in the classroom, online, or in blended models.

Faculty development services and trainings for MERLOT Partners include: annual faculty development (train-the-trainer) workshops; consultation services; participation in regional or individual campus workshops; and MERLOT international conference sessions devoted to faculty development. Future programs for faculty developers will include more learning opportunities on the use of MERLOT. New workshops, courses, and online resources will be developed to meet the changing needs of faculty. The development of an online workspace for MERLOT Partner faculty development personnel will allow them to share their teaching strategies and curriculum, and afford them the opportunity to conduct problem-solving discussions.

Other important parts of MERLOT are the Personal Collections and the Virtual Speakers Bureau. Personal collections help personalize the vast MERLOT collection for members. A personal collection is a compilation of MERLOT materials that MERLOT members can access easily to use for specific purposes, classes, or topics. Owners of personal collections can annotate each collection to more easily explain the purpose of it. When viewing a Material Detail screen, it is easy to select it as part of your personal collection. The link to your personal collection of MERLOT materials is always available on your personal member profile page. The MERLOT Virtual Speakers Bureau allows you to enhance the educational experiences of your students by bringing them together with guest speakers who are experts in their fields. Guest Experts are available on a wide range of topics relevant to technology, teaching, and learning, including MERLOT and faculty development issues. Faculty members, faculty development specialists, and administrators who have expressed a desire to participate as Guest Experts are listed in the MERLOT Virtual Speakers Bureau at <http://www.merlot.org/merlot/vsbMembers.htm> (*Faculty Development*, 2007).

## JOIN MERLOT!

When you register as a member of MERLOT, you get your own Member Profile space. This is the page (figure 5) where you can introduce yourself to the MERLOT community. You have rights to edit this page, and you can include information about yourself. This page also contains links to any materials you have authored or submitted and any comments or assignments that you have submitted. If you build a Personal Collection, it will be linked on this page. Your profile page will be a part of the extensive MERLOT Membership Directory where other members can find you. Want to learn more about MERLOT? This paper has reviewed only a part of the MERLOT universe. There is more to learn about MERLOT projects and activities. These can be viewed by browsing the MERLOT homepage or by contacting a member of the Editorial Board in your discipline. But becoming a member is the first step. Consider becoming a part of this exciting online initiative. If your material is peer reviewed you will be able to use it in establishing your academic or professional credentials. You may also wish to offer your services as a peer reviewer or a virtual speaker. There are many ways to benefit and get involved.



Figure 5. Member Profile page

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