OSEL - is, now what exactly??

Does the sudden appearance near Amity, Oregon of a crop circle in the form of the well-known Firefox logo say anything about which web browser extraterrestrials prefer?

The birth of OSEL

The Open Source movement has a new advocate at Oregon State University. The Open Source Educational Laboratory has a simple mission statement: Help Get Students at OSU involved in Free and Open Source Software (FOSS).

The OSEL was created in partnership between the OSU Linux Users Group and Open Source Lab. Initial funding was provided through funds provided by the students of OSU through the Technology Resource Fee.

It's about *Community*
The Open Source movement is all about building a world-wide community of developers. The OSEL intends to help students become members of this community. In part, this will take place by providing a welcoming lounge/workspace/resource center in the space known as the Penguins Nest, home of the OSU LUG (Linux Users Group) in Dearborn 401.

There, students will encounter our two OSEL "evangelists", Alex Polvi and Brandon Philips.

It's about *Student-to-Student Interaction*
Some of the most important lessons that students learn in college occur outside the classroom. When students interact with other students they relate on a peer-to-peer level, which is an entirely different type of experience from the professor/student relationship. The Open Source Lab at OSU has for several years seen excellent results from student workers teaching each other skills in "the pit", the common workroom for their student developers.

The OSEL will, in part, be trying to expand this experience to a wider group of students. Through a variety of activities, the OSEL hopes to reach a wide range of students and help them experience the possibilities of open source development.

Alex Polvi (left) and some of the zealots involved in building the crop circle. Polvi, one of the two OSEL student evangelists, with a preliminary design model for the Firefox crop circle. As a student at OSU Alex has worked at the Open Source Lab, and for Mozilla, and most recently spent a summer internship in NYC working for Google.

It's about *Skill Building*
In the past, students learning computer science were rarely exposed to anything more than toy programs. Production software was treated by their developing companies as carefully guarded intellectual property.

The advent of open source software has radically changed the programming landscape. Now there are literally thousands of programs, for every imaginable application, that are used daily by millions of people, that are completely available for inspection by any

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interested party. More importantly, most open source software projects are incomplete: There are lists of known errors, features that have been requested but not yet provided, or documentation that needs to be written. Even students with only moderate skill levels can apply their talent on real-world applications that are actually being used.

Names are made in the open source community by reputation. But to break into this community can sometimes be intimidating. A major part of the OSEL mandate will be to mentor students and help them develop their skill sets, and choose projects appropriate to their skill level, to help them advance to the next stage of their development.

Questions and Answers

Q: But what, exactly, will OSEL be doing?
A: Whatever we can think of to help more students become involved in open source software. In part, this will be to explore how OSS can be better used in the curriculum. This includes possibilities such as senior design projects, Master's student projects (masters student Darshana Chhajed is a good example of this. She is finishing a summer internship with the Open Source Applications Foundation in San Francisco, and the work she has been doing there will be the basis for her Masters thesis). Other educational opportunities include the operating systems course, the data structures course, special topics courses (a 419 in open source development will be offered winter term).

But students are motivated by more than just credit. The OSEL will be a clearinghouse to help students look for part-time or full time jobs involving OSS, or to learn about projects they can work on just for the fun of it.

Q: Does this have anything to do with that big Google grant?
A: No. Initial funding for the OSEL came from student TRF funds, with space provided by LUG and help from the Open Source Lab and the COE support staff. Part of the activities for the coming year will be to locate more on-going sources of support.

Q: How can I get involved with OSEL?
A: Contact Professor Budd, or the student evangelists in Dearborn 401. The OSEL will be conducting meetings in the near future to talk about building better connections between the OSL and the university.

Q: What's with the crop circle, anyway?
A: The crop circle was created in honor of the 200 millionth download of the Firefox web browser. Now, the OSEL won't claim credit for the circle, since OSEL didn't even exist yet when the circle was created. But some of the same wild and crazy people who thought up the crop circle will be running the OSEL. So look out!

Brandon Philips, watching the launch of Firefox One weather balloon, has also worked for the OSL, and NASA, and this past summer was doing an internship for IBM Austin Linux Technology Center where he continued work on a genetic library patch set for the Linux Kernel.