“The content in traditional IS textbooks is very weak,” said Gallaugher, an associate professor in the Carroll School of Management, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. “The cycle time is also quite long, so the content is often out-of-date. The time it takes for a book to go online or Google is with each traditional publishing cycle. It’s ludicrous to expect a student to spend $175 for this kind of content as easy to read as, say, an article in BusinessWeek or Fortune.”

For Gallaugher, it has been a natural transition to write an open source textbook with a new online company, Flat World Knowledge (FWK).

Gallaugher’s open source textbook, Information Systems: A Manager’s Guide to Harnessing Technology, has an expected publication date of summer 2009. Yet, he is publishing chapters and case drafts online as they’re ready for release. About 40 percent of the book was online by September, and the material was already being used by faculty worldwide. The content is being added to the FWK platform as reviewers and other adopters provide feedback.

For teachers and students, open source textbooks provide fresh, current and engaging content, he said. The FWK format brings free, online content accessible from anywhere.

Gallaugher has found many benefits in FWK’s model, including:

- Retention of the copyright of his material.
- Fast production cycles allow him to get content to consumers quickly.
- The ability to provide a free online version of the product.
- Low-cost print versions—the print version of Gallaugher’s online textbook starts at less than $30.

“There is also an opportunity to have my content become among the most widely adopted material used in my discipline,” he said. “What a great way for faculty to have an impact!”

In addition, the online version of FWK is developing for Gallaugher’s textbook includes a sophisticated interface. The online version will eventually include pop-ups for keywords and definitions. Plans for optional supplemental content include audio podcasts versions, along with ways for readers to easily engage the author to help make additions and improve subsequent versions.

FWK was founded in February 2007 by Jeff Stelstad and Eric Frank. Before starting their business, they had recently left a division of Prentice Hall/ Pearson Education, where Stelstad was editorial director and Frank was director of marketing.

“We love the industry,” Frank said. “We love signing great authors, developing books together, and putting together and executing sales and marketing campaigns that establish new market leaders. We have been as successful as any two people in doing that consistently throughout our careers.”

But Stelstad and Frank realized the world was changing rapidly around them.

“We couldn’t get textbook publishers to change fast enough with it,” Frank said. “We had this terrible feeling that we were spending our days rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. So it was time to move on and do it ourselves.”

FWK pursues two types of authors: professional profiles in its acquisitions. The first are those who have already written a market leading textbook and who remain free agents to write their next book in a new course area with FWK.

“The second are those who display the characteristics of a highly successful textbook author and who, therefore, should write a textbook because together we can make it a market leader,” Frank said. “John Gallaugher is in this category!”

FWK also looks at the prospective author’s teaching accomplishments. John is one of those ‘top one percent teachers.’ Students love him and are inspired by him, despite the fact that his course is consistently one of the most challenging,” Frank said. “He has won numerous teaching awards, and his excellence in the classroom has been recognized in places like BusinessWeek and Fortune.”

FWK predicts that online versions of traditional textbooks will increase in demand. The textbook also gives Gallaugher an excellent opportunity to share his experiences from his field work through Boston College. He spends several weeks a year with executive classes in places like Silicon Valley, Seattle and throughout Asia.

“The online version of FWK is ahead of the curve. People are always looking for ways to improve them, always pouring their soul into ensuring that the next time he teaches a class it is the best,” he said.

Feedback from users helps him improve the book and increases its credibility among authors. Everything he does in class is online. “This not only includes the text, but also PowerPoint slides, student questions to consider for reading, even podcasts,” Gallaugher said. “I’ve also included marketing material to promote technology study among management students.”

Gallaugher remains extremely passionate about his work, especially as the number of U.S. students studying IS and other technology disciplines are falling dramatically: “I see the book and online material as a special opportunity to share this content as a sort of ‘great course in a box’ with other faculty. I’ve been delighted to be a collaborator who ‘joins the material. In fact, after just a single day, the Google Analytics tracking downloads it up on all continents — from Antarctica to University of South Pole yet.”

For Gallaugher, it has been a natural transition to write an open source textbook. He’s created online content and blogged since 1997 — before the term “blog” was ever coined. He’s the author of the well-known blog Werk in Geek (WIG) (http://www.gallaugher.com/); it’s one of the oldest, continually published digests of his work online. The number of authors who have written with FWK is growing. An online textbook has been an experience that he has found different from previous writing ventures, but tremendously rewarding.

“If writing material for students — future managers, Gallaugher said. “This gives me an opportunity to write in an engaging style, yet still wrap key management concepts around these ‘fun’ reads. My goal with the textbook was to make the content as easy to read as, say, an article”

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students and the broader community of scholars. WiG helps him to do just that. Many former students subscribe as well. “It’s a great way to stay connected,” he said. “Many WiG readers have helped us arrange site visits from Boston to Bangalore for our field study experiences, while others have come back to campus to speak, or have suggested other articles that have made other WiG additions.”

Gallaugher highly recommends leveraging blogs to promote textbook content. “If other sites write about a topic, and you’ve got something important to say, you might mention a blurb and refer them to your online content,” he said. “But do not use the blog as a flagrant self-promoting opportunity. Blog and article comments should add value; otherwise, you’re seen as a spamming huckster. Online readers are fairly good at seeing through shill posts.”

Gallaugher resides in Newton, Mass., and has two young children. For him, work and hobbies intersect; he loves what he does. “It’s my motivation for teaching so much,” says Gallaugher, a tenured research professor who voluntarily takes a three-course, teaching overload. “Being able to give back to our community via the book project and supplemental material is great. With Flat World’s composition model, it will be wonderful to turn this into a lucrative move as well. That (monetary payback) will be key for authors because many authors will become disinterested if there’s not a strong incentive for continued contributions.

“The winning textbook publishing model is one that empowers authors to make an impact and to make money. I think Flat World has cracked the nut, but we’ll see.”

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