

Bringing education back to schools.

OPEN SOURCE IN EDUCATION

RICHARD SMEDLEY



At last the many groups involved in promoting Free Software as an educational tool are gathered round a single banner. Penguins, gnus and bsd devils are going back to the schools that turned out the current generation of programmers. The aim is to put education before training.

The past two years has seen a real groundswell in the efforts of disparate individuals and organisations to get Free Software into schools. This has been covered recently here and elsewhere. The one thing that these efforts have lacked has been a cohesive central focus. Discussion amongst many of the individuals involved on various mailing lists and Usenet groups - in particular the list hosted by SuSE - lead to a meeting, in Salisbury, on March 12 this year.

The meeting was hosted at Westwood St Thomas School, Salisbury, by Paul Taylor - a frequent contributor to SuSE's schools list. It was well attended, with more than two dozen people making the journey from as far afield as West Wales, East Anglia and the North West. Many people are working on projects in their own time, as is the way in the Open Source world. Commercial representation was also good.

OSiE - a new group

The meeting was started with a joint proposal from SuSE Linux' Roger Whittaker and Michael Brown, of new Linux managed services company Fen Systems,

for an Open Source In Education (OSiE) initiative. A national group to both promote and support Free Software in UK schools.

Whittaker began by outlining the recent history of GNU/Linux in schools. Talking about SuSE's initial contact with schools at BETT (the educational technology show) and the attempted involvement of Becta. Wearing his UK Unix Users Group (ukuug) hat, Whittaker proposed that organisation as a neutral parent organisation for OSiE, and offered the SuSE schools mailing list as a forum for discussion of aims and sorting out the administration.

After outlining the "challenges" facing Linux for schools, Michael Brown set out a proposal for OSiE as an "umbrella group", providing on its Web site directories of schools and vendors, a resource library and a "knowledge base." Unaware of the *Open Source for Education* Web site set up by Malcolm Herbert, when at Becta, Brown had registered the *osie.org* and *osie.org.uk* domains, ready to host the group if the name was agreed upon. After all it is very frustrating to get a group to agree on the name for a project only to find that there is no suitable url for the Web site!

The knowledge

The beginnings of the knowledge base are already online. Brown has donated the tutorials and information amassed for his company's Web site. Group discussion highlighted a desire for this resource to be professionally managed and edited, presenting information "by practitioners for practitioners". Too many "resources" are redundant collections of newsgroup archives, difficult to search and extremely uninviting. To this end an editorial team will be almost as important as the original contributors.

Many of the decision makers in education are non-technical people. With this in mind much of the site will be aimed at providing easy access to solutions. New trial sites, as well as long-term Free Software-users such as Felsted school (see below), will contribute case studies. Those struggling to convince their manager of the viability of Free Software will be able to point to these "real-world" examples.

Lively discussion followed this presentation, much of which had covered administrative details. Concerns were raised over issues at the very heart of the Free Software debate: The philosophies behind Open Source and Free Software; possible conflicts of interest between commercial and non-commercial concerns; over-emphasis on support at the expense of advocacy. The open nature of the discussions served well to lay the foundations for a balanced organisation.

The morning was rounded off with an introduction to the extremely interesting set up at Felsted, a private school in Essex. It boasts one of the most economical, diverse and stable networks in any UK school. BBC and Acorn Archimedes computers, as well as pupils' own Pentium IV PCs are all served by a robust free BSD setup. Thin clients are distributed throughout the school, giving students ready access to their work and e-mail.

After lunch a KDE desktop was served up remotely, from Felsted. This was hampered, in true "live demo" style, by local difficulties - in this case on Westwood School's own network. However a telnet session showed the attendees much of Felsted's system.

The meeting was closed by Phil Jones, with a demonstration of his impressive suite of tools,

developed as the Linux for Schools Project (lfsp), and featured previously in Linux Magazine. These tools enable pupils to work collaboratively, at the Linux command line, from their MS Windows desktops and provide for easy administration of per user web space on the server. The *Gethelp* utility orients the new users to the command line and pupils are soon "chatting" with other remote users. Jones demonstrated a Windows desktop with a KDE taskbar and GIMP both running on the Linux server. All agreed that tools such as these, enabling schools' current Windows arrangement to work with Linux machines, would be vital for many schools to start the transition to Free Software.

Other attendees included Kevin Taylor, maintainer of the Linux Schools Howto, Miles Berry of the Linux-using girls preparatory school St Ives, in Haslemere, Surrey; Debian's Phil Hands and representatives of several LEAs, schools, companies and other projects.

Far from listless

OSiE has since been set up as a project on Sourceforge. This gives a ready made infrastructure for group development in order for members to concentrate on the aims of the group rather than the details of how to organise the structure. Several mailing lists have been started. The general discussion list being the liveliest.

The council of the ukuug has agreed to the affiliation of OSiE, without the need for formal ukuug membership on the part of OSiE members. This affiliation should help to uphold the neutrality of the group as the commercial market for Linux solutions in schools grows, leading to inevitable pressures.

At the time of going to press help was needed in many areas. There can be few readers who do not have an interest in education. The nature of the group's organisation - as a Sourceforge project - readily lends itself to individual involvement. Meanwhile, as OSiE builds grassroots support, what will be the response of the DfEE, Becta, NESTA and the TC Trust, who decide whether taxpayers' money should go to open solutions for education or foreign companies for office software licences? ■

info

OSiE Web site:

<http://www.osie.org.uk/>

OSiE project pages:

<http://sourceforge.net/projects/losiel/>

OSiE discussion archives:

<http://www.geocrawler.com/lis/ts/3/SourceForge/10686/0/>

Linux User online article:

<http://www.linuxuser.co.uk/articles/issue8/index.html>

SuSE school page:

<http://www.suse.de/uk/schools/index.html>

UK schools howto:

<http://www.northants.lug.org.uk/projects/schools/index.html>

lfsp - Linux Magazine 5, February 2001,, p30 "Lessons in Linux"

Felsted School:

<http://www.felsted.essex.sch.uk/guides/>

RedHat's move into education:

<http://www.europe.redhat.com/news/article/136.html>

The author

The author spent nine hours in a tiny hire car, with just a Leonard Cohen tape for company, in order to attend the meeting. He is otherwise harmless and, when not playing rugby with his children, spends much of his time with php and python.

photographic credits

Mike Robinson:

http://www.btinternet.com/~mike_rl



[right]
Accessing Linux files from the Windows desktop

[left]
Two days of the round table" Only three beards? Are they real Unix users?