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UNIQUE LINUX DISTRO GEARED UP TO IMPACT HIGHER EDUCATION, STUDENT SUCCESS

(July 27, 2010) - A recent comer to the burgeoning world of Linux distributions says that its approach holds unique promise to at last increase adoption of the alternative platform within the hard-to-crack higher education and advanced secondary school sectors. UberStudent, which dubs itself “a free Linux learning platform for learning, doing, and teaching academic computing at the higher education and advanced secondary levels,” is upping the ante by coupling its ground-breaking educator-designed distro with plans to offer free online courses to teach students to academically excel with its platform.

“I began UberStudent as a way to place sets of smart and dedicated computing tools, and just the right amount of support, into the hands of college and college-bound secondary students,” said Stephen Ewen, UberStudent’s founder and lead developer. “At core, it’s an academic success curriculum in the form of an installable, ready-to-go learning platform. With UberStudent, students can learn to really excel at the skills and habits they must have to succeed in college and future workplaces,” he said.

Ewen said that much of UberStudent’s inspiration comes from his own experience. After overcoming what he called “significant learning challenges” to obtain a high school equivalence diploma in his early 30s, he made his way through a community college and then transferred to a rigorous honors college where he graduated with its highest academic award. Describing his achievement as “the highlight of my life, to that point,” Ewen credits much of his success to what he taught himself about academic computing while in college, insisting that almost anyone with the right tools and habits can make the grade. He now holds a masters degree in adult education and has chocked up impressive instructional and administrative experience in postsecondary literacy and student success development. “I’m an educator first, foremost, and always,” Ewen emphasized. “Everything I do as a developer is done through that grid.”

UberStudent has thus taken a decidedly different approach from other Linux distributions designed for education, which Ewen hopes will make it too hard to resist for students and learning institutions. “To date, Linux distros for education, such as Edubuntu and Fedora’s recent ‘Education Spin’, have featured a meta-package of broadly varying discipline-specific programs added to a basic install,” he said. While conceding that the approach is useful to showcase Linux’s capabilities, Ewen said that it lacked the “pedagogical cohesion” routinely valued by educators and most beneficial to students. “It’s little surprise to me that this approach has proven largely unattractive,” he said. “UberStudent fundamentally changes what it means to be an operating system for education,” he added.

UberStudent takes what Ewen called a “core skills” approach, which he said “centers on research and writing, study, and self-management skills, essentials required of all successful college students regardless of their major.” He emphasized that he hoped schools preparing students for college would especially take notice of his distribution. “Ideally, students should arrive at college already proficient in these core skills, mediated by technology,” he said, adding that “in an era of increased expectations alongside tightened budgets, schools could save a bundle” because UberStudent is open source, free. He also added, “It’s never too late to learn, though, which I suppose my own history illustrates.”

UberStudent’s reach for institutional academic ties is evident in two programs among its clearly well-thought-out sets of them, each organized around the platform’s core skills approach. The bibliographic manager Zotero was developed by George Mason University, and the concept and content mapping application VUE by Tufts University. Students will be glad to find that UberStudent is also decked out for multimedia, graphics and games.

UberStudent is built upon Debian, Ubuntu, and “dozens of other distros who’ve helped make Linux the extremely desktop-friendly platform it is today,” according to Ewen. “I developed UberStudent in the same spirit in which public scholars build upon and refine the work of others to advance public knowledge,” he stated. “Hopefully, everyone will benefit,” he added.

UberStudent uses the GNOME desktop. Ewen said that he developed UberStudent’s default desktop theme while referencing desktop design research into what reduces eye-strain and fatigue. Whether users find this to be so or not, the theme is clearly one of the most attractive available for GNOME.

Asked if he thought UberStudent’s Linux base might be off-putting to potential adopters, Ewen said he instead thought it was one of his project’s strengths. “The inadequately critical acceptance of proprietary computing platforms in academic computing has shortchanged student learning. As a result, emerging workforces are less innovative than they could be, and often require costly training in new versions of programs,” he said, while deflecting blame away from what he called “good-hearted educators.” Ewen asserted, “When computing technology is open sourced, students more naturally move beyond knowing which buttons to push to knowing the how and why,” which he described as “the essential and profound difference between computer literacy and computer fluency.” Computer fluent people of all sectors, Ewen explained “can readily apply computing knowledge to all sorts of novel situations, across computing platforms and knowledge domains.” Ewen said that because the line between users and developers overlap in the Linux world, computer fluency is “more or less a natural learning outcome” of basing one’s academic computing in Linux during college. “UberStudent is very explicitly amplifying this factor among its users,” he added.

Ewen also said he hoped more academic institutions would reaffirm their mission to the public good by increasing their involvement in developing open source software and platforms. “In the long view, the funds they’ll save will be greater than the funds they might gain by patenting things,” he predicted.

For more information and to obtain UberStudent, go to <http://uberstudent.org/>.