



ADVENTURES in Foreign Language

The Newsletter of OWL Testing Software • Volume 4, Issue 3



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Happy Birthday to OWL! 10 Years of Excellence in Online Testing

By Michelle Zediker, Consultant, OWL Testing Software

Ten years ago, the co-founders of OWL Testing Software knew that they were looking at a proposition that could change the face language learning. The small Pittsburgh-based software firm was approached by the world languages coordinator at the largest metropolitan public school district in southwestern Pennsylvania with an unusual request. The district was looking to create a new kind of computer-based assessment tool. They were looking to accomplish more than simply turning their well-worn standardized tests into a computerized document -- simply replacing the pencil with a mouse click. They wanted to evaluate their students with a new type of standardized test. This type of test would focus on how students use language in a practical way -- by speaking it. In short, they were looking for a computer-based oral proficiency tool. This technical and educational challenge represented the inception of OWL Testing Software.

The Hatching of an Idea

In 2000, when OWL co-founders, Chris Dalessandri and Irwin Hurst, started the first proof of concept of what would become OWL Testing Software, they knew they were far ahead of what was being done commercially. At the time, little consideration was given to Web-based platforms for assessment. Most software reviewers did not even consider oral response or listening comprehension examples.



To differentiate their product, the OWL team started by focusing on what was hard, what no one else was doing, oral proficiency interview-type assessments. The founders collaborated closely with that first public school customer to work through the difficulties and the test management issues over the next 2 years.

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Happy Birthday to OWL !

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Their goal was to leverage the Web to make online practice and assessment an integral part of the language-learning environment.

From this initial platform, the software was developed into a commercial product that was installed onsite at few additional school districts. As any young company learning to fly knows, some hard lessons can be learned when spreading your wings. Nevertheless, Chris and Irwin used these lessons to improve the initial versions of the software, OWL v.1.0 and OWL v. 2.0. These initial versions were based upon ActiveX technology, which required users to have Microsoft's Internet Explorer exclusively for their Web browser.

Soaring Toward Excellence

In 2004, the OWL team made a strategic decision to rewrite OWL from the ground up. It was a monumental task requiring hundreds of hours of design meetings and planning sessions. They were very ambitious with OWL v. 3.0. They included many more question types and thousands of new features as well as the ability to accommodate multiple Web browsers.

Thankfully, that investment has really paid off. Today, OWL version 3.0 is an entirely Web-based, comprehensive test management system. It is available as a subscription service or as a site-installed application. There is no software to manage or install on users' computers, so OWL customers are able to start building their online test and question bank almost immediately. Users can easily integrate audio, video and picture files to customize their tests for their specific learning application. For customers who wish to participate in the OWL Community Library, a wealth of already built online test items are available to jumpstart their online assessment program.

OWL's comprehensive approach to the assessment cycle gives users efficiencies and convenience at every step.

Features like automatic randomization, test sharing, automatic item scoring, auto messaging, online rating and online reporting allow administrators to manage their entire assessment program with more expediency and control. For site-installed users, OWL can be integrated with a student record system providing still further efficiency.

An added benefit for educational users, OWL can be a tool for improving assessment at every level. When OWL is used by instructors to rate their own students, there is a 'wash-back effect' that helps to improve instruction. By using OWL's data collection, reporting and analysis on an individual activity at the student, teacher, class and institutional or district level, OWL customers can access performance data and improve instruction at every level.

Flying in the Face of Today's Challenges

Some things have remained constant for the company over the past ten years. Potential customers still want a high degree of capability from their testing solution and they want it FREE. However, at OWL Testing Software, they have found that organizations often fail to consider the real costs of an open-source solution. Organizations often consume valuable time trying to piece together multiple computerized solutions to meet assessment needs. An institution can quickly lose sight of their original goals when they become entangled in an assessment cycle that is at best inefficient and unpredictable.

That is why it is more important than ever to spread the OWL message. OWL is a singular, well-engineered and well-supported, tool that can meet ALL the assessment cycle needs. OWL customers know that is worth paying for a superior alternative to a patched together, open-source solution. OWL enables customers to focus on what is important, learning and assessment, not software development.

According to Chris, "Many times a potential customer will ask, 'How long have you been in business?' Why do they ask this question? Because they are looking for stability."

Mr. Dalessandri continues, "When I engage with a Chief Technical Officer or a legal representative at an organization, they are not asking about open source. They want to know that we can support them and train their staff. Moreover, they want to know if we are going to be around three years from now when their license expires. These are assurances that you can't get from free software."

A Wiser OWL

Today, OWL has developed into a flexible platform that meets needs well beyond traditional high-stakes testing. Unlike most pre-packaged language learning systems, OWL is being applied to a multitude of learning scenarios across a variety of organizations. OWL users include government organizations, not-for-profit groups, corporations and educational institutions.

In addition to educational applications, like online language learning and assessment, OWL is used for instructor pre-screening and rater evaluations. Some universities use OWL for graduate student self-placement and teaching assistant qualification. OWL Testing Software also is used for professional certifications and pre-employment screening.

Now the challenge for the OWL team is to maintain their competitive edge technologically as well as educationally. The OWL development team is constantly working with their customers and partners to find even more ways to improve online learning and assessment around the world. They are always looking for new pathways to integrate learning and new tools for assessing competencies.

While the Chris and Irwin may not be able to say what OWL will look like in ten more years, one thing is certain. The impetus for innovation will come not from within the OWL team, but from OWL users. At OWL Testing Software, they know that any customer inquiry could be the technical and educational challenge becomes the next innovation in online testing. It is that customer focus that differentiates OWL Testing Software in today's software development environment. It is what makes choosing OWL an investment in the future of your online testing program.



Perspective on Product:

OWL Version 3.7

With OWL version 3.7, users have even more ways to expand testing capabilities. OWL's goal is to empower our customers by continually providing better ways to build and expand the use of Web-based technology in every aspect of learning and assessment. Now, with Automatic Notifications and Student Self-Registration, customers have more ways to communicate with their students.

Test Editor User Interface *enhanced*

OWL's latest version offers enhancements to the test authoring and editing user interface.

- 'Preview as a Student' Mode allows users to verify randomization and timing settings.
- OWL's Expanded Virtual Keyboard now supports more than 200 different languages.
- Alternative Test and Section Titles allows users to save work using a desired naming convention while providing an alternative for the test taker to view.

Translation Task *new*

OWL's new Translation Task, shown below, offers expanded capabilities to address the unique needs of accessing a test taker's translation abilities.

- Display longer amounts of text
- Test takers can compose their translation responses in a larger frame

Student Self Registration *new*

Save valuable administrative time by allowing students to register themselves for a test. This can save OWL users time in administering:

- Placement Tests
- Self Assessments
- Certification Exams

Automatic Notifications & Customized Message Templates *new*

Now users can improve communications by creating customized message templates AND OWL can be set up to generate messages automatically based on OWL system events. Read more about automatic messaging in "Focus on Features" on the back page.



Spotlight on Relationships:

NYU-SCPS chooses OWL Testing Software

NYU SCPS
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

This fall, New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies (NYU-SCPS) will begin using OWL in two departments within the Division of Liberal Studies and Allied Arts—the American Language Institute and the Foreign Languages, Translation, and Interpreting Program. NYU-SCPS is NYU's fourth largest graduate school and fifth largest undergraduate college and is widely known as one of the most respected post-baccalaureate continuing education programs in the United States.

The American Language Institute will be using OWL for unauthenticated assessment. English as a Second Language (ESL) students will use the Web-based software to self-assess their English-speaking ability.

The results will enable students to make better choices about placement decisions. The Foreign Languages, Translation, and Interpreting Program will be using OWL for assessing graduate-level candidates' translation capabilities. The results of these authenticated assessments will factor into the department's placement process.

"The department directors have similar goals but different means for achieving them. We were searching for one online solution that was not only affordable but also flexible enough to meet the distinctive needs and challenges of language teaching for our two different programs. We found OWL to be an exceptional way to address their specific needs."

Patrick Miller
Chief Information
and Technology Officer
NYU-SCPS

For more information on NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies, visit www.scps.nyu.edu.

Visit the OWL pressroom to read the latest news about OWL Testing Software: <http://www.owlts.com/news.html>

The screenshot displays the OWL testing interface for a translation task. At the top, there is a timer showing 'Item Time: 56' and a 'Please think about your answer now' prompt. Below this, the task is titled 'Don Quixote Oral Response' and includes a 'Recorder' icon and a 'Ready' button. The task text reads: 'In your own words, explain the phrase "chasing at windmills". Be sure to include in your description:'. Below the task text is a virtual keyboard with a 'Type normally on your keyboard or point and click.' prompt. The interface also shows a 'Section 1' tab and a 'Section' dropdown menu.



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Special 10th Birthday Edition

*Happy Birthday!! Wishing OWL
many, many more such days! OWL
enables a quantity of assessments to
be economically feasible.*

Richard Bingham, KIOSK

*Happy B-day to OWL from CSI!!!
Valeria Belmonti, Director, Modern
Languages Media Center*

*Department of Modern Languages
College of Staten Island/CUNY*

*Happy Birthday!! OWL makes
assessment and practice accessible
from practically anywhere.*

Thekla Fall,

World Language Consultant

Focus on Features:

Automatic Notification

New in OWL v. 3.7, the Automatic Notification feature allows customers to set their OWL assignments to automatically generate e-mails to any user that has an e-mail address in OWL -- students, raters, or even the assignment creator them self. These e-mails can be triggered by events, such as 'Assigning a Test' or a 'Completing an Assignment.' OWL's message builder includes easy-to-use drop down menus for selecting targeted recipients and events.

There are many opportunities to use Automatic Notification to improve communication and efficiency throughout the assessment cycle. For example, a test administrator may be alerted when someone registers for a test. Test raters can receive an e-mail when a test is ready to rate. OWL also can be set to send a test taker an e-mail allowing them to review their grade or rating.

The Automatic Notification feature can be further customized by creating message templates using OWL system variables and target language text. In this way, each recipient can receive a personalized message including, for example, his or her name and test score and a greeting in the targeted language.

Currently, Automatic Notification is limited to e-mail. Future messaging options are expected to include messaging via text (SMS) and Twitter™.

