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Learning the easy way

Educating via a CD can yield results, as an experiment shows, writes Frederick Noronha

SPOON-FEEDING may be a term with unpleasant connotations. But a South Indian Linux guru has compiled a 'teaspoonful' of training that could make it easy to understand and master the world's best-known 'free' OS (operating system) that has many advantages and yet can also be difficult to get started on.

Could this point to a better way in which to learn, not just computers?

'Linux in a teaspoon' is a CDROM collection of tutorial material from among the best in the world. "The title... exploits the metaphor of 'spoon-feeding'," says the two-man team of compilers behind this interesting product. Version 3 of this product has been recently released by Algologic Research and Solutions, based in Secunderabad.

(Linux, or more accurately GNU/Linux, is a package of computer applications and an operating system, which functions as an alternative to Microsoft Windows or Apple's MacOS. Linux can replace Windows on your computer desktop, or Windows NT on your server.)

Now, the two co-authors promise that this CD-ROM could be "your introduction to the magic of GNU/Linux". Many users of this alternative Operating System, which is now taking even the business-world by storm, swear by its efficiency once they get started on using it. But getting started can be tough...

Put together by Grenoble-educated engineering doctorate holder S Parthasarathy and a young GNU developer Raghuram, this could be a useful product.

On the CD are compiled over 40 full-length text books and over 200 'HOWTO' documents covering every aspect of Linux in, what they authors call "a profound but readable style". It also includes over 120 mini- HOWTOs and 'tons' of tutorial material, plus numerous links and pointers to more resources on the world wide web. (HOWTOs are the volunteer drafted documents that offer tips on various aspects of Linux.)

To put this together, the team had to compile over 17,000 files in over 3,000 directories. They merged this all in a single, easy-to-use top-level navigational index. Its price is a modest Rs 300.

Dr Partha's style is interesting. In the 'homepage' of the CDROM, he provokes the reader, suggesting you "do not read" the material that follows if you believe in certain "myths" about Linux.

For instance, he says, stay off this CD if you believe Linux is no fun. Or if you buy the argument that Linux is hard to install. To counter these myths, detailed answers are offered.

This CD includes some very useful guides -- books already published abroad, and often reproducible freely under GNU or other licenses. This is quite unlike restrictive copyright policies that could make information un-affordable and out of reach of the Third World.

Some of this CD's material includes the Simple Users' Guide for Linux, Learning Linux from Scratch, Learn Unix, and the much-appreciated RUTE to Linux.

Other myths that Dr Partha systematically demolishes are: Linux is not manageable (by yourself). There are no applications software for Linux. Linux is just a black box. Linux is no good for real-time systems and embedded systems. The CD-ROM seems to be an interesting model of sharing its resources while still building up a route to earn the money that will keep up the company's bottom-line. This firm also offers paid training to those who need it.

Comments young co-author Raghuram: "Linux means Freedom, freedom of thought and freedom of using it according to your requirement. It's a way of life and once you are addicted you cannot change it, rather you wont feel like using any other operating system." He believes Linux makes one concentrate "on skills rather than on your benefits". For the latter will surely "come your way" if you deserve it. This CD-ROM could go quite some way to build up awareness about Linux in India -- a country with ambitions of becoming a software superpower, where 'free' and open source software is attractive for many reasons, one being that it is affordable and piracy-free.

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