Learning and Teaching Repositories – the Personal Touch
(Report from the Worcester symposium: *Learning and teaching repositories – is this the last chance?*)

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Common philosophy behind current repository developments

The symposium brought together a wide cross section of people working on the development of learning and teaching repositories – institutional, subject specific and national repositories, covering both open source and commercial software. Putting together our experience created a comprehensive view of the current state of repository development, and our report sets out the current philosophy underlying much of the work we are doing.

We are all aware that the uptake of the use of learning and teaching repositories in universities in recent years has been terribly poor in comparison with that of research repositories. The approach taken clearly did not meet the needs of lecturers; most contemporary developments have now taken a fresh new approach. In many ways this is a second chance, some would say the last chance for the use of repositories to take off. But what are the new ideas which we all hope will make the difference? At our meeting we discovered that despite the variety of types of repository being built there is indeed a set of common values and features which characterise the present new direction.

The personal touch

The strongest new theme to emerge is a change of focus from the resources to the tutors themselves. This change presents itself in many different ways. It has become very common for everyone to cut down the amount of metadata which tutors have to put in when submitting items to their repository. A title and some basic information, including access levels, plus optional description and keywords/tags is all that's required in most cases, thus greatly reducing the previous metadata schemes. As a result, users play a major part in deciding the categories and information for browsing and searching. Sharing and making material public is no longer put forward as the main reason for uploading resources to institutional repositories, instead the repository is presented as a place where people can organise their material to suit their own professional needs, with options for further sharing.

Naturally those of us developing repositories do hope that sharing behaviour will indeed evolve, as the benefits of sharing become more fully appreciated. Many repository systems involve tools for community building; these features will encourage networking, such as the opportunity to make comments on other people's resources and the provision of a personal "profile" page for each user to showcase their material which enables others to discover further resources by looking at a particular individual's collection.

All this is of course inspired by the success of Web 2.0 systems such as YouTube, Flickr and MySpace; many repository concepts now reflect this personal approach. However it is not simply a matter of "having a go" with a Web 2.0 approach, most of the changes we now see are the result of feedback from earlier repository pilots where lecturers conveyed their dismay at filling in lots of formal metadata and found that the model of building a library-style collection for other people to browse did not fit in with the immediate day to day priorities of organising their materials and making them available to their students.

A second theme within the current style of repository development is to pay close attention to the way in which tutors work. Research repositories provide tutors with the tools to publish their papers and make them widely available, the reader of the publications being other researchers. In contrast, the material in a learning and teaching repository is written in different way, its immediate purpose is to be used in teaching, and most material is to be read by directly by students. Therefore current projects use a range of ideas to ensure that their repository fits in with tutors' needs. Some have set up integration with the VLE so that material in the repository can be readily linked to the VLE or that uploading to the VLE also uploads to the repository. Many of us have introduced a "preview" of resources rather than relying on textual descriptions; tutors browsing through can see at a glance what each resource looks like. Ease of use is at a premium. The items in the repository are usually simple files rather than learning object content packages. Files have individual urls set up in such a way they can be used from VLEs or from e-portfolio systems, web pages, whatever the tutor is using to communicate with their students.

Most current teaching and learning repositories are not mediated, that is, users are entrusted to populating the repository and using it as they see fit. Advocacy reinforces the central role of the teacher with invitations to "manage your resources more effectively", "create a digital home for your materials", "share if appropriate to your needs", "link your resources to other online systems", "all in one place, but with access to

many", "create a showcase of your work", "enhance your reputation", "make contacts with others working in the same field". The repository is being presented to lecturers as a working tool to make their job easier but which can also be used to enhance their profile within the university.

Spectrum of repositories

A third theme is the emergence of a spectrum of repositories, perhaps reflecting the complexity of the nature of learning and teaching and the different ways tutors fit in to a range of institutional and national networks. Developers have seen the need to create repositories which suit particular purposes best rather than struggle to use one standard system for every need. At one end of the spectrum is the institutional repository, designed with features and regulations ideal for that particular university. Contribution would normally be restricted to staff in that university or possibly its partners, though of course the advantage of an institutional repository is that the university can declare its own rules. Material could be kept private to individuals or made public, according to the author's wishes and items would be made available for students via VLE or some other mechanism. Usually such a repository would be used across all subject areas, though there are repositories which cater for a specific subject – a departmental repository. There is a fine line between a departmental subject repository and one further across the spectrum which is open to contributions at a national level for a particular subject area. Subject repositories have the advantage of bringing together subject specialists and reinforcing their professional network. Clearly subject repositories are designed for sharing, so participants have to be willing to make their material available and to join in the networking, that's the whole point. At the far end of the spectrum would be a national or international repository where material is published worldwide. This represents a much greater level of sharing, though it would more strongly enhance an author's reputation, and eventually provide a large-scale source of resources for others. Rules and regulations for using such repositories are of course fixed by the organisers and users have less control over how things are run. Such repositories are a key part of the Open Educational Resources movement which is presently heavily promoted by the government, by HEFCE and by JISC.

Further features

As part of the desire to provide users with useful services, there is also a range of further features being tried in specific systems rather than across the board. Such things include, alerts, RSS feeds, federated searches, using the repository as a media player, allowing optional, generating automatic metadata, auto tagging, linking to single sign on, allowing comments and ratings, linking to social networking, Twitter, blogs, and to VLEs – all of which are different ways of trying to make usage both easy and helpful.

Conclusion

Our symposium revealed a rich and varied approach to development of learning and teaching repositories though all working to a common philosophy of putting people first, empowering users and meeting their professional needs across a spectrum of institutional, subject and national levels.

Appendix
Contributions

Institutional repositories
- The *Worcester Learning Box Repository Project*, University of Worcester focuses on tutors and their working environment. It uses open source software from Southampton University. **Andrew Rothery**, **Viv Bell**, and **Mark Adams**
- The *Open University LORO Project* supports its modern languages team. Uses similar software to above. **Anna Comas-Quinn**
- Coventry University's *Repository for the Virtual Environment* uses *Equella* linked to *Moodle*. **Andy Syson**
- University of Aston also uses *Equella* but linked to *Blackboard*. **Sarah Hayes**
- The *Research Archive and Digital Asset Repository* at Oxford Brookes combines research and learning and teaching using *Equella,* and also links to *Blackboard*. **Rowena Rouse**
- The Nottingham Trent University *Supporting, Advancing and Harnessing Repository Enhancement Project* uses *Desire2Learn*. **Trevor Pull**

Repositories across universities
- *Scotland's Colleges* group share a community repository based on *Intrallect*. **Jackie Graham**.
- The *Humbox Project* uses similar software to WLBR and LORO to provide a repository for the national humanities community. **Sarah Hayes**,
- The *TRIBE, Intute and Google Scholar Evaluation Report* provides advice on resource sharing in the context of Business and Management. **Steve Probert**
- The *Xpert Project* has designed and implemented a national/international type of repository which gives links to items held in other repositories and updated by RSS feeds. **Pat Lockley**
- *JorumOpen* is placed as the leading UK repository for outputs from projects as well as individual tutors. It will have an important role in the *Open Educational Resources* movement. **Matt Ramirez**

Support for repository development
- The *OneShare Project* at the University of Southampton is bringing together open source software from projects such as *WLBR, LORO, Humbox, LanguageBox* and *EdShare* to create a repository linked to and supported by *EPrints*. **Yvonne Howard**
- JISC is supporting, or has supported the start-up of, a huge range of projects including many of those listed above: *WLBR, LORO, Humbox,RADAR, SHARE, Xpert, JorumOpen, OneShare*. The JISC-funded *Repositories Support Project* supports repository development across the UK. **Andy McGregor**

Views from the users
- **John Poulton**, **Libby Symonds**, and **Pete Maggs** provide the viewpoint from those about to set up or launch a learning and teaching repository.

The report is not so much research findings but represents an overview of the views of the individuals present based on their experience and that of the colleagues they work with.

The *Worcester Symposium* was held on 24 March 2010 sponsored by the *Worcester Learning Box Repository Project* and JISC. Details of the event and some of the presentations can be found at:
http://wlbrproject.wordpress.com/learning-and-teaching-repositories-is-this-the-last-chance/