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Auditing the office for learning and teaching resource library

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Auditing the office for learning and teaching resource library

Abstract

The Australian government Office for Learning and Teaching's (OLT) Resource Library is a key means of disseminating the outcomes from projects funded by itself and its predecessor organisations, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and the Carrick Institute. In order to apply the recommendations and resources emanating from these projects, it is vital that educators and other stakeholders are aware of, and effectively able to use, the Resource Library. Based on anecdotal evidence indicating a lack of awareness of the Resource Library and problems with consistently being able to search for and retrieve relevant resources from the database, the OLT commissioned a project to formally evaluate the Library and redesign it to improve access and usability. This paper reports on the project's progress, including the results from a questionnaire completed by 117 higher education stakeholders.

Keywords

office, auditing, learning, library, teaching, resource

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Auditing the Office for Learning and Teaching Resource Library

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The Australian government Office for Learning and Teaching's (OLT) Resource Library (<http://www.olt.gov.au/resources>) is a key means of disseminating the outcomes from projects funded by itself and its predecessor organisations, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and the Carrick Institute. In order to apply the recommendations and resources emanating from these projects, it is vital that educators and other stakeholders are aware of, and effectively able to use, the Resource Library. Based on anecdotal evidence indicating a lack of awareness of the Resource Library and problems with consistently being able to search for and retrieve relevant resources from the database, the OLT commissioned a project to formally evaluate the Library and redesign it to improve access and usability. This paper reports on the project's progress, including the results from a questionnaire completed by 117 higher education stakeholders.

Keywords: office for learning and teaching, resources, library

Background

The Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) provides considerable amounts of funding to a wide range of projects that result in important outcomes for the higher education sector in Australia and beyond. The dissemination of these outcomes, and of the outcomes of the projects funded by the OLT's predecessor organisations, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and the Carrick Institute, is therefore an important activity. The OLT's Resource Library (<http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-library>), publicly available on its website, is the key means of addressing this challenge

Approach

Overview

The project described in this paper is applying methods developed in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) to establish how the various existing and prospective resources in the OLT Resource Library

should be described, so that they can be accessed more effectively. The resource attributes that end-users would want to employ for finding and selecting materials have been identified. Additionally, the values that best represent these attributes have been determined, according to the fundamental criteria of recall, precision, intelligibility and cost on the part of both indexers and end-users (Kelly, 2009). The metadata schema (i.e. list of attributes), and taxonomies (i.e. sets of values) needed to support the schema have been derived on the basis of both user and literary warrant (Hider, 2012, p. 160). In other words, both the prospective users of the resources and the resources themselves have been consulted, so that they may be connected with each other using a 'common language'. The project is being conducted by a team of academics and librarians from Charles Sturt University, the University of Wollongong and the Australian Council for Education Research. It is due to be completed in June 2015.

Phases

The project consists of the following seven phases:

- Phase 1: attribute identification through (a) examination of resources, (b) analysis of transaction logs, and (c) end user online questionnaire (reported in this paper);
- Phase 2: evaluation of existing keywords, through experimentation using search queries from (b) and (c) above;
- Phase 3: evaluation of existing taxonomies for possible adoption, using criteria based on international standards;
- Phase 4: creation of new taxonomies and development of existing taxonomies, through user studies and usability testing;
- Phase 5: writing of indexing guide;
- Phase 6: re-indexing of database resources and a sample of external resources; and
- Phase 7: system evaluation and analysis of existing resources' coverage.

Project outcomes

The project aims to deliver a new database for the OLT that will provide improved access to existing and future content in the Resource Library. As a set of indexing tools, the metadata schema, taxonomies and guide will also be made available for application in other databases and architectures providing access to higher education resources. The final project report will also include recommendations concerning software and hardware options to support the database into the future, and around the scope of the database itself, as a repository.

Progress

Questionnaire design

For the first phase of the project, a questionnaire was developed using Survey Monkey and piloted with a small group of academics. Following further refinement, it was disseminated to a wide range of higher education stakeholders across Australia, in April-May this year. Both users and non (but prospective) users of the Resource Library were invited to complete the survey, which included the following questions:

- Which of the institutions below is your main employer?
- How long have you been working in higher education?
- Which of the following disciplines best describes your teaching area?
- Have you ever received an award, grant, citation etc. from the OLT or from either of its predecessors, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) or the Carrick Institute?
- On how many occasions in the past three years, would you estimate that you have searched the OLT's Resource Library (<http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-library>)?
- In the past three years, what have you searched the database for?
- Did you find what you were looking for?
- How easy did you find it to search the database?
- Do you think you might want to search the database at some point in the future?
- Please describe, as concretely as possible, a future search query (including particular search terms) you might wish to conduct in the database:
- Which of the following fields would be useful in your searching of the database?

Respondents were given the opportunity to go into a draw for an Apple iPad Air and were also invited to leave their name and contact details if they wished to receive a copy of the final report from the project, and to indicate if they would be interested in participating in a later phase of the project. Ethics approval was obtained from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Questionnaire responses

One hundred and seventeen responses were received from respondents at 32 universities and six other employers. The majority (80%) of respondents had been working in higher education for over 10 years, with 40% having done so for over 20 years. When asked about their teaching discipline, 25 respondents indicated that they did not identify with any particular discipline because they were non-teaching staff (for example, staff in learning and teaching leadership or support roles). Of those who nominated a teaching discipline, by far the largest group (48%) was from the education discipline. This is likely to include staff in centralised learning and teaching services roles (for example teaching courses on university teaching for academic staff of the institution) as well as education faculty staff. The majority (59%) of respondents indicated that they had received an OLT award or grant (or a similar award or grant from a predecessor organisation).

Most respondents (80%) reported that they had searched the OLT Resource Library in the past. Around half of the respondents had searched the Resource Library quite frequently (e.g. 22% had searched the library more than 30 times in the past 3 years, and 47% had searched it more than 10 times). This provides support for the importance of the Library. The majority of respondents (79%) indicated that they had searched for both resources from particular projects already known and for resources from certain kinds of projects. Respondents were asked to elaborate about why they had searched the Library and these open-ended responses were categorised and grouped. Based on this categorisation, 19 respondents were found to have searched the library for project reports from specific projects, 16 had searched for information to support planned grant applications, and 13 had searched for teaching/practice resources. Other categories of searches frequently undertaken included information for colleagues (11), information on specific topics (11) and information for a literature review (8). It is interesting to note the wide range of purposes for which the Library is used. It is also interesting to note the number of respondents who indicated that they used the Resource Library to locate resources or information on behalf of colleagues.

Respondents who indicated that they had searched the Resource Library in the past were asked whether they found what they were looking for in these searches. Only just over half of the respondents indicated that they either always (4%) or mostly (49%) found what they were looking for, with a large proportion (40%) indicating that they had done so only sometimes, and a smaller number either rarely (6%) or never (1%) finding what they were looking for. Respondents who indicated that they had searched the Resource Library in the past were asked how easy they found it to search the database. A substantial minority found it quite difficult (42%) or very difficult (6%) to search the Library, with a slight majority finding it quite easy (49%) or very easy (3%). These results provide strong support for the need for improvements to the Resource Library.

Respondents were also asked whether they thought they might want to search the database at some point in the future and 90% indicated that they did. Responses to the question asking for a description of a specific search that might be undertaken included a wide range of different searches. Analysis of these responses has contributed towards the refinement of the database schema in the initial phase of the project. In response to the question asking which of a list of fields would be useful in searches (Keywords, Resource title, Project title, Author(s), Year published, Lead institution, Discipline, and Resource type) more than 50% indicated that they would use each, with the exception of Lead institution, which only 37% said they would find useful. Respondents were also asked to provide additional feedback. Table 1 summarises the key themes emerging from an analysis of these responses.

Table 1. Themes identified within responses to the question asking for additional feedback

Theme	Frequency	Examples
Improvements	24	<i>Anything that can be done would be an improvement because the present set up is very clunky. At the moment I think twice before referring an inexperienced colleague to this resource.</i>
Suggestions for our project	6	<i>It would be nice to see the resource library built on the basis of research evidence with some form of user acceptance testing.</i>
Promote awareness	3	<i>Be nice to know more about what it is!</i>
Positive about repository usability	3	<i>It is very easy to use and when I introduce new staff to the resource library, they are amazed at the ease with which information appears...eg: keywords</i>
Importance	2	<i>The OLT resource database is an important repository of information for academics working in higher education in the Australian context.</i>
Feedback to OLT	2	<i>The format of OLT reports does not lend itself to clear provision of information.</i>

Many responses provided suggestions for improvements to the Resource Library. The following are some additional examples of the areas for improvement identified:

- Improve the search interface, for example by allowing predictive text and wildcards, by improving the filtering system and by ensuring that the advanced search includes the full range of attributes;
- Include a wider range of elements as searchable resources within the database, including projects in progress, upcoming events, and successful award and grant applications;
- Differentiate more clearly between types of resources such as guidelines, reports and project descriptions;
- Allow online feedback and other kinds of social interaction, as well as notification of updates for example using RSS feeds;
- Make it easier to link from other sites, to share links to resources within the database and to export search results as pdfs;
- Improve the display of search results, for example by displaying a brief description and providing an option to expand;
- Standardise keywords in project, fellowship and resource listings;
- Use Google search capabilities within the system;
- Check and update external links; and
- Provide links to similar libraries.

Where to next

Based on an analysis of the existing resources and drawing on the results of the survey, we have finalised a revised schema for the Resource Library database, the first step of the database redesign. After establishing the extent to which this new schema can be implemented in the current system, vocabularies for certain elements (e.g. subject) will be developed, and a guide to the use of the schema and vocabularies will be written. This will be used to re-index the existing resources, after which an audit will be conducted based on this reclassification. It is anticipated that the audit will reveal some gaps where more projects might be awarded, as well as strengths where a number of projects have contributed valuable learning and resources. It is hoped that users of the new Resource Library will have less difficulty in retrieving these valuable resources.

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