

Supporting the ‘sharing institution’ – practical steps towards a more open teaching and learning culture

Institutional repositories for research output have developed progressively over the last few years. Although a primary motivation is Open Access both institutional and academic needs must also be met in order to foster this spirit effectively. There is now a greater emphasis on creating a more open culture for teaching and learning and institutions are again beginning to play their part more readily. On a larger scale, there are pioneering global examples of courses being preserved and complex learning materials being deposited in national and international databases. But what does fostering a more open culture in the practice of teaching mean for the institution itself and its academics? The virtual learning environment has given greater opportunities for effective administration of courses but in other ways it has had the opposite effect on sharing and re-use. There is potential for institutional solutions which are complementary to the global landscape.

In this paper we report on the practical experiences and issues met, in setting up a institutional resource, EdShare, as a vehicle for sharing educational materials more easily in a multi-disciplinary institution. With constructive feedback from faculty, within the EdSpace project, EdShare has migrated into a more visual, web 2.0 style, resource with a flexible deposit process promoting ‘micro-sharing’. It now offers a range of sharing options to support the teaching workflow in an encouraging atmosphere. Other features will support the growing emphasis on multidisciplinary teaching and collaboration – both internally and externally.

The context

The early priorities of institutional repositories have frequently been on research outputs although these are not the only valuable assets of universities and other institutions. At the University of Southampton, in the UK, we have been developing the Research Repository (e-Prints Soton) since 2004, to showcase the research output and to make it more accessible. As a significant next step, the University took the strategic decision to develop a repository for educational materials. This contributes to the overarching vision for repositories within the University to link more deeply the products and activities of both scholarship and research.

In October 2007 JISC funded an Institutional Exemplar Project named EdSpace at the university to develop and explore our ideas. Since the key concept is ‘sharing’, the resource became known as EdShare and the deposits are known as shares. The system was intended

to be easy to use, lightweight, nimble and sustainable. The intention is to be simple in design and to present only a very low threshold for adding content.

In the not so distant past, students accessed course materials via the library's Reserve Course collection boxes which were open to anyone. A lecturer could also easily find previous or related lecture notes and reading lists to build on to prepare for the next course. The University has used the Blackboard software system since 2000 as a means of delivering a large percentage of its electronic access to course content. This Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) however, has limited potential collaboration, sharing and visibility of educational resources. Content is generally accessible only to those registered for a specific course with which they are associated. We wanted people in different faculties, from across the institution, to be able to view, comment on, re-use, tailor and contribute to development of the content. These individuals might be in a range of roles: developing, designing, delivering and supporting educational materials, resources and processes. From these activities there could emerge new collaborations, groups or interests to enrich the student experience further.

Developing EdShare

We are using the well-established EPrints repository software currently deployed worldwide by over 250 repository applications. However, EdShare is situated in a community with additional needs and now more accustomed to social features from YouTube, Flickr, Amazon and other sites with a more visual and participative approach. This progression provided an opportunity to take a fresh look and tailor appropriately for learning and teaching. The repository interface was therefore modified in a series of stages through continuous dialogue between the administrative and technical teams and the early adopters and steering group.

The interface was developed to put more emphasis on the materials themselves than on the metadata. It was enhanced by presenting more useful previews of the growing range of materials – audio, video, slides, images – as well as the more traditional documents presented in research repositories. The items were often more likely to be small scale rather than full blown learning packages - perhaps usefully explained as micro-sharing. The metadata threw up many challenges compared to research papers – even as basic as ‘what should the title be?’ ‘Who created it?’ The upload process accommodated files, web links and bulk uploads and there were unfamiliar file formats to understand and manage. The deposit process was simplified to the minimum to encourage active use as materials were being created. It was linked to the university systems from the beginning to allow a simple logon and to capture user metadata. A simple drop down box showed the previous keywords used to help with tagging consistency.

A set of access permissions was generated to enable sharing options wanted by our users. They range across the spectrum of Just me, Selected users, My school, University, and the World. These give options for sharing according to the maturity of the material and copyright considerations. They give a place to store, organise and collaborate, at early stages, with colleagues both inside and outside the institution. However, the Open Access option is there for full sharing, using Creative Commons licences. Each share has a publicly viewable page with an option to 'request a copy'. This can encourage external people to contact depositors and for them to open up their content to the world. We hope that this might generate future champions who see genuine benefits for themselves in greater sharing.

Working with Faculty

We talked to schools with related interests such as Oceanography, Geography and Mathematics. They saw clear opportunities for being aware of and for making use of each other's material in overlapping subjects, the current separation magnified by separate physical campuses. Service teaching for other departments was identified as another natural opportunity for EdShare. MATLAB was an example of software used or taught in different departments but generally hidden in their silos. It was, however, more characteristic of Mathematics to create documents using LaTeX rather than Word – a necessary practical consideration for re-use. Geography saw obvious opportunities for making visible learning materials they had created and wanted to house in a secure place for sharing with a broader community. Another potential need was for maintaining access for students of different disciplines to materials from previous courses.

Other opportunities which were identified were in more generic teaching such as academic integrity, information skills and research methods. Both generic and departmental materials could be repurposed by others and were early examples of 'shares' created in EdShare. Examples of advice or good practice in the use of tools for teaching such as zappers, or audience response systems, also were suggested at an early stage for sharing both within the institution and externally. The VLE was not a place that could showcase such useful experimentation. The department of Computer Science has started using EdShare for their new pioneering course in Web Science – it is easy for a group to build it up together – changing access permissions as materials mature. In this way, EdShare is being used as a proactive working environment rather than just a showcase for completed 'perfect' materials.

Academics also gave many ideas on features that would be useful to them. Recent additions to functionality such as notes, comments, profiles, and assistance with building collections, are aimed at engaging more active participation by depositors, collaborators and end users.

Looking forward

The EdSpace project comes to an end in March 2009 but EdShare is now strategically positioned for wider use, with key supporters in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, as well as the library and the lecturers themselves. The EdShare resource has been prepared to be a working service which, in future, can be managed in a lightweight way by core services such as the Library in collaboration with IT Services. Using valuable lessons learnt from developing a sustainable research repository, the university technical services and e-learning strategy group have been involved from the beginning. As the resource grows it will be instructive to track the usage of those requested features - added to enhance the organisation and exploitation of teaching and learning for the individual within his community. There is potential to improve the integration of EdShare with the Virtual Learning Environment, and other institutional systems such as intranets and portals to make workflow even simpler. Outside the university, there will be future collaboration with national open education initiatives such as the UK's Jorum service and other more global communities. At a more practical level, it is hoped that new 'teaching and learning' institutional repositories can draw from the experiences of the EdShare exemplar.

The foundations are there to encourage lecturers to be part of a broader community building on materials they were previously unaware of. We expect to see more evidence of multidisciplinary collaboration both within the institution and beyond as more participants join the early adopters. We are already getting queries from abroad for items which have, perhaps diffidently, been given access permissions of 'university only'. EdShare has been designed to give them the potential to showcase their work for others when they are ready to do so and gain feedback from others who have built on their endeavours. A more open culture of sharing can grow best when individuals within an institution can realise the real benefits in gathering, managing and sharing their learning and teaching materials for themselves and are furnished with an appropriate resource to enable this.

Note: The paper reports on the practical experiences of the EdSpace project, envisioned in our poster at OR08, in providing an early exemplar of an institutional repository EdShare directed at active sharing of teaching and learning. The full paper will give additional details of this case study with supporting illustrations and background references.

EdSpace <http://www.edspace.ecs.soton.ac.uk/>

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