Online repositories for e-learning: putting people first

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1.   INTRODUCTION

At the University of Worcester we have set up a new kind of online repository for learning and teaching. Rather than organising the learning materials by conventional metadata we have created the repository as a personal tool for teachers, allowing them to choose their own way of classifying their resources, and take control of access and sharing. The principles of this kind of repository were set out in a EUNIS2009 paper by Andrew Rothery and Sarah Hayes (2009). We present our implementation of these principles as an example of good practice.

2.   WORCESTER LEARNING BOX REPOSITORY

We have now set up such a repository at Worcester in collaboration with the University of Southampton as part of a JISC-funded project, Worcester Learning Box Repository Project (2010). The underlying software is also being used in a number of related developments at other universities; ours is an example of an approach being adopted in a number of universities in the UK. The design of the repository gives teachers autonomy in organising their materials and gives them a personal profile page presenting the resources they are happy to share. Others can browse the repository using the "tags" which authors have chosen to use. Alternatively they can look at each others' profiles and discover resources by a kind of social networking. Resources can be previewed by an in-built viewer and downloaded or linked-to as appropriate.

The University's previous repository was a more conventional one and totally unsuccessful in attracting users. We are now piloting the new replacement system and we are encouraged by the initial response.

3.   FEATURES OF LEARNING BOX

3.1. Profiles

Learning Box allows users to create personal profiles that can be read by other logged in users. The tutor profile includes: personal information, profile picture, institution, the owner's latest additions and most viewed items. When browsing the repository users who find items they are interested in can view the profile of the original creator and follow links to items of mutual interest. Communities of good practice can be forged between subject specialists.

3.2. Access Levels

Access levels are set by the system managers – in our system they have two choices: "private" or "open to all." The design of the system makes it easy to change this, however, and custom settings could be arranged to suit different uses.

3.3. Secret URL

There are a number of ways in which items can be viewed. The standard method is for teachers to search or browse the repository, find the item and then either Preview it or Download it. Another method is for creators to copy and paste the url of the item into an e-mail and send it to someone. If the item is "open to all" then the recipient just needs to click the link. The creator of the item can

choose either to send the link to the actual item or a link to the page in the repository. If they send a link to the page the recipient will have to have a repository account and login to see it. Secret url is a good method for creators of items to put links to their resources in another system, such as Blackboard or Moodle, where they can be viewed by students who do not have access to the full repository. In other words, the repository recognises that students will not view and browse the repository directly; items in a learning and teaching repository have to be made available to students via their e-learning systems.

3.4. Tags

Tags are defined by creators to attach keywords to items. Creators decide what tags, or keywords, they would like to give their item and these words appear in the "tag cloud". Users of the repository can see the tag cloud and click on it to find resources they might be interested in. Tags make the repository easier to search as they don't require users to do lots of browsing.

3.5. Collections

Collections give the individual tutor an easy way to manage their items into topics. Collections are similar to folders; the same item can appear in multiple collections without having to be uploaded more than once.

3.6. Searching and Browsing

Learning Box gives tutors the opportunity to search for items in a number of different ways. The advanced search is very detailed and presents the user with a form based on all the categories in the repository such as: creator, title, description, keyword, school and format. A basic search only asks for a keyword. Other methods include: looking through the "latest additions", using the Tag Cloud, or browsing for items that have been created by authors whose profiles the user might be interested in.

4. CONCLUSION

Earlier attempts to build e-repositories used structures similar to those found in repositories for research papers or for library collections. At Worcester we were not alone in finding this unsuitable for the purpose of managing learning resources created by tutors. The fresh approach has a minimum of compulsory metadata, simply author and title. Descriptions are optional, as are tags, which are composed entirely by the author; there is no externally imposed "metadata scheme". Everything is centred on the author giving them opportunities to organise their resources, to present them to other tutors and to make them readily accessible from student e-learning systems. Tutors can share resources and find them by searching or browsing through other tutors' profiles. We will be piloting the system April/May 2010 with full implementation across the university scheduled for September 2010.

Andrew Rothery is Senior Fellow in E-Learning in the Information and Learning Services department. Viv Bell is Technology Co-ordinator for the Hereford and Worcester Lifelong Learning Network and a lecturer in Computing. The authors are leading the Worcester Learning Box Repository project.

5. REFERENCES

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