

E-Learning Conference: Day 2

Finding, sharing and re-using online resources: Personalising the experience for the teacher and the learner

A series of workshops sponsored by the JISC-funded project L2O: Sharing Language Learning Objects

Workshop 1:

Share and Share Alike? Online language learning materials in a repository would you give as well as take?

Participants in this workshop had the opportunity to explore a newly-created, prototype repository of online learning materials and resources. The repository contains materials contributed by a number of different institutions, and this real-life, practical example of 'sharing in action' enabled participants to evaluate and re-assess their own attitudes to the sharing of online resources.

In a discussion which followed the investigation of the repository, participants were asked to consider this question:

What are the benefits and barriers to sharing online resources?

A summary of their ideas follows below:

Benefits

- Not re-inventing the wheel – workshop participants felt that sharing quality material saves time and allows practitioners to concentrate on creating new, unique material.
- The online materials within the repository are fresh and different – it is possible to 'give something a go' that you have perhaps not tried in your teaching before (other people have different ideas about how to teach certain points)
- Sharing pedagogy (this was felt to be particularly relevant to using and creating online materials – an area in which educators may be less experienced)
- Sharing good practice (particularly with reference to effective eLearning pedagogy and design, but also in relation to using online materials in the classroom or to support a course)
- A greater range of quality materials available to users than would otherwise be the case simply by searching on the internet
- Encourages collaboration with colleagues/other institutions rather than competition. In this respect, it is a move 'against the competitive re-purposing/corporate re-purposing of universities'

- Saves time – it takes a long time to create effective online learning resources and activities, and so a bank of ready-made materials is very appealing
- It is possible to edit and change materials quickly and easily, allowing for greater personalisation of resources, and thereby enhancing the student experience
- In such a repository, materials are quick and easy to find and access
- New copyright arrangements, such as Creative Commons, allows for materials to be shared and edited with creator-approval. On the subject of copyright, participants felt this could be both barrier (see below) and benefit, in the sense that digital copyright is currently so hard to be certain of, that a bank of copyright-friendly resources would be extremely appealing.

Barriers

- Lack of institutional support: Many participants felt that there was a lack of support for sharing within most institutions: they felt that as individuals, there was a desire to share, but that this was not encouraged on an institutional level where the emphasis is on retaining unique ideas in order to improve the institution's appeal to students (who are now increasingly seen as customers)
- Not invented here – this sentiment was reflected at an individual and institutional level. Many participants felt an instinctive trust in their own (or their own institution's) materials over those produced by someone else. There was also a suggestion (encouraged by institutions) that materials *should* be created in-house to make best use of existing knowledge and skills.
- Copyright – participants felt this to be an extremely problematic issue on a number of levels, not least the primary concern that institutions hold the copyright over materials created on their computers, so that even if a creator wanted to share material, their institution would be able to prevent this (should it choose to). Other concerns in this area were the lack of knowledge about digital copyright within the educational community and the lack of any 'test-cases' to help decide the law – would a creator of online material have to be certain of copyright on every single aspect of their material, e.g. pictures, audio recordings, texts and so on? At the moment, it seems that he/she would, and participants felt that this strongly inhibited sharing. The issue of uploading information to the repository was also raised – shouldn't creators set the level of copyright when they upload material? And shouldn't information on digital rights be available to downloaders/uploaders?
- Time constraints (in reference to uploading material to the repository). Currently, a resource must have a reasonably large amount of metadata attached to it in order for users to find the resource and be able to use it. This is relatively time-consuming.
- Is it applied research?

- Participants highlighted a lack of access to technology and a skills gap which prevents them from producing online materials and sharing with colleagues; and may prevent them from using a digital repository in the first place.
- Sustainability and maintenance: participants raised the question of who would administer and monitor the repository? They felt there was a need to keep materials up-to-date and refreshed, while contributing new resources.
- Too many similar resources: participants mentioned that due to the lack of a wide-range of online learning resources, materials might seem similar and repetitive to students. However, it was agreed that the number and variety of online resources was increasing all the time, and that in the future, this might not be so much of a concern.
- In specific relation to the prototype repository, participants mentioned problems with understanding how to download, unzip and use material. Facilitators explained that due to current technical capabilities in making 'content package' files, many of these difficulties cannot, at this moment, be avoided – but are being improved upon in subsequent projects. Participants also felt that more instruction was needed in the use of the repository – or perhaps a more intuitive interface was needed – in order to aid users in finding and accessing material.
- Quality of materials: participants felt that they would be willing to share if they could be certain of the quality of the materials within a particular repository; although it was agreed that what constitutes 'quality material' is subjective, and so perhaps a 'wide variety of materials' would be a more realistic aim, allowing practitioners to select appropriate material to their taste.
- Terminology: for some participants, the use of terminology such as 'repository' or 'pedagogical asset' was distracting, for others it was evident that such jargon was unavoidable.

Workshop 2:

Finding a needle in a hay stack: how the learning and teaching context helps you find the online learning materials you need

This workshop focussed on the need for effective resource descriptions – metadata – to enable educators to find appropriate resources. Participants evaluated existing ways of describing resources and then discussed how these might be improved with reference to the L₂₀ Project's findings on metadata. It became evident that description of the learning and teaching context was essential in effective resource description and discovery.

Participants raised some interesting questions about what 'metadata' is, *how* it should be recorded, and *who* should record it:

- Describing a resource is difficult to do - but extremely important since most search engines will search this field when attempting to locate a resource. There is a need for a precise description, probably including all keywords. However, there can be widely varying descriptions – even of the same resource – by different people because the description field is particularly open to subjective interpretation by the cataloguer/resource creator. How can we get consistency in the way that resources are described?
- This led to the question: who is the best person to catalogue or describe the resource? Creator or cataloguer? Generally, participants saw an ideal situation as being when a resource is jointly catalogued, so that the creator contributes their expertise in pedagogy and understanding of the learner context, and a cataloguer contributes their expertise and understanding of correct cataloguing procedures.
- However, some participants felt that the materials creator was too close to the material to describe it effectively, and that he/she may make assumptions about how the resource will be understood and used. This was felt to be particularly pertinent to describing possible further/other uses for the material (beyond the original teaching intention). Participants felt that this information was highly useful in order to share and re-use the resource. It was suggested that in the future, new technologies might be able to indicate 'further uses' or other metadata fields automatically, based on metadata already completed and stored knowledge of a teaching and learning taxonomy.
- Another area where the need for consistency and accuracy was felt to be imperative was the 'keyword' section. Participants suggested that a taxonomy would be very useful here.
- The workshop highlighted an aspect of metadata that had become clear as a result of the L20 Project, which was that good metadata informed good eLearning. The act of considering how best to describe a resource in precise and direct terms encourages the creator to think deeply about the pedagogical and practical nature of what they are creating. To this end, participants suggested that the process of thinking about the correct metadata to attach to a learning activity could be used as a tool in teacher training.

- In looking at the resource description fields for pedagogical assets which were chosen for the L2O Project, participants felt that there was a need for some indication of level. The problem of assigning any kind of level to a resource was discussed at some length: it was agreed that it was easier to assign level to a learning object because the tasks within it would have been created for a particular student group; however it was problematic for pedagogical assets, which have no inherent task. There was a clear need for an idea of level in order to guide teachers as to whether to consider the resource or not; however, language teachers are used to using all kinds of resources in a wide variety of contexts and tasks, and so a stark indication of level could actually be misleading and hinder resource usage. A suggestion to this dilemma was to describe the language in a more detailed way, e.g. 'a native speaker speaking at normal speed, using a high number of colloquialisms'. Participants agreed that there was no perfect solution that they could currently see.

- The workshop concluded with a discussion on whether metadata categories applied to describe a resource actually matched the kinds of terms that people use to search. It became clear that metadata arising from the creator's intentions might be different when we approach it from the angle of assisting in an automated search for resources. It was suggested that there is a need for technology-assisted ways of understanding the teacher taxonomy and automating searching, browsing and cataloguing to help practitioners to find effective resources efficiently.

Conclusion and comparison to the findings of the eLearning Symposium, 2005

The 2007 workshops looked at the issues surrounding the sharing and cataloguing of online resources from a practitioner's point of view. This stands in partial contrast to the focus groups on 'sharing' from the 2005 eLearning Symposium, held at Southampton, which took a broader, more theoretical and research-orientated view. Despite this, both workshops and focus groups highlighted similar, as yet unresolved issues in relation to the sharing of online material: namely, IPR concerns; a lack of skills to develop and make use of online material; time constraints arising from the creation and cataloguing of material, and the 'not invented here' syndrome. There was, nonetheless, across both Symposium and workshops, a strong desire to share materials – and a certainty that this would have a positive impact on education.

It is interesting to note that in some areas, little has changed over one year and practitioners are still grappling with the same issues that cause barriers to the sharing of material. However, it seems that there has been a subtle shift in emphasis: participants in the 2007 workshops are now actually having to confront and deal with these issues as part of their daily working life. This must be a cause of satisfaction for the eLearning community – that despite appearances, we are slowly, but inexorably moving from theory to practice.