

A multi functional regional digital repository for teaching higher education in further education colleges



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Introduction

There is a growing interest in the use of a *learning object economy* as a means to deliver high quality learning to students particularly in the post-16 educational sector. This is fuelled by, amongst other things, pressures to increase student numbers brought about by initiatives such as widening participation and lifelong learning, and student's expectations of high quality electronic learning. The reuse of learning objects is a means of making wider use of scarce and expensive resources. Crucial to this is finding an effective means for the storing, cataloguing and retrieval of materials.

At the same time, and at a more local level, the University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty (UPC) at the University of Plymouth has identified a need to develop a repository which will meet the needs of a regional partnership and is capable of storing a range of materials including:

- teaching materials that can be used with a range of VLEs in use across the partnership;
- research outputs that can be used in a research informed teaching context;
- administrative documentation used to support a range of programmes;
- documentation to assist with Integrated Quality and Enhancement Reviews (IQERs).

One of the aims of the Higher Education Learning Partnerships Centre of Excellence in Learning and Teaching (HELP CETL) is to investigate these and other related issues with a view to developing a repository of digitised learning resources available to staff and students who are undertaking higher education in further education (HE in FE) colleges within the South West region of England. The UPC Repository will allow the sharing of learning materials across partners and allow staff access to a range of support materials. The lessons learned in delivering and using the UPC Repository across a network of colleges would be easily transferable to other partnerships within the HE in FE sector

Issues

Repositories can be set up locally i.e. within an institution primarily for institutional use. They can be regional and there are also national repositories and resource collections of all kinds. One use of repositories is to allow tutors to share materials and to re-use them, thus reducing time needed to prepare e-learning materials and activities. In addition a repository may:

- provide course developers with wider access to resources;
- provide students with wider direct access to resources;
- foster collaborative working and sharing of resources;
- enable more flexibility in course design in an institution's VLE;
- provide public access to research outputs;
- allow the sharing of relevant administrative documentation to a restricted community;
- link local, regional and national initiatives.

To enable institutions teaching HE in FE in the South West to make more effective use of their existing digital assets it is intended to promote shared, open and accessible use of digital content across the region. Before arriving at this goal there is a complex web of issues and choices which must be considered. In particular:

- technological options
- interoperability issues and choices
- cultural barriers and drivers
- educational model(s) to be supported

The above areas are seen as spanning a continuum ranging from people to technology. Put another way, it is necessary to investigate individual and cultural factors through to software and hardware decisions.

In the past there has been a tendency for developers to focus primarily on technical considerations but we believe passionately that the end solution should not be technology led. It will, therefore, be essential that the outputs are put into an applicable pedagogic framework and that the system and processes are subject to a pedagogic evaluation. Furthermore, to ensure that this initiative is supported by staff and can be embedded within teaching delivery in the South West of England, it will be crucial to design and deliver suitable staff development.

The authors have identified eight distinct domains which they feel will influence the success or failure of the development of a regional Digital Repository for HE in FE. The domains are:

- Pedagogy
- IPR and Copyright.
- Cultural differences
- Trust
- Higher Education in Further Education
- Learning Objects
- Reuse
- Packaging

Moving down through the list, the nature of these domains spans factors relating to any educational initiative; issues of which arise when sharing; concerns of HE in FE in particular; and concludes with those specific to an electronic repository. Within each domain there are issues of relevance to all who are considering the development and support of a learning object economy. The poster will show these 8 domains and expand on the key questions and issues that they raise.

Future work

The project team has recently been successful in being awarded funding by the UK's JISC (Joint Information Services Committee). The UPC Repository project will deliver experience of setting up a repository based on open source software and employing open standards to the HE in FE sector. It will utilise the expertise and guidance provided as a result of other JISC funded projects.

The UPC Repository project will assist in achieving the twin aims of providing learners with access to the best possible learning experience and supporting over 1,000 staff based in FE colleges teaching on HE programmes in the south west of England. When complete it will enable the sharing good practice and making learning materials available to students in a manner which places students' needs at the heart of their learning experience in both the college and work based learning environments. The UPC Repository will allow the sharing of learning materials across partner colleges and allow staff access to a range of support materials. The lessons learned in delivering and using the UPC Repository across a network of institutions would be easily transferable to other partnerships within the HE and HE in FE sector.

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