

One Share Demonstration

Blog by Sam Jordison

The first project showcase, about One Share and led by David Millard, has the title: 'Chasing Edshare: In Pursuit of a Usable Teaching and Learning Repository.'

David says he plans to explain how different things have become since 2005 when he got involved with learning repositories.

The biggest thing that most people knew about them then was that they didn't work properly, he says.

He gives a brief explanation of Learning Objects, how people were trying to build them and how they tried to help people upload them. They were getting interesting responses about unpacking the ZIP files from the repositories and being faced with "a whole load of stuff" that they didn't really know how to unpack. They were technical, used jargon, etc. Users also didn't really have a mechanism for managing their teaching materials on their own machines, so getting them to try and produce learning objects was "really inappropriate".

So they went back to the drawing board...

They realised that they were offering the wrong service for learning objects. If it's not about archiving, they asked themselves, what should it be about?

It was now 2006 and they started to think about web 2.0 and the services they offered that people actually used.

So youtube and flickr offered hosting that was both online and inline - you could actually see the stuff that was on the browser. They allowed organisation with channels and albums, tags, keywords and co. There was also the community aspect. They were as much about people as about materials.

It wasn't just about altruism. It was sharing for a purpose.

Going back to the repository they thought about hosting strategies. They wanted to keep metadata simple.

They worked on an inline preview tool that showed what people were uploading, that could preview word, powerpoint, pdfs, video, audio, snapshots of web pages etc. The page becomes "about the thing, not about the stuff."

They worked out ways of organising data. People can add zip files. They can multi-file. There's a collections mechanism. They have tags.

The important point, David keeps stressing, is that we went out and talked to people and found out what they wanted and what actually worked.

"It's up to the users. It's their system."

He's now showing the profile pages that people can use in edshare - which also acts as a homepage and shortcut to the materials they've been using. It also provides download statistics and has a news feed that tells you about comments on your material and co.

We discovered that a repository isn't just an archive and an endpoint, it's part of a cycle and it evolves over time.

Returning to the present day, he says we're thinking about impact. He pulls up a slide of various use cases and the 4600 public items available.

They've also worked on getting the software together as a package. Edshare is a set of extensions to EPrints and they've established a support network with eprints - and a website - edshare.org.uk.

Again he says the biggest lesson was "listen to people even if they tell you things you don't want to hear."

And we're going to move onto questions after lead developer Patrick McSweeney makes a technical point about they've worked out a way to obtain cost effective deployments of edshare for institutions.

Question: A delegate asks how edshare persuaded people who didn't manage their own data very well to become involved.

We ran engagement workshops, says David, which universities were keen to take part in because they were eager to get more involvement. The short answer is "talk to them all the time." And allow access to developers. Allow users to talk direct to people like Patrick "who looks fierce, but is very good..."

Patrick jumps in and talks about development cycles, the stress of rolling things out quickly, but the thrill of getting feedback - especially suggestions for improvements.

If you're building a real system, you should probably be giving over about half your time to make it work.

Question: Another delegate asks about how they cope with getting different versions of the software out...

David talks about reacting to feedback again and the new things that will be raised as new versions come out.

Question: Is there a web API for eprints?

There are various web apps you can use in an API-like way, says David.

Patrick explains that there are functions that allow web deposit and search and retrieval, and there will be a more standard way of doing things that's in process at the moment.

There's a linux plugin called preview plus that converts slides from powerpoint presentations into a series of images and similar.

David also talks about discussions they've been having about getting things from blackboard into eshare - and what the limits of eshare should be.

Question: Is there an account management structure.

David says it depends on the type of system you are using. There are admins on the sites, but they're really intended for the technical people.

Question: What kinds of licences do people have?

David says when people upload things they have a suite of licences they can choose from (or not, indeed, if they prefer). We've discovered that people are less worried about their stuff than the stuff from other people that they've used...

Question: Has the large number of items been self-seeding? Once people get past the barriers and tell their friends and co?

David says it depends. Sometimes there's money behind the creation of items, sometimes there's a network of people plugging in. We still need to promote it and talk to people and tell people what they can do. The technology won't make it happen by itself.

Question: Given the stripped out metadata how does the related items function work?

Patrick says it depends on the tagging. It's easy to add tags and they link using them... "We can talk about the maths later, if you like," he says!

...There are so many questions that we're in danger of running over time here. It's clearly something that delegates are finding very interesting...

Ah! Even as I type we've had to draw a reluctant close. On to the next demo!