DSpace Helps Irish National Learning Repository To Change Its Focus

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This paper describes how the Irish National Digital Learning Resource Repository (NDLR) has implemented a DSpace-based platform which enables it to more effectively utilise its limited resources to serve customer need. The implementation of a DSpace-based solution in partnership with two private-sector service providers has permitted a refocusing of the available resources from software licensing to research and development of the platform.

The new repository platform has a open architecture which permits a great deal of flexibility in its usage. It is envisaged that as the various communities that use the repository develop over time, they will also begin to access the repository in very different ways and indeed there are already signs of this starting to happen with some of the more advanced Communities of Practice that make up the client-base of the NDLR.

The development of the platform has been heavily influenced by a deep process of engagement with the various communities of practice and also by the clear imperative coming from the Irish Government that shared-services across the entire Educational Sector are to be heavily encouraged. This imperative dictates an open, collaborative and flexible model of service provision that is not easily met using any existing commercial, off-the-shelf (COTS) software products. In an environment where the focus is on the production of assets and very limited resource is available for their subsequent archival storage, a lightweight, extensible standards-compliant metadata schema has been favoured.

One key user-requirement that has become increasingly clear is the fact that repository users would prefer to engage with the system in a social context. This finding should not come as a surprise, the focus of the NDLR system is learning and in most cases learning is a social activity. The new platform both enables and encourages this type of interaction and the next release will copper-fasten this commitment with significant developments such as the use of Twitter and seamless integration of the repository with Moodle and other Virtual Learning Environments and also its linkage with other global repositories.

The current state-of-the-art in repository technology is in a rapid state of change at present, this reality dictates an extensible platform that can rapidly change to maintain its currency. This level of flexibility is unaffordable with COTS platforms but it is the belief of the authors that the approach that has been taken is both sustainable and likely to maintain the NDLR service in a position of leadership both nationally and internationally. It is the explicit intention of the partners to contribute the code developed under this initiative back into the DSpace codebases in order to make it available to other potential users and also to subject it to the kind of critical review that is required to prevent the ethos that underpins the initiative from becoming introspective and overly specialised. It is the belief of the authors that this system and the organisational approach that it supports have a great deal of potential to support National initiatives in other countries and these linkages are actively being sought and developed.