New beginnings: A report on the ALTC Exchange version 2

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The ALTC Exchange is an online service that provides learning and teaching resources and facilities to support professional communication and collaboration across the Australian higher education sector. Released in May 2008, the Exchange is an integral part of the ALTC's strategy for disseminating good practice and aimed at fostering change and development in learning and teaching. Membership is open to academics, managers, and leaders of learning and teaching in Australian higher education and internationally. Considerable input into the design requirements and development of the Exchange has been made by practitioners, sector leaders, professional associations including ascilite members and other interested teaching and learning professionals. In August 2009 an extensive upgrade to the Exchange was released. This paper reports on the current status of the Exchange and outlines recent developments to improve usability and enhance functionality.

Keywords: ALTC Exchange, repository, Web 2.0, professional learning

Introduction

Released in May 2008, the ALTC Exchange is an integral part of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's strategy for disseminating good practice and aimed at fostering change and development in learning and teaching in higher education in Australia. The Exchange was developed following extensive input from the higher education community, including from many members of this society, who participated in research, focus groups and provided other feedback. Membership is open to academics, managers and leaders of learning and teaching in Australian higher education. A number of international educationalists have also become members.

The Exchange is a national repository of learning and teaching materials for Higher Education that includes the ability to search other key learning resources, websites and databases. Following an initial seeding of quality documents, members have been encouraged to make their own contribution. The Exchange also seeks to promote the sharing of ideas and know-how, encourage the adoption of good practice in learning and teaching in the higher education sector, and provide resources to support the professional learning of educators. To support these functions social networking tools (wikis, blog, sharing and commentary tools) have been incorporated into the Exchange. Such tools facilitate networking opportunities among professionals as well as stimulate discussion, and sharing and reuse of learning designs and activities. Commentators have noted the importance of the dynamics of networks to the realisation of the potential benefits of repositories (Conole, Culver, Weller, Williams, Cross, Clark, & Brasher, 2008; Brosnan, 2005).

Members can use the Exchange as a professional networking platform to:

- establish public or private spaces for collaboration;
- publish blogs for comment and discussion;
- publish online content using a suite of contribution tools;
- set up a personalised area in which to save resources and manage their contributions; and
- make links with others members, and follow their contributions.

Current status

During 2009 the ALTC Exchange has undergone significant redevelopment, its first major upgrade since its initial release. Throughout this period the ALTC has actively promoted the Exchange to, and focused support on, ALTC-funded individuals and groups. Promotion has included workshops and presentations at ALTC events specifically run for these groups. Key ALTC-funded individuals have also acted as champions for the Exchange promoting its use within their institutions and in wider discipline networks.

Currently membership of the Exchange is approaching 2,300 and this year more than 91 active group spaces are being used for special interest groups or collaborative work. During 2009 the majority of the group spaces (66%) have been used by ALTC-funded members to support their project activities. Most commonly this has involved using the Exchange to assist in the dissemination of project outcomes particularly after the upgrade to the Exchange occurred in August 2009. Tools suitable for publishing and structuring content have been enhanced and a number of project groups have employed these to create extensive sites within the Exchange.

The Exchange has also been used as a project workspace by some ALTC funded groups making use of a suite of tools suited to this purpose including tools for managing membership, providing notifications to members and contributing and managing content. These work teams often adopt the practice of establishing private workspaces while constructing their group sites and managing project team activities. Once the project is complete, these spaces are then opened to all Exchange members who may access resources or participate in discussion around the project themes and documents. Additionally the Exchange has been used to support communities of practice and as a project work space for collaborating on proposal preparation and sharing documents.

Exchange version 2

Following feedback from Exchange members and commissioned reports, the ALTC embarked upon a major upgrade of the Exchange concentrating on technical improvements. Programming and development is provided in-house and the Exchange is developed on the Drupal 6 platform. Exchange version 2 was released in August 2009 with the aims of:

- providing a stable platform which can be easily updated,
- improving usability,
- resolving long standing issues, and
- applying key enhancements requested by the Exchange membership.

Some of the most significant changes implemented in the upgrade are as follows.

Repository and contribution tools

- The search feature has been enhanced with new search algorithms producing more relevant results, and allowing sophisticated filtering and sorting. Boolean searches and suggestions for misspelt words are also supplied.
- The electronic book tool, which allows the creation of a structured collection of web pages, has been improved and shared editing (wiki) features have been introduced. The whole collection of web pages comprising a book may be downloaded as a single PDF file.
- The text editor allows the embedding of multimedia including video files and provides members with greater flexibility in the design of their web pages.

Shared workspaces management

- The group tool, which allows the creation of shared workspaces, now supports group navigation and allows easier browsing of content and the ability to highlight specific content. New features include the ability for members to subscribe to email notifications when group content changes.

Networking

- Your personal space on the Exchange is called myExchange. Navigation of this area has improved and all content contributed by you is accessible and easily edited from this location.

- Focus has been placed on encouraging visitors to the site to join and become members. A prominant 'Join Exchange' area is featured on the Exchange Home page. The new members' home page contains news and highlights relevant to members.

Design

- A new more attractive and intuitive design has focused providing greater ease of use of the site particularly in relation to navigation and in providing an understanding of how screen elements are to be used.
- The amount of screen 'real estate' that is devoted to content has been greatly increased (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Single web page on the ALTC Exchange

Help and communication with members

- Help has been revamped, providing searchable help options and links that enable members to send requests directly to our online support system. Video help development is underway.
- An easy to use feedback form has been included on every page.
- An Exchange Blog (www.altcexchange.edu.au/exchangeblog/) has been created and is used to keep members up-to-date with proposed changes to the Exchange, provide an opportunity for members to give feedback about these changes, inform members of any issues and publish notifications concerning the status of the Exchange.

The changes implemented in version 2 have assisted in the increased use of the Exchange by ALTC-funded teams and the higher education community. One indication has been in the numbers of new members which has increased from an average of approximately 100 per month prior to August 2009, to over 220 each month since the implementation of the new version. On the whole, the changes have been received positively by the Exchange membership as indicated by feedback and comments of those involved in the testing, for example, one long time user has remarked "...I like the look and structure of the new release of the Exchange. It gives much more screen 'real estate' to content and the main page is

easier to navigate". Another user commented, "I …immediately noticed the increase in the space provided to display content. This is excellent as space was a major problem. Also, there is much less clutter both in the opening page and the group pages. ... The search for groups and people is now much better and user friendly.

The upgrade has also provided a platform which enables the Exchange development team to respond relatively promptly to members' requests for enhancements. Minor updates have already been applied and a further update is expected in the next two months.

Future developments and challenges

A challenge indicated by others who have developed Web 2.0 style software to support professionals, is to continue to attract and foster an engaged membership and provide a fresh and valuable repository (Conole, Culver, Weller, Williams, Cross, Clark, and Brasher, 2008; Luker and Sheppard, 2009; Engeström, 2005). Our primary foci in the coming year will be the further growth of the repository with the aim of developing a collection of practical, quality learning and teaching resources. The level of participation in contributing to the Exchange repository is slowly growing but greater involvement is required to ensure a dynamic and meaningful collection. Apart from actively seeking additional material for the repository, maintenance of the collection is also underway.

Supporting this focus will be the implementation of a peer review system, seen as an essential requirement to add value to the repository and in providing 'rewards' for those who contribute, in research conducted by ascilite for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (Philip, Parrish, Lefoe, & O'Reilly, 2007). Various models for consideration in implementing a peer review system for the Exchange have been presented by Philip, Lefoe, O'Reilly, & Parrish, (2008) and will be taken into account in the implementation. In both these foci we call for the support of the higher educational community in volunteering to be reviewers and in continuing to contribute their ideas, expertise and knowledge.

Additionally we will seek to understand our stakeholders' needs better and a research project is also planned for the Exchange in 2010. Areas to be investigated include the use by the Exchange by individuals and project teams, the use of the Exchange for sharing and repurposing of learning and teaching materials and the support the Exchange can provide to those building communities of practice.

The ALTC Exchange may be found at http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/

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