

Repurposing an online tutor training resource

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This paper presents a reflective case study that illustrates the challenges associated with repurposing, for the human health sciences, an existing high-quality staff development and tutor resource website originally developed by the Faculty of Veterinary Sciences at the University of Sydney. The discussion focuses on the experience of negotiating, planning, and executing repurposing the site for staff development and tutor support in postgraduate programs offered by the Faculties of Health Sciences and Medicine. Benefits and challenges associated with repurposing this resource within the same overall university context are considered.

Keywords: elearning, reuse, repurposing, online tutor training, health sciences

Background

Close examination of the educational literature on reuse of digital resources reveals little of individuals' 'lived' experience of reuse (e.g. Littlejohn, 2003). This paper presents a reflective case study of a repurposing project within a large, conventional research-intensive university. We report on the challenges faced, the processes used, and reflect on our experience in this repurposing project.

Many degree courses offered in flexible delivery mode in a university setting provide an orientation to online teaching and learning program for their tutors. At the University of Sydney, this has been a somewhat discrete and individual activity. Yet, not withstanding the obvious disciplinary and contextual differences between degree programs similar orientation concerns and quality control issues need to be addressed. Given this common focus, in 2006 we embarked on the process of repurposing an online resource for orienting tutors to online tutoring originally built and refined by a different faculty (Veterinary Science) with the goal of supporting online tutors in postgraduate courses in the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Health Sciences. This resource, VetTeach, falls into Duncan's highest level of aggregation category: 'collections of assets which include the educational context and support for educational activities' (2003, p.15) and Koper's middle level of reuse: 'something created by someone else within the same community or organisation' (2003, p.48).

Discovery

VetTeach would have been 'under the radar' if not for its recognition within a broader strategic development project, the College of Health Sciences eLearning Resource Centre (ERC) (Mahony & Wozniak, 2006). VetTeach was reported as an example of a good practice site in the ERC (Pizzica was then an educational designer on the ERC project and Mahony the project director). Subsequently, the ERC was reported at the 2005 ODLAA bi-ennial Conference. When the Conference organisers placed a paper on VetTeach (Laxton, Forsyth & Toribio, 2005) in the same session with one on the ERC, Mahony's knowledge of VetTeach was extended and Devonshire, in attendance at the Conference, was introduced to VetTeach. Shortly thereafter Pizzica, Devonshire and Mahony all independently approached the subdean for postgraduate coursework in the Faculty of Veterinary Science about migrating VetTeach to a human health sciences context. Advised of this by the subdean and given our shared interest, we

formed a collaborative team to negotiate access, plan for and then repurpose the site, for use to support online teachers in the medical and health sciences as HealthTeach.

The challenges of repurposing the tutor resource

VetTeach was developed for delivery as a modularized WebCT site, supported with a single face-to-face workshop and selective coaching where needed. Following implementation, informal evaluation indicated that it provided a successful professional development activity for supporting teaching practice. It also proved to be an efficient and sustainable use of resources within the degree course (Laxton et al., 2005).

The key repurposing challenge was how to redesign the resource to accommodate an expanded range of disciplinary and course contexts, yet still maintain its course-specific (purpose built) nature. The repurposed resource was to be used in multiple teaching environments in which there would be an increase in the number of tutors accessing the resource, the discipline areas covered would change (from veterinary science to multiple fields in the human health sciences), and there would be differing participant communities and course goals (e.g. ranging from primarily physicians in professional Master of Medicine courses to a mixture of health professionals in the Graduate Studies Program in Pain Management and the Graduate Program in Sexual Health). There were also differences in how HealthTeach would be integrated with tutor support plans and professional development activities across the different course contexts. Similarities with the Veterinary Science context included use of tutors in professional practice outside the university and the potential for both students and tutors to be located anywhere on the globe.

The success of VetTeach had been identified as, in part, due to its context-specific nature, with many examples related to specific veterinary science practice. Another factor was sensitivity to the needs of the tutors and to the teaching ideology and focus of the courses in which the tutors would be working. Thus, one of the risks in repurposing and extending the program was that this specificity would be lost and its efficacy compromised. To be used to support several different degree programs HealthTeach might necessarily become too generic to provide the specific targeted support needed by tutors whose expertise in their subject matter was clear but whose teaching experience was limited. In the new context, tutor expectations and responsibilities might also vary from course to course. Cox, Clark, Heath, & Plumpton (2003), for example, characterize tutors' roles according to facilitation and moderation of discussion activities and focus on the tutor's role in facilitating the process of knowledge construction and integration in students. Denis et al. (2004), however, describes roles of the tutor from the perspective of the tutor's interactions with students, identifying many different roles according to whether they are Central (related to interaction) or Peripheral (occurring prior- or post-interaction) and reflecting a range of necessary competencies (pedagogical, communicational, discipline expertise and technological). The transformation needed could not simply be editorial.

The repurposing activity

Given our combined interests, we approached this as a single project rather than each working separately to repurpose the resource for our own more specific needs. From both an individual and an institutional perspective there were obvious benefits with this approach. It was cost-effective in that it utilised an established and proven resource. It also combined staff talents and available resources across the institution, to deliver a consistent and professional approach to tutor training within our faculties. Yet, in spite of these benefits there were a number of challenges that had to be addressed. One was how to present the site to the end user so that it appeared purpose built and specific enough to meet individual needs. Another was to repurpose the site so that it could accommodate different delivery needs, ranging from integration into a structured orientation program through to a more ad hoc, user driven approach (i.e. accessed on a 'need to know' basis).

Meeting these challenges required:

- negotiating permission from the Faculty of Veterinary Science to use and repurpose the site
- identifying the likely variations in participants, context and use for HealthTeach

- sharing the review and revision task in the light of the above context (web pages were prepared as Word documents so that revisions could be identified by using Track Changes and Comment)
- developing human health sciences examples which were authentic and relevant for a range of professional contexts/specialisations (e.g. ethical considerations)
- including in the design a course specific module to take account of pedagogical specifics and local policies
- reviewing as a group the above, with discussion about all points of difference until agreement reached
- implementing the changes on the website
- editing, reviewing and sign-off of the HealthTeach website

Another important consideration in terms of the long term viability of the site was developing a management plan for updating and maintaining the resource in our devolved university environment.

Meetings were held in person and by audio-teleconference, as we are located on three different campuses of the University of Sydney. During the exercise we identified, experienced and resolved a number of issues:

- terminology differences were clarified to ensure consistency in application throughout the resource
- differences in course expectations of tutors were discussed and the resource repurposed to accommodate the different contextual needs
- differences in perceptions of tutors' commitment and interest in accessing and engaging with the support materials
- the importance of restricting changes to only those that were necessary and sufficient, to minimise cosmetic changes and to contain the workload involved
- the need to refine the design to enable course-specific information to be provided in a consistently structured manner (the introduction of a course specific module)
- other issues such as differences in rhetorical approaches and individual work responsibility timetables.

Reflections

Fortunately, from the beginning there was agreement about the challenges of repurposing the resource for multiple contexts, despite our common human health sciences focus. We shared similar philosophies of learning and teaching and were already known to one another. This meant that we could from the onset focus primarily on our task; the need for attention to team building to aid collaboration was not ignored, however, and should always be given due recognition in such circumstances.

We began with a resource which we all respected and considered of high quality. Even in these circumstances and in the framework of an agreement to make only necessary changes, the review process made visible the differences in academic context and culture in which each of us worked, as well as varying personal preferences. It is possible that if each of us had repurposed VetTeach separately there would have been a greater number of changes though not necessarily substantial ones. In our team environment the default became no change if there was not agreement to the change. This approach, based on a common/ collaborative ownership of HealthTeach, controlled the tendency to make cosmetic changes.

VetTeach was located in the technological environment in which we wished to place our repurposed version: WebCT4 centrally managed in the University of Sydney. Thus, we had few information technology infrastructure challenges to surmount, and could focus on pedagogical design and content. While we did not initially forecast the total hours we expected this project to take, the work has probably taken longer than expected. This emphasises the importance of allocating enough time for review, revision, and in our case negotiation across multiple contexts.

At the time of writing HealthTeach is close to release for use in our varied environments. While we are confident that we have reached a satisfactory design balance between the specific and the generic for this

multiprofessional human health sciences online tutor training resource, this achievement can only be confirmed when feedback from course team members is received.

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Permission from the Faculty of Veterinary Science to repurpose VetTeach for the human health sciences is gratefully acknowledged.

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