PROWE (Personal Repositories Online Wiki Environment) - a First Look

Anne Hewling
The Open University
a.hewling@open.ac.uk

ABSTRACT
New online, accessible and cost-effective networking tools, such as wikis and blogs, encourage the open exchange of ideas – and usually without the need to impose heavy moderation. They also offer the possibility of collaborative authoring and other shared endeavours such as informal repository development that may contribute to building and sustaining a community of practice. Part-time distance education tutors often lack the opportunity to participate in collaborative activity and community building interaction. The PROWE project seeks to explore the potential of these new tools to foster community and realise part-time tutor professional development.

Keywords
Repositories, distance tutors, professional development

INTRODUCTION
The Personal Repositories Online Wiki Environment project, PROWE for short, is a JISC-funded digital repositories project focusing on the potential of repositories at the informal and individual levels. The project's overall aim is to develop an understanding of how current technologies can, and are, being used to support communities of part time distance tutors. In particular, the project will establish the role that individual and group repositories play in informing professional practice and facilitating (part-time) staff development. The project has a central research question:

> "In what ways could wiki and wiki-type environments be useful and useable as personal and informal repositories to support professional development within part-time tutor communities of practice?"

Two institutions, The Open University (OU) and University of Leicester (UoL), are involved in the project. Both institutions make extensive use of part-time tutors although tutor duties, and thus associated professional development needs, vary quite widely.

THE PROJECT
The project began with consultation with tutors and academic staff from both institutions, by means of face-to-face focus groups. Simultaneously an analysis was undertaken of wiki/blog/bliki solutions currently available. Assessing possible tool options, the project had to take account of the requirement that any environment developed must potentially be widely applicable across a variety of institutional contexts within the higher education sector. It must also be compatible across different VLE platforms and accessible via different internet browsers. At the time of writing (January 2006) analysis of technical and metadata requirements needed in order to marry user needs and tool availability is underway and the project partners are setting up and testing sample wiki or wiki-type environments with groups of their own tutors. This will help to refine specifications for a more extensive trial later in the year. An update on progress in this regard will be offered during the presentation of this paper at Networked Learning ’06.

THE TUTORS
From the outset it was clear that there is no 'typical' profile for a part-time tutor. They share many issues and imperatives but few commonalities. The diversity that is 'the part-time tutor' can be elaborated as follows:

Employment and teaching experience
Many tutors in this project are employed full-time in addition to any tutoring work they may do for either of the partner institutions. A few work full-time for one of the partner institutions. Some tutors work in further or

higher education, possibly but not necessarily, teaching the same subject that they tutor part-time. Some tutors work in other education contexts e.g. management or administration. Others work in professions unrelated to education and tutoring is their only teaching activity. Some tutors are retired education or other professionals and yet others are best described as full-time part-time tutors or educators. This latter group most often work across multiple institutions. It was noticeable that many of the early volunteers for testing the project fell into this latter category, as did some of the most technologically innovative individuals - although it was equally interesting that the project simultaneously drew the attention of a number of self-confessed 'technophobes'. With regard to any training which tutors might have for teaching in higher education, some were education professionals formally qualified to teach - albeit not always trained at higher education level - many were not. Some were taking advantage of fee-waiver schemes whereby tutors could also enrol on university programmes in education whilst also tutoring.

Technology – access and use

Somewhat surprisingly all but one of the volunteer tutors attending the initial information collection focus groups at the OU had broadband access to the internet at home[1]. This was true even for those tutors who reported using the internet for email and basic level online discussion groups only (OU tutors all have email addresses provided by the university, UoL tutors, generally, do not). At the other extreme there were some tutors who had experience of using wikis and other online tools, a few had personal blogs and one had a website of resources which he used to provide his students with access to online resource materials. Most tutors reported storing their teaching resources, tutorial notes, handouts etc. on their home PCs, some used key or stick storage devices. Only two tutors had any previous experience of mobile learning devices such as Palms or PDAs.

Teaching and tasks

The range of teaching or tutoring and associated tasks performed by tutors is as diverse as the tutors themselves. Some UoL tutors are almost exclusively involved in assessment activity and for all OU tutors marking assignments, known as 'TMAs', is a large part of any individual tutor's workload. In the OU this marking is a task which increasingly happens online. The other aspect of OU tutor work is providing tutorial support – either face-to-face or by telephone although some OU tutors do not undertake tutorials but work exclusively through online discussion boards in First Class. Interaction with other tutors is largely confined to online discussion boards designated for such activity (OU) or to email (UoL and OU) although some OU tutors teaching on popular courses may have joint meetings and briefings arranged in the geographic regions in which they are teaching. OU tutors also have a university-wide gateway to web based resources through TutorHome, a series of web pages offering advice and guidance on issues related to tutoring for the OU.

Wishes and issues

The tutors involved in the focus groups all expressed the wish for more interaction with other tutors and for more sharing of resources. Many reported a lack of time for collaborative activity and, equally, a concern over ownership issues for shared materials. One particular issue arose over the ability to retain original materials whilst also offering them up for others to develop in new directions. Some were concerned about how they would continue to access materials they would share and expressed the view that they would wish to store them on their own PCs. There was a great deal of optimism about the possibility of developing a shared resource or repository but, as one OU tutor expressed it, the success of the project would, for him, be measured by whether the facility became an icon on his desktop. This implies that ease of access and integration with other tutor activity (and the software that that activity uses) are critical. Simply put, using any new environment must become an effortless and integral part of the work of being a tutor and it must better serve existing needs, or real needs that are not yet being met. Regarding the content that might be developed in shared space would relate to common issue for tutors. At the OU specifically this would include, for example, supporting learners in prison, and at UoL, supporting learners studying interculturally.

---

[1] This was a very surprising finding even allowing for the fact that these participants were particularly interested in working with new technologies online. A further contributing factor may be that they were, by and large, all from reasonably affluent (and not remote parts) of the UK, although month on month UK Government statistics show that Broadband access in the UK as a whole is increasing very rapidly as a percentage of overall Internet accesses – see: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/intc1205.pdf

THE ISSUES

Software solutions already exist for most of the activities that tutors would wish to undertake. However, not all are available in any one particular wiki or wiki-type environment. Or, where they are there are overriding issues to be considered – such as security, authentication or storage. Most wikis are completely open, accessible to any one, and thus are liable to interference or spam attack. This vulnerability makes them unsuitable for stable, long term repository type use. Wiki technology also makes it difficult to store multiple versions of documents which would be required to ensure that contributors do not lose control of their original contributions.

One major challenge for PROWE is to develop an environment which will offer enough security (i.e. which respects access and the integrity of inputs) to inspire the trust and confidence of its users in order to ensure that they contribute to it. It must also be flexible enough to encourage the widespread uptake needed to, in turn, ensure that it endures as a stable, secure and supportive environment. Another challenge for the project is to link the development of repository deposited resources to individuals and not just to the institutions in which they are presently teaching. This will be essential to ensure sustainability and achievable by offering users incentives to contribute by providing long term personal satisfaction and continued professional development over a career which may span multiple institutional affiliations.

LOOKING FORWARD

Informal repositories such as those which can be developed in wiki-based environments offer a lighter touch approach to information sharing and content development. This makes them more attractive to time pressed tutors and allows those individuals to develop support communities whilst producing new forms of knowledge. Experience with informal repositories may also serve as an introduction to the use of more formal repositories, and to a culture of sharing and reuse. Where common technical platforms can be developed this new knowledge and peer support are not confined to use in one institution (where they originated) but can move with individuals across institutions as their careers evolve. In sum, the challenges to ensuring sustainable communities are less technical than social.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am pleased to acknowledge the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funding for the PROWE project.