Chapter XIV

Being a Content Expert is Fun Again with Pachyderm

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the reasoning behind the lack of the expected authoring of digital learning objects. It argues that the creation and dissemination of learning objects by university faculty have not occurred as a result of technical hurdles and frightening acronyms, lack of organizational procedures, unclear legal and ownership issues, and the ineffectiveness of “selling” the idea to faculty as part of the promotion and tenure process. The technology, interfaces and storage devices have been in place for some time, waiting for the learning object authors to publish their work. The Pachyderm 2.0 software is discussed as a tool for faculty to utilize. The author hopes that discussing and enumerating the obstacles to learning object authoring and dissemination, combined with the proposal of using the Pachyderm software along with a model of working with organizational information technology (IT) staff, will assist all involved in circulating successful digital learning objects.
Introduction

Well-made digital learning objects are an exceptional supplement to good teaching. But, who is actually creating and disseminating them? For all the buzz and hype over the past few years, it does not seem that we are witnessing the predicted explosion of learning objects at the campus level. Why is this still the case? The technology exists, the computer file servers blink and hum in anticipation, the content experts engage in new research, the learning system software provides the navigation structure, and the helpful support staff stands at the ready. The overall answer is that for content experts, producing and sharing learning objects just has not been any fun. In this case, fun is defined as sitting down to create something, doing it easily and sharing it quickly with the world.

Educators and museum curators have always thrived on being experts in their field. They enjoy researching, teaching and taking any opportunity to publish their findings and circulate their passion. Coupling this zeal of discovery with the world of brightly colored pixels and a network connection to the world’s computers seems like the perfect combination.

Why then does any discussion of “authoring learning objects” cause these accomplished people to scurry back to their labs and vaults, shunning the nearby group of mammoth Web servers that are aching to disseminate their work?

Indeed, if it is true that a “learning object” is “any digital resource that can be reused to mediate learning” (Wiley & Edwards, 2002, p. 3), why is it that there have been very few avenues to ameliorate the actual creation of learning objects into cohesive and successful presentation formats? What would happen if faculty needed to understand the intricacies of paper absorption, inks, binding methods, and how to run a printing press in order to publish their findings in a book format? A similar situation would occur in our libraries with shelves and librarians standing at the ready with very few books.

Issues with Learning Object Creation

What is at the root of the problem with widespread adoption of learning object creation? It is probably because publishing research, lectures, or exhibits in an engaging, multimedia form has not been the fulfillment it sounds like. It has been intimidating and time-consuming, and too often devolves into a cryptic discussion of “interoperability” or “metadata”. Where’s the fun in that? What faculty member or curator has time to delve into the sharable content object reference model (SCORM) or clearing up the ambiguities of the “fair use” argument? Then, after all