



It's a bird! It's a plane! ... Grappling with the notion of 'repository' in SCAP programme activity

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The Scholarly Communication in Africa Programme is both a research and implementation programme in that we are experimenting with technology solutions for a revised, expanded approach to scholarly communication and conducting research on scholarly communication practice within four Southern African institutions(1).

All activity within the programme is framed by our methodological lens: Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). CHAT is a valuable tool in that it addresses our objective of trying to define the ecosystem of scholarly communication within our four partner institutions. We want to know: What are the historical trends and factors that have shaped current scholarly communication practice; and what impact are new research and communication technologies having on these ecosystems?

Beyond this we are interested in advancing the open agenda as a means to growing more robust scholarship and profiling the important research conducted on the African continent. In this utilisation of openness and technology, we address the notion of impact and the question of how to promote the visibility/findability of local research for the purpose of addressing the socioeconomic and developmental imperatives on the continent.

The technology or implementation strands of SCAP activity are dictated by an action-research approach in which participating institutions dictate the course of action. Through a series of workshops with researchers in pilot research units coupled with senior management consultation, we have identified a particular 'need state' around scholarly communication at each of the institutions, and technology implementation activity has been designed to address or stimulate these site-specific contexts.

At the Universities of Botswana and Namibia repositories are central to the need state and form the focus of our implementation activity in these institutions – the issue of uptake around the sharing platform being the issue in the first instance, while total collapse is the case in the latter.

Conscious of the legacy of failure and disappointment associated with many repository initiatives on the continent, we have grappled (at times uncomfortably) with the idea of the repository being the focus of programme activity in two of the four SCAP sites; repeatedly expressing that we didn't want to invest resources in a slightly updated version of what would still turn out to be a 'roach motel'(2) ... we just wanted an institutional SPACE in which to describe and store content and a platform from which to disseminate. But that's a repository ... isn't it?

The examples of successful repository activity we have seen in the South African context have been in institutions where repository activity has been aligned with university strategy and the interests of academics. This suggests to us that the answer in getting beyond the beleaguered repository lies in the fundamental approach to its conceptualisation.

Revising our approach to repository

In both the Universities of Botswana and Namibia repositories were established 5–10 years ago in the library and hard-working librarians set out to populate them with content. The focus appears to have been technology and the library.

The focus (or objective) of the SCAP technological implementation strategy is to advance a strategic approach to dissemination as a means to address the core mission objectives of the university, particularly the imperative to be "a major contributor to nation building", as the UNam mission statement puts it.

This objective requires an expanded view from seeing traditional book or journal article as the primary mode for knowledge sharing, and we are therefore interested in profiling a broad array of outputs, let's call them 'research objects', which can be accessed and understood by an expanded audience (including government and policy-makers).

The 'research objects' category includes traditional outputs such as books and journal articles, but also extends to the further end of the spectrum to include research reports, social-media communication of work-in-progress, and data. (Open data is, however, still a glimmer in the eye as we focus, for now, on text-driven objects.)

So how do we share these objects and ensure their findability? Build a repository? Already tried that. The answer: A strategic approach to describing, curating and disseminating. In short: publishing.

Building a publishing layer onto the repository (and into the institutional scholarly communication ecosystem)

There has been a lot of talk about 'publishing layers' being added to repository software platforms. Much of this discourse seems to focus on Web 2.0 tools and plug-ins (and on technology generally). The technology is, of course, important, but our interest and focus resides more firmly on the influence of activity which we see as being human-driven and shaped by the activity system at work in the institution.

At perfunctionary level, this publishing layer is concerned with the manifest, explicit activity of harnessing metadata and strategy to boost visibility (such as indexing in databases and online profiling). But when examined more closely, there appears to be a complex (and more interesting) implicit dimension in which this publishing layer is driven by and relates to the ecosystem of scholarly communication in the institution: the rules which govern institutional practice around dissemination, the division of labour underpinning the enterprise, and the tools which academics use in the process of conducting and sharing their research – all of which constitute the matrix that is the cultural historical activity system.

The Cultural Historical Activity Theory approach provides a means for us to examine this dynamic matrix of activity which exists as a culmination of historical forces ... and to identify where the tensions or misalignments are in this system which must now adapt to a changed context.

How the dynamics of the activity system shape and determine the publishing layer is at the centre of our inquiry; repository software being incidental, a means to an end, in

what we trying to achieve.

In the Universities of Botswana and Namibia our revised approach to repositories is bolstered by what we perceive to be a new willingness on the part of managers and academics to engage strategically with dissemination and to see publishing (this dynamic, complex vision of publishing activity) as part of the core business of the institution.

We have no guarantees of uptake or success, but seeing the repository space as a means to service a more holistic, ecosystem-driven approach to dissemination (as opposed to a technologically-determined process) is interesting for us to explore.

Note:
This post is a summation of preliminary thoughts around SCAP repository activity and the first in a series of exploratory posts. We are interested to tap into the experience and expertise of others in the field. If you are involved with or know about an initiative that is engaged with reviving or taking a renewed approach to institutional repositories (particularly in a developing-country context) we'd like to hear from you.

- (1) Participating institutions are the Universities of Botswana, Cape Town, Mauritius and Namibia.
 - (2) The term 'roach motel' is an allusion to Dorothea Salo's exploration of repositories and the participation gap which calls for a serious reconsideration of repository missions, goals and means.
- Salo D (2008) Innkeeper at the roach motel. *Library Trends* 57:2

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