MonAtar: The Monash Teaching Avatar

Experiences

John Hurst

Clayton School of Information Technology
Monash University

20051104
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Background and Introduction

Teaching Quality and Accountability

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A.J. Hurst

Information Technology, Monash University
Driving Forces on Teaching Quality

- The 1993-5 so-called ”Quality Rounds” of university review
- Emphases on Research, Teaching, and Community Engagement
- At Monash, creation of Associate Deans (Teaching)
- Heavy emphasis upon process, only later upon outcomes.
- Dramatic shift in attention paid to process: for teaching, it was course and unit approvals.
- Begs the question: what happens subsequently?
The Teaching Quality Process at Monash

Post Quality Rounds

- Every faculty has an Associate Dean (Teaching)
- responsibility is the oversight of Teaching Quality
- Process is based upon "The Reader Over Your Shoulder"
- Every ADT reviews other faculties new courses, new subjects
- Process
  - Course/unit document in proforma course description/unit description
  - contains logistical and pedagogical information: objectives, relationship to others, workloads, academic responsibilities, etc..
  - roster of ADsT who review every proposal from every faculty
  - return approval, or negotiate changes
  - difficult cases may be decided at EdComm, but usually sent back for revision
Reality Check

- ADsT review outside their fields of expertise
Reality Check

▶ ADsT review outside their fields of expertise – but
Reality Check

- ADsT review outside their fields of expertise — but
- review for pedagogy, not content
- bunfights when demarcation involved as well!
- “quality” documents – not!
  - almost universally Word documents
  - exchanged by email
  - revised, re-revised, counter-re-revised
  - no audit trail
  - many inconsistent copies
The “Lead Site” Program

- The “Lead Site” program
- Each faculty asked to develop Teaching Quality theme for cross-dissemination
- InfoTech: *Exploiting our “Own” Technology in the pursuit of Quality*
- How can we use IT to support teaching quality?
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- Need a single repository - database?
- But need broad access mechanisms
- But there must also be consistency and a certain amount of structure - a “semi-structured” document – the *unit description*, based upon existing Word document proformas
- XML was an emerging technology that seemed to be appropriate!
- Coupled with a web page was the next obvious step
Principles

Two guiding principles:

1. Academics should have the responsibility for, and control of, the content and delivery of all teaching materials.

2. There should be a single, up-to-date, accurate repository of all logistical and quality information relating to the delivery of course content.
Principle 1: Academic Responsibility

- The best person to judge how a unit is to be delivered is the person who delivers it
- The nature of the delivery should be transparent to all stakeholders
- Stakeholders are entitled to accurate and timely information about a unit
- All of these issues captured in a *unit description document*
- The quality of the teaching should be discernible from the unit description
Principle 2: Single Repository

- Far too often, data about units is continually entered and re-entered
- Example: booklists, software requirements, lecture rooms, tutorials, etc..
- Every year there is a mad scramble to “update” the handbook.
- The irony is, the information is usually out-of-date by the time the handbook is published!
- Want a “cradle-to-grave” management of unit descriptions
- Want single-sourcing of all information – the “one-stop shop”
Principles: More

- unit descriptions should be publicly accessible
- all *relevant* staff should have edit access to unit descriptions
- unit descriptions should capture all the relevant details about a unit
- details should be easily extracted for reports, web pages, etc.
Opportunity

- Discontent with existing system led to devolution of approval process
- from 2000, each faculty had authority to approve its own courses and units
- reporting line to university Education Committee to ensure quarantining of discipline areas
- Faculty of Information Technology could now run its own unit and course approval process
- Concept was to do this through an authenticating web page
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The Unit Description

Security

The User Interface

Approvals

Paperless Meetings
The Unit Description

► XML document
► fields (elements) such as Unit Name, Unit Code, Reasons for Introduction, Unit Objectives and Content, Teaching Strategies, Assessment, Workload, School Responsibilities, Pre- and Co-requisites, Approval History, Edit History, ...
► many of these have subfields (e.g., Assessment Strategies).
► at bottom level, elements are unstructured text fields, and can contain HTML - but it must be well-formed!
Security

- Initially, every document open to editing by any person
- All users must authenticate before editing, through university LDAP system
- Audit trail identifies who edited what
The Edit Process

- Two classes of editor: novice and expert
  1. novice edits structured text
  2. expert edits full XML
- system automatically renders between structured text (as displayed), and XML (as stored)
- structured text allows paras, bullet and numbered lists, bold, italic, and a few other simple markups
- inner content XML elements passed through unchanged
Approvals

- Each new or revised unit must be approved
- Levels were (since changed):
  1. School
  2. Faculty Education Committee
  3. Faculty Board
- Approval at all levels handled semi-automatically
- Each level has a sign-off by an authorized and authenticated user
- Report available to show where in approval process a proposal lies
Paperless Meetings

- Since all documents, in all versions, are kept on-line, on-line access in meetings is an obvious choice
- FEC went on-line in mid-2000, FB in late 2001
- easy transition to generate HTML web-accessible agendas and minutes
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Open Access

Approvals

Report Generation

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Information Technology, Monash University
Open Access

- Some user resistance to everyone being able to edit
- Concept of school ownership, rather than faculty
- Incident where offshore academics edited one of their offerings - clashed with originating school!
- Open access changed to restrict edits to members of originating school
- (since changed back!)
Approvals

- Hard-coded: not a good idea!
- Interest in deployment by other faculties foundered on approvals model
- Wide variation in approvals processes
- Suggestion that the approvals work-flow be decoupled
- Need more “round-tuits”!
Report Generation

- semi-structured XML documents allow report generation from arbitrary elements
- examples:
- However, these are not currently generated on-line on demand - should be!
Reengineering?

- System has already been re-engineered once (to solve big security hole!)
- Is it time to do it again?
- Moved from personally maintained system to official faculty web site
- Deployment in other contexts would certainly warrant this effort
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Serendipity

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Serendipity?

The advent of the avatar has prompted some interesting ideas:

- Interfacing to other university systems: Callista, CUPID
  - Have an API model
  - needs more “round-tuits”!
- Automatic teaching portfolios
  - Data entered by individuals is authenticated
  - Data represents teaching initiatives by these individuals
  - generate authenticated teaching portfolio reports on these initiatives
- Course maintenance: auto-admin support for students
  - Honours student: XML framework for course specification
  - gives avatar style development for courses
  - Auto-tailored Prolog programs to assist students with course choices and enrollment

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Information Technology, Monash University
Conclusions

- Certainly transformed the way in which InfoTech now processes teaching developments
- Crunch was the transition from the old faculty structure to the new one (2005).
- Much of the process and context has changed, but the avatar has been retained.
- Teaching Quality: is it really improved?
  - I think **yes**, but I am biased!
  - Administrators very supportive
  - Reason avatar was retained in new faculty structure was by popular demand of the academics who were using it!
And the name *avatar*?

- Comes from the Hindu, meaning *an incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a person or idea*.
- In computing, means a *movable icon representing a person in cyberspace or virtual reality graphics*.
- Some people have criticised the term, presumably because of the lack of an “icon”.
- My original joke was that it (the program) was the manifestation of the ADT, and his power of controlling teaching quality.
- The irony is that the ADT has gone, but his manifestation lives on!
And the name *avatar*?

- Postscript: someone (unknown?) claimed that the word *avatar* is offensive to Muslims, and the program has been (re)named to *MonAtar* (contraction of Monash Avatar).
- I could find no evidence of this ...
These Slides ...

Are available from: