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Letter of Support

From   Joël Fisler, eLML Project Coordinator
To   Allyn J Radford, Managing Director Learnilities Pty Ltd
cc   Hans-Jörg Zuberbühler, Head of Customer Team

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Structured Content Authoring and Aggregation Tool Project

Open Education Resource (OER) initiatives exist to make high quality content freely available for reuse by others. The value of this type of sharing and reuse improves access to education and training globally both within and beyond existing institutional structures. Its value also increases as the current financial pressures and resource constraints increase within education and training sectors globally.

While a great deal of effort and expense has been dedicated to the establishment of OER initiatives there has been comparatively little investment into making the process of creating and reusing content easier. Developing technology that will easily enable non-technical people at all levels to author, aggregate and remix content, and then to contribute derivative works back to the community is a vital step in growing participation in OER. It is also an important step in increasing the volume of available OER content.

Adaptation of content to suit the local needs or the requirements of an individual course is an important facet of reuse and adoption of OER. Several OER initiatives have focused on structured content models to support flexible and adaptable reuse of OER content (eg Connexions; Open University of the UK OpenLearn; University of Zurich eLML Project; etc). While this work has resulted in a limited range of tools to convert content from word processing formats to XML formats and some online content creation tools, these have often been found to be difficult to use by non-technical content authors and have limited capability to support adaptation of content. There has not yet been any technology that has solved the problem of ease of use in working with content throughout its life cycle while still promoting reuse and interoperability.

The OER Structured Content Authoring and Aggregation Tool Project is unique from several perspectives:

- a)   It has been created through a unique approach to collaboration and interest from highly significant OER initiatives globally;
- b)   It incorporates an approach to harmonization of XML Schemes used by these initiatives to increase the level of reuse across these initiatives;
- c)   The concept has been designed to fit with, and support next generation learning technology architecture built upon flexible service-orientated approaches;
- d)   It has explicit objectives to make both authoring and adaptation of individual content items and/or collections of items as simple as possible for non-technical users;

e) It supports single-source publishing models whereby content is liberated from technology and can be easily and automatically transformed into a variety of content formats for use beyond traditional learning environments;

f) The use of XML content better supports "True Interoperability" of the authored content;

g) It will have in-built support for the development of content that conforms to accessibility guidelines;

h) The tool itself will be designed and built to conform as much as possible to accessibility guidelines;

i) It will be an openly licensed, community source project that will be available to the broadest possible communities of users; and

j) It will strive to build on existing, suitably licensed tools and code rather than ignore useful work that has preceded it.

The University of Zurich has been committed to open source software for many years. Both the learning management system OLAT (www.olat.org) and the content creation tool eLML (www.elml.org) have been developed at the University of Zurich during the last ten years and have been released under a very liberal open source license (Apache 2 license). Those tools are being used worldwide and enjoy an excellent reputation in the e-learning community.

Nevertheless the University of Zurich welcomes the initiative to create a new structured content authoring and aggregation tool. With eLML, the eLesson Markup Language, the University of Zurich successfully started a similar project in 2004. But throughout the last five years we have learned a great deal of insights when it comes to creating structured e-learning content, using XML and XSLT technology and creating WYSIWYG tools for content production. It would be interesting for us to actively participate at the development of the "Next Generation eLML" tool, which is what we think the structured content editor could turn out to be. Furthermore we are interested in working within a highly professional network of motivated academic partners from throughout the world.

The University of Zurich would be willing to contribute both development effort and existing open source tools like the Firedocs eLML Editor into this new project.

Joël Fisler
eLML Project Coordinator

Hans-Jörg Zuberbühler
Head of Customer Team