

Institutional Repositories: What's the Use?

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Introduction

Although the earliest institutional repositories (IRs), such as the University of California's eScholarship and MIT's DSpace, have now been operational for nearly 7 years, very little research has focused on IR end-users – the people who search and retrieve digital content from these

systems. This poster describes a study that attempts to fill this gap in the IR literature, focusing on end-users rather than on contributors. In this study, a research team conducted interviews with IR end-users in order to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How do end-users characterize IRs?;
- (2) What approaches do end-users take to accessing and using IRs?;
- (3) For what purposes do end-users use IRs?;
- (4) To what extent do end-users perceive the information from IRs to be credible, relative to information from other sources?; and
- (5) To what extent are end-users willing to return to the IR and/or to recommend the IR to their peers?

This study is part of the IMLS-funded MIRACLE (Making Institutional Repositories A Collaborative Learning Environment) Project (<http://miracle.si.umich.edu>), which aims to identify best practices and success factors associated with the administration, infrastructure, access, and use of IRs.

Research Methods

During the first half of 2008, research team members conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with the end-users of five different IRs. To qualify as an end-user, a potential participant had to have used the IR in order to find content; however, we found that the line between end-users and contributors was often quite blurry. As it proved quite difficult to identify pure IR end-users, several different recruitment methods were used in order to locate potential interviewees. The majority of interviewees were obtained via SurveyMonkey links that were placed on the home pages of the five different IRs. A few additional interviewees were identified by IR staff or by IR contributors. Although our interviewee pool is not representative of all IR end-users, it is quite heterogeneous along a number of different dimensions. Our interviewees totaled 20 individuals from 10 institutions, including six undergraduate, four master's, and three doctoral students, five faculty members, one library staff member, and one museum curator. These students, faculty, and staff represent many different fields: Anthropology, Chemistry, Cinema Studies and Literature, Communications, Computer Science, East Asian Languages and Culture, English, History, International Studies, Library and Information Science, Molecular Genetics, Public Relations, Sociology, Speech and Hearing, and Veterinary Medicine. Interviewees tended to have used the IR five times or less; only two out of 20 interviewees reported having used the IR six or more times. Interviewees were asked a series of questions focusing on their experience with the IR and their perceptions of the IR and its contents.

Preliminary Findings

With regard to our first research question, "How do end-users characterize IRs?" interviewees' characterizations varied quite a bit. They provided us with a very interesting array of similes and metaphors for the IR, including: database; drawer; receptacle; gateway; interface; place; server; promo; and online forum. In fact, two of our interviewees specifically brought up Wikipedia when describing their institution's IR. One of these interviewees explained that his university's IR was like Wikipedia because "people have contributed to it... [people whom] are known to be good in that field." Similarly, another interviewee described his university's IR as "kind of like a static Wikipedia... that requires more bureaucracy."

Analysis related to our second research question, "What approaches do end-users take to accessing and using IRs?" yielded two primary findings:

- (1) end-users initially found out about the IR in many different ways and
- (2) interviewees used a wide variety of methods to navigate to the IR and to then look through and/or locate content within the IR.

Interviewees first learned about the existence of the IR when they were told about it by their advisor or professor, attended a library workshop in which the IR was mentioned, received a notice from their university indicating that they were required to submit their thesis/dissertation to the IR, saw a link to the IR on their library's Web page and decided to explore, just happened to come across it via Google, or were looking for a way to archive and/or make their own materials accessible. They also mentioned several different ways they got to the IR, including through their university library's home page, through Google, directly through the IR home page, through links to specific IR collections and/or items that were sent directly to them by individuals whom they know, and through their university's home page.

The third research question, "For what purposes do end-users use IRs?" revealed several motivations for end-users' visits to the IR. They ranged from simply exploring the contents of the IR to investigating the potential of the IR as a possible venue to store materials. Several interviewees mentioned that they specifically navigated to the IR when looking for items that they knew were produced by their university community, such as slides from lectures and talks on campus. Quite often, student interviewees said that they were looking at theses and dissertations in the IR in order to:

- (1) see what topics other students had focused on;

- (2) try to decide what topic they might like to focus on; and
- (3) get a better idea of what their own thesis or dissertation should look like in terms of formatting and overall structure.

Two interviewees mentioned using the IR as a networking tool. For example, one doctoral student mentioned using her university's IR in order to identify faculty members (particularly ones outside her own department) that she might like to have on her committee. Although the majority of our interviewees described purposes for accessing the IR that were primarily academic in nature, several of our interviewees indicated that they had used or will use the IR also "for fun," "for my own enjoyment," and "for my own pleasure."

The fourth question concerned users' perceptions about the relative credibility of the IR and its contents. Many of our interviewees indicated that they felt that IRs were more trustworthy than Google and Google Scholar; however, their explanations often revealed that they held some assumptions that may or may not be true with regard to the IR they were discussing. For example, several of our interviewees explained that they believed IR content was more trustworthy than content brought up by Google because all IR content had been reviewed by someone affiliated with the institution. In contrast, a few other interviewees expressed some hesitation about trusting IR content because they believed that anyone could put anything in IRs. These more hesitant interviewees were particularly concerned about the quality of student work and other non-peer-reviewed, unpublished materials in the IR. In contrast, several interviewees mentioned that simply the IR's affiliation with a particular university automatically increased their trust of the content. Other interviewees held no such assumptions either direction – they explained that their credibility judgments were based not on where they retrieved an item (i.e., the IR, Google, or Google Scholar), but on the actual creator (i.e., the author and his/her affiliations, the publisher, etc.) of the particular item.

Regarding the last research question, "To what extent are end-users willing to return to the IR and/or to recommend the IR to their peers?," nearly all of our interviewees indicated that they were likely to return to the IR and to recommend the IR to their peers despite comments about the IRs lack of visibility and content. As one doctoral student explained, "The idea of [name of IR] seems really interesting to me and I would like to make more use of it, and I would also like to see other folks make more use of it, and I think as it gets more widely disseminated as a place for people to put information up, I think it will become a really valuable rich resource for interdisciplinary collaboration and things like that. Right now I feel like it's just starting out and it hasn't sort of reached its full potential yet."

Next Steps

Data analysis is still underway. Preliminary findings suggest that IR end-users and their motivations for using the IR are quite diverse. Initial findings also suggest a few areas for improvement for IRs, such as the need for more content and increased visibility of the IR; however, they also provide confirmation that IRs are offering content and services that are, indeed, being used and appreciated by their end-users. Future analysis will focus on end-users' familiarity with and understanding of the term "institutional repository," the types of content they look for in the IR, how successful they perceive their interactions with the IR to be, and their beliefs about the specific benefits of IRs particularly relative to other information systems. The findings from this study will reflect IR end-users' viewpoints about what's working and what's not with regard to IRs. This information will be helpful not only to those who are building and running IRs, but also to those who are contributing content and to other end-users who are seeking to take full advantage of what IRs have to offer.

Acknowledgements

Support for the MIRACLE Project is provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) through its National Leadership Grant Program (LG-06-05-0126-05).