

Viewpoint

A Foundation for Digital Repositories

An interview with Michele Kimpton, executive director of the newly formed DSpace Foundation

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By Mary Grush



CT: What's the vision behind the creation of the DSpace Foundation?

Kimpton (photo at left): The role of the foundation is to be a central organization that can supply leadership and support to the overall community of DSpace users. The vision is to be able to promote and increase open access to scholarly works by using DSpace and advocating for open access. At the end of the day, *all* scholarly works would be available to anyone, at any time, in any part of the world, to further research, foster collaboration, and promote open access to knowledge.

What needs to happen in order to achieve more universal open access to scholarly works?

I think we're making strides, in that there's already DSpace and other open source repository platforms. Universities and other academic institutions are starting to put content that they create in house up online, but it's only a small fraction of the total content today. So I think to get to the stage where all content is available, you really have to hit critical mass in terms of institutional participation.

What barriers have kept institutions from participating?

One barrier that's no longer there, that might have been six or seven years ago, is *having a need*. Today there's a lot more content produced electronically, and institutions have had to figure out how to deal with that. Because not everything is produced in paper any more, you can't use traditional mechanisms for storage and preserving and providing access. And the Internet plus the digital content has driven not only the need to preserve the digital content, but also the ability to produce distributed, open access.

The barriers at this stage relate to enabling institutions tactically to be able to do this. Many institutions would rely on their libraries that don't necessarily have the technical infrastructure. So, DSpace has tried to solve this problem by making a very simple open source application to run and install without a lot of technical expertise.

Another barrier to overcome is for the creators of these works to embrace the value of putting them up online. Five or six years ago, when the Internet was just ramping up, the value proposition wasn't as clear. Now, I think we're starting to approach critical mass as faculty and researchers are getting more exposure and wanting to share their works in an easier fashion. One of the goals of DSpace is to make it easier for these creative works to have value, once they are up online.

So it's not just a question of technology -- there are some cultural elements as well.

Yes -- absolutely.

Are traditional publishers somewhat of a barrier as well?

The publishers are coming around -- though not all of them -- and adapting their strategies and policies. And there are open access advocacy organizations that are working with the publishers and tracking which ones are more prone to let creators have rights over their content, and which try to lock it down. Also, we try to give the creators of works -- faculty and researchers -- the knowledge so that when they are talking to publishers they understand their rights as authors. We've used Creative Commons licensing to help drive some of that.

It seems like scholarly communications are taking place in an increasing variety of digital contexts. How will DSpace keep up as digital formats change and related platforms evolve?

There are many applications that DSpace interfaces with -- such as learning environments or thesis publications. We

want to make sure that DSpace, which is really more of a repository for saving content, can talk to these applications as they change, and that it can handle new types of formats and objects that are being put into the repository for access. In order to do that, we build stable and standard application interfaces (APIs) into the DSpace platform.

So, as various applications evolve, so does DSpace through open APIs. And the other way it evolves is through open source. You have a large pool of developers from all different backgrounds working on different uses of DSpace, and they can write the code to keep DSpace updated for their particular needs. The code then is donated to the community code pool so that anybody with a related need can use it.

How do you manage all that development?

You don't! There's very light management infrastructure, because the real beauty of the project is that you have developers from all over the world that are making their own decisions on how they want to contribute to and implement the code. What the foundation will provide -- and the DSpace Foundation is new, just recently put in place - is a technology roadmap that is embraced by the community.

Why did MIT and HP take the step to create the DSpace Foundation as an independent organization instead of just letting DSpace continue as a joint project?

As the community became very large, MIT and HP wanted to provide the level of support that was needed -- and they had been doing that somewhat ad hoc up to that point. Also, with a foundation there would be an independent organization that would provide focus for the community. If the organization were to continue as a part of HP or MIT, that could potentially skew (or be perceived to skew) to the benefits of MIT or HP, the objectives that the community would want to achieve.

Make no mistake, MIT and HP have put in the effort and the funding to get this nonprofit off the ground, and they are committed to do that for as long as it takes. But they wanted to make sure that the community would be provided an objective venue, as opposed to one of them taking the lead.

You're at the beginning of your tenure as director of the DSpace Foundation, and the foundation is in its beginnings, too. Do you have a sense of a timeline for the impact of this work?

Sometimes when we are fully immersed in all this we forget that the days are still young. Large-scale digital archiving, preservation and access, and creating digital libraries are really at the forefront now, so I expect that there will be flurries of activity. But it's important to remember that we are at the leading edge now. And we should embrace it, because this is the time when we can set the direction for the next generation.