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**Submitted version deposited in CURVE January 2014**

**Original citation:**

Brick, B. and Corradini, Erika (2012) 'The HumBox: a teaching and learning repository for the humanities ' in *Marina Orsini-Jones and Laura Pibworth(Eds)*. Language Learning and Teaching: Future Routes Conference Proceedings of the Joint Conference of the VLEs' Languages User Group's Vi Annual Conference and the Routes into Languages West Midland Consortium (Coventry) Conference, Coventry University Languages Centre 16th March 2012 (pp: 38-46). Coventry: Coventry University

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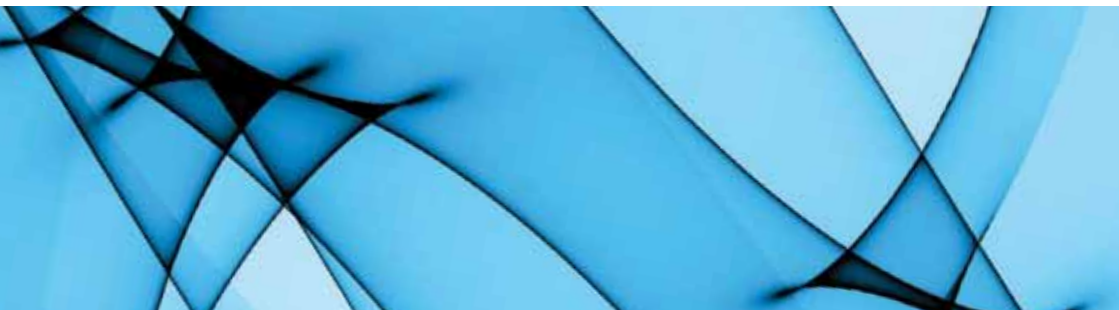
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# Language Learning and Teaching: Future Routes

## Conference Proceedings

Marina Orsini-Jones and Laura Pibworth (Eds.)



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Pedagogical Innovation in  
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**Proceedings of the Languages Virtual Learning Environments'  
User Group Annual Conference/Workshop jointly organised with  
the *Routes into Languages West Midlands Consortium* held on  
the 16th March 2011 in the Department of English and Languages  
at Coventry University.**

Marina Orsini-Jones and Laura Pibworth (Eds.)  
Coventry University

ISBN Number 978-1-84600-0331

# The *HumBox*: a teaching and learning repository for the humanities

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**Keywords:** *HumBox*, peer review, open educational resources (OERs), digital repository

## Introduction

The *HumBox* is an online space for the publication, sharing and managing of digital humanities resources. It is also the hub of a community of humanities professionals who are engaged in re-using and reviewing each other's resources and making connections with each other through the *HumBox* system. It was created as part of the *HumBox* project, which was funded under the JISC/HEA Open Education Resources (OER) programme and led by the Higher Education Academy Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) Subject Centre, based at the University of Southampton, in collaboration with the Subject Centres for English, History and Philosophical and Religious Studies. The project ran from April 2009 to April 2010, and since that time, the community of users on the *HumBox* has sustained the site and grown in numbers.

The UK OER Programme aimed to make a wide variety of educational resources created by academics freely available on line for anybody to discover, use and re-purpose. It was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in order to give the UK momentum in the growing international OER movement.

## 2. Which institutions were involved?

Each subject centre had a number of institutional partners whose role in the project was to provide teaching and learning resources to be uploaded to the *HumBox* repository. These Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were:

- Coventry University
- The University of Warwick
- University of Glasgow
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of Portsmouth
- Aberystwyth University
- University of Leeds
- The University of Sheffield
- The University of Manchester
- University of Southampton
- Aston University

### 3. How did the project start?

The funding was seen as a kick-start to establish a viable self-sustaining community which would last beyond the life time of the project. The partners were initially encouraged to upload a minimum of 40 resources to the repository in any format from a simple Word file to multimedia learning objects. Although the technology underpinning the site was important, the project was not about the technology *per se*. The *HumBox* site is an adaptation of the *LanguageBox*, which was itself based on a version of ePrints, which is open-source research repository software developed at the University of Southampton. The overarching idea was to build the community from the bottom up, with the user community involved in the development of the repository from its inception which meant that the discussions and direction the project took was heavily influenced by the issues important to them such as quality, copyright and review. This helped to foster a feeling of ownership and meant that individuals identified themselves strongly with the project.

The repository's design was influenced by a number of projects involving the LLAS Subject Centre and the University of Southampton which explored issues round the storing and sharing of language learning resources in a dedicated community repository. These were the L20: *Sharing Language Learning Objects* (JISC 2005), the *Contextualised Learning Activity Repository Tools project (CLAReT)* (JISC 2006), and the *Language Box* which was developed as part of the Faroes project (JISC 2009).

These projects had two broad areas of investigation:

1. The specific technical requirements of a digital repository for a particular teaching community, and the development of initiatives for sharing, repurposing, reviewing and editing of learning resources in the area of language teaching.
2. Establishing simple technical processes and providing teachers with considerable support in understanding how to disaggregate their material into repurposable core resources and in how best to make material available for colleagues to share.

The Faroes project developed a repository called the *Language Box* which provides storage and of online digital content for use by teachers and students, and incorporates some of the key affordances of Web 2.0 technology.

### 4. How successful has it been?

Data from internet-tracking of *HumBox* shows that at the time of writing (2011) the number of registered users has nearly trebled since the launch of the site in February, 2010. The site now has over 500 registered users, with approximately 27,000 of individual visitors to the site and 170,000 page views of the site. The majority of these

new users have joined the site since the end of the funded *HumBox* project, which indicates ongoing, voluntary interest in the *HumBox*.

There are many thousands more people viewing the site and downloading resources. Visitors come from a wide range of countries (147) and from a range of media, mostly via Google or direct entry into the *HumBox*. This indicates that the site continues to be popular and is reaching an ever-wider audience.

The most recent contributions to the site were made by new members to the *HumBox* community. The total number of items in *HumBox* is actually far greater than the system cites – at approximately 2816. This figure differs from the number of cited resources, because some items may consist of several files, but under *HumBox* terminology, they would still be considered as one ‘resource’.

A peer review process has been introduced and is on-going. An active community of humanities lecturers regularly uses the site and the level of awareness of OERs in the Higher Education sector has risen substantially through the publication of a number of articles and numerous conference presentations.

## 5. How is the repository structured?

One of the key aims of the project was to make the *HumBox* user-friendly and not intimidating to potential users. Once the initial registration is complete resources can be uploaded to the site and managed from a personal account as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Profile Page

The profile page (see Figure 1) is one of the main characteristics of the site. Users are able to create a profile page which enables them to showcase their teaching work and link to their home page. It also includes recently published items; comments members have made on their resource; whether it has been downloaded or remixed; a list of their bookmarked items and any collections of resources they may have produced. A collection is a number of resources with a common theme.

The profile page allows the users to see how your resources are being used and allows them to see how the resources of others are being used. It also acts as a way for them to present the teaching side of their profession, perhaps to complement an already existing research profile and provides the opportunity for them to see the impact of their teaching materials beyond your own institution.



Figure 2: Resource Description and Upload Page

The resource description page is where users upload resources and input metadata describing the resource. This page has been kept intentionally simple and demands a minimal amount of metadata, so that users are not deterred from sharing their teaching resources by the need to complete an onerous amount of descriptive information.



Figure 3: Resource Page

The resource page contains the following information: preview screen; description; key words and tags; the date of the deposit; the name of the depositor; languages; attribution; number of downloads and the specific nature of the 'Creative Commons' licence. This screen provides an immediate impression of what the resource is to the user which helps them make a rapid decision about whether they want to use it.

Granularity is an important part of the repository's design: it is not complete courses that are on offer but resources based around one teaching point or theme. These can be gathered in collections of resources. This ensures maximum 'shareability' and provides contributors with the opportunity to showcase their work rather than supplying all of the resources for a particular course or module.



Figure 4: Toolbox, Comments and Notes



At the bottom of the resource page users have the opportunity to engage with the resources either by bookmarking them; downloading them and remixing them; using the Toolbox; commenting on how they have used the resource or providing further information which could enhance it. The 'comments' area has proved popular with users, as many find that their resources are enhanced by useful comments provided here.

## **6. Why use the *HumBox*?**

A survey from 2010 (LLAS) found numerous reasons why academics have chosen to use the *HumBox* including finding out what other institutions and practitioners are doing; to share practice and have work reviewed, to find useful resources to use or adapt, to find new ideas to enhance practice, to keep up with new developments, to provide an opportunity for early career researchers to showcase their research and teaching materials and also to provide an opportunity to see perspectives from other humanities disciplines. This is a summary of their responses:

### **6.1 What is good about the *HumBox*?**

- Easy and intuitive
- Open access
- Variety of teaching materials included
- Wealth of resources
- Gives the opportunity to share good practice
- Can adapt materials
- Sense of community
- Targeted at humanities community
- Good presentation
- Resources easy to download
- Good quality materials

### **6.2 Why is the *HumBox* useful?**

- To see what other institutions and practitioners are doing
- To share practice on standard aspects of learning e.g. study skills
- To help with finding useful resources to adapt for own students
- To help practitioners reflect on their own teaching
- To find ideas to improve/enhance one's own practice by seeing new/innovative ways of presenting material
- To keep up with developments in the discipline
- To help early career researchers to demonstrate teaching experience and communicate research work
- To see things from the perspective of other humanities disciplines

*HumBox* is a popular site that continues to grow in numbers of resources and registered users. Users find it to be a rich site for both resources and ideas and an intuitive and attractive place through which to share their own work. A smaller number of users are engaged in deeper activity in relation to *HumBox*'s OERs, and are downloading, editing and repurposing resources, or commenting/reviewing the work of others.

### **Conclusion and future developments**

One of the main objectives is to involve more language practitioners, however, Atenas (2011) has argued that there are three reasons why a strong sharing culture has not developed: 'Using someone else's resources, the fear of being plagiarised and the fear to look as someone that is plagiarising somebody else'. However, Kernohan (2011) has argued that the current changes to the HE fee regime and the concomitant budgetary scrutiny means that OERs are becoming 'an essential part of academic practice'.

It is also hoped that the *HumBox* will be improved, for example with the introduction of a discussion forum and email alerts when new resources are added. The review and comment facility has grown organically with some users actively seeking reviewers to test their materials on. There is certainly scope to make this facility more sophisticated. Finally, users have requested an improvement in the data which shows how often resources have been viewed and downloaded.


The *HumBox* is currently being used in at least two separate research projects and it will continue to evolve as a tool for the UK humanities teaching community, in response to feedback and user comments. Tracking of *HumBox* resources and research into how open access repositories serve their communities will also be ongoing as *HumBox* moves forward.

To find out more about *HumBox* and sign up, please visit [www.humbox.ac.uk](http://www.humbox.ac.uk). School and college teachers are welcome to sign up too.

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*“Despite the advent of the English Baccalaureate, many schools are still lagging behind in their Modern Foreign Languages provision. It is more important than ever that we work in partnership to get across the message that languages are important. The message certainly rang loud and clear at this conference, and I would welcome further opportunities for our schools to be involved in such work.”*

**Nick Jones**

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