e-Collaboration Workshop: Access Grid, Portals and other Virtual Research Environments for the Social Sciences

Rob Allan, **Rob Crouchley** and **Michael Daw** cover their one-day workshop reporting on the latest developments in e-Collaboration technology and applications, held on 28 June 2006.
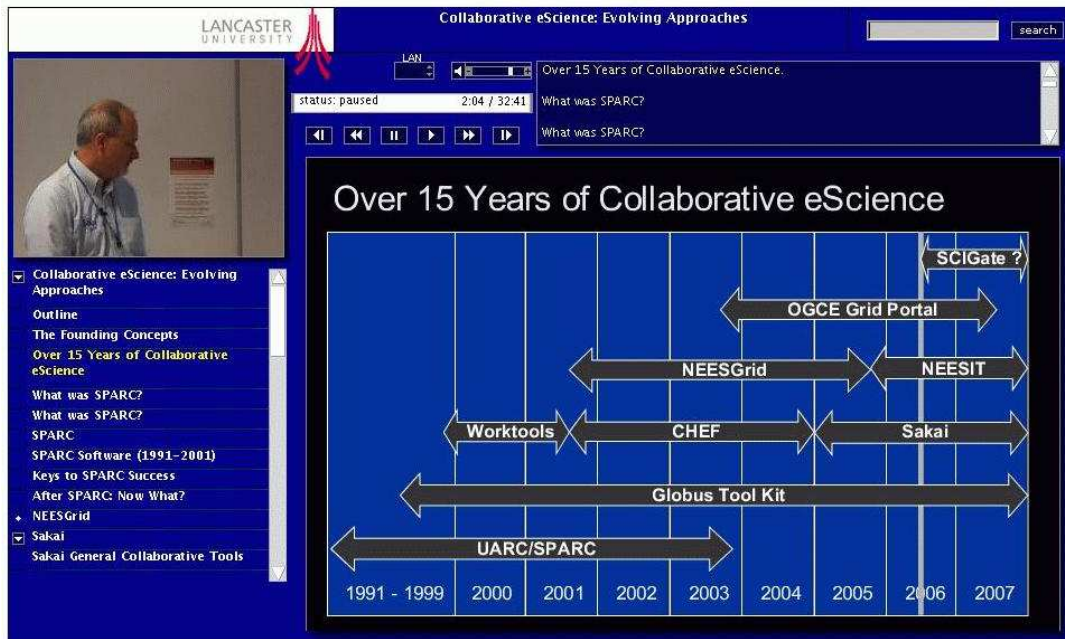
Introduction

This workshop was held on 28 June 2006 at Manchester Metropolitan University as part of the 2nd International Conference on e-Social Science hosted by the National Centre for e-Social Science (NCeSS).

The aim of the workshop was to bring together conference attendees interested in e-Collaboration as part of their research activities, to review requirements and to see what is currently going on in various JISC-funded projects. Several of these are funded by the Virtual Research Environments Programme [1]. Fifteen projects were funded in this programme (starting in early 2005), using a range of collaboration tools and on-line technologies to deliver research services to end-users across a range of disciplines. In addition there is the Access Grid Support Centre and the ReDReSS Training and Awareness Project, both described below. We have attempted to "cross-pollinate" these projects through a number of jointly organised workshops and an on-line Wiki (itself a form of Web-based collaboration tool) with links to related information [2].

This workshop was broadly scoped into two sessions, one on portals and the other on Access Grid focussing on e-Collaboration as an increasingly vital element of today's complex research activities.

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Figure 1: Charles Severance presenting on Collaborative e-Science captured in ReDRESS.

We were very pleased that **Charles Severance** from University of Michigan was able to attend and present work in the Sakai portal project to support distributed research teams. His stimulating talk, entitled *Collaborative e-Science, Evolving Approaches*, discussed different ways for scientists to interact in 'virtual collaborations'. Charles explained that early emphasis was being placed on sharing resources with a pre-defined set of Web-based tools, bringing people together interactively later on. During work spanning some 15 years it is clear that re-usable software is necessary to be able to respond quickly to such changing requirements as users adapt their work practices to the technology available. This also demonstrated the requirement to link together many different tools and to put an emphasis on user interfaces. Inter-operability between them rather than reliance on middleware is key to this.

Adrian Fish and **Miguel Gonzalez**, both of University of Lancaster, described the LUCeS Conferencing Tool which is being included as a component for Sakai. It includes functionality such as video conferencing (via a free, open source Java applet), shared desktop, and whiteboard, chat and "moviecaster" from one simple user interface. This work is being conducted as part of the Sakai VRE Demonstrator, and user requirements have indicated that such tools are useful. Adrian and Miguel demonstrated some of the tools working between two laptop PCs.

Rahim Lakhoo, University of Portsmouth, presented his work in a talk entitled *Audio Visual Conferencing Tools, Narada Broker and MAST*. This is also part of the Sakai VRE Demonstrator project and is exploring other aspects of video conferencing tools with the aim of linking portal and desktop applications into Access Grid with associated development of video and chat services. These are being developed using the GridSphere portal and Java Media Framework.

Paul Watry, University of Liverpool, described the Cheshire III VRE Project, in particular the MultiValent component which is used for shared interpretation of documents in a variety of formats.

The Access Grid (AG) session began with a presentation from **Michael Daw**, University of Manchester, on recent updates in the work of the Access Grid Support Centre. This was followed by three talks illustrating the success of the AG in various applications. He first spoke on *Memetic as a Virtual Research Environment*. Memetic is now being used by several groups to record meetings and other activities taking place in an AG environment. It enables sessions to be marked up by a 'reporter' to act as a record for subsequent analysis. In addition to standard meetings, at which key decision points and supporting information might be recorded, its use is also being explored as an evaluation tool for the performing arts. Examples of dance and music were shown and it was illustrated how the Memetic markup language could be extended to indicate positive or negative socio-emotional areas or task areas.

Martin Turner, University of Manchester, described work on Portals and 3D Visualisation for non-Scientific Users, currently being undertaken in the CSAGE (Collaborative Stereoscopic Access Grid Environment) Project. This has many applications ranging from archaeology, the learning of foreign languages to performing art with distributed participants in a virtual 3D installation.

Finally, **Paul Beckett**, Univeristy of East Anglia, illustrated the use of portals and AG working together in a presentation entitled *e-Collaboration in the History of Political Discourse*. In this project, M.A. students at several universities work together in reading groups with experts to interpret texts. Ergonomic aspects of using the AG had been addressed and an e-Texts Forum had been set up in which the students could contribute and share opinions in an uninhibited way. This also employed the Sakai Wiki tool developed at University of Cambridge in another VRE project.

The workshop ended with a number of demonstrations and discussion on further ways that AG and Portals could usefully be combined.

On-line Version of Presentations

The ReDReSS Training and Awareness Project (Resource Discovery for Researchers in e-Social Science) was set up in 2003 jointly funded by JISC and ESRC. It is co-ordinated by the Collaboration for Quantitative e-Social Science, a joint venture of University of Lancaster and Daresbury Laboratory which is now a node of NCeSS. Paul Dolby of the ReDRESS Project has made audio-visual recordings of a number of workshops held over the last two years on topics such as Grid applications, Internet security and confidentiality, and information and knowledge management. A previous workshop, *Portals and VREs*, held at last year's 1st International Conference on e-Social Science is also available online [3].

Presentations at this workshop now form an on-line record and are accessible to all [4].

References

1. JISC Virtual Research Environments Programme
    http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme_vre [Richard, I think this may have changed now]

2. Home of TWiki.EResearch   http://www.grids.ac.uk/eResearch

3. Portals and VREs Workshop at 1st International Conference on e-Social Science 2005 http://www.ncess.ac.uk

4. NCeSS Winter Training School - 27 February - 2 March 2006, Manchester University UK
    http://redress.lancs.ac.uk/Workshops/Presentations.html#ncess2nd

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[RJA: should be OK]

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