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A portfolio-based approach to developing wiki and blog capabilities – from individuals to institution, one 'size' does not fit all

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Abstract

Challenges for institutional learning technology services are evident in many developments in social software, such as wikis and blogs, and pressures from a demanding, techno-literate clientele. With difficulties in forecasting the future direction, pace and impact of such trends, adopting a single system may constrain the ability to respond to evolving user needs and to subsequent developments.

At UoL, a 'deliberately emergent' approach has been adopted within the e-learning strategy, with a variety of wiki/blog initiatives now being pursued in different contexts in a portfolio approach. This has two benefits: firstly, to avoid any constraints inherent in a 'one size fits all' approach to managing evolving requirements; and second, to enhance the institutional capability to deploy wikis and blogs in a wider range of applications and academic contexts.

The approach has been informed by UoL participation in the JISC-funded, OU-led Prowe research project. Key lessons concerned the diverse nature and needs of campus-based and remote communities, as well as the role of 'soft' factors in shaping the adoption of new technologies. In parallel, an institutional web content management system has been implemented, based on the open source Plone® software, with the provision of wiki/blog tools as part of the configuration from the outset.

From September 2005, initial facilities were provided for demonstration, experimental and developmental use, including wiki/blog tools to support collaborative working. Between July 2006 and February 2007, server capacity was increased twice more to cope with growing usage and with further user features being provided. Developments to extend further the range of user features are in hand.

Early applications have included:

a)   the creation of event and project repositories for dissemination purposes;

b)   use of tools for collaborative work in small teaching and research communities;

c)   use of wiki/blog features for developing courseware and collaborative student activities.

The wiki/blog (r)evolution has now been extended to other technical environments, including:

a) an initial offline trial and now standard use of wiki/blog plug-ins for the UoL Blackboard VLE, allowing use by students who lack the web authorisations for contributory use of some Plone sites

b) a Moodle-based project with built-in wiki/blog facilities, in a joint research project making use of PDAs and Pocket PCs supporting trainee teachers' school placements; and

c) standalone proprietary environments, such as the use of Blogger in a collaborative research project developing FE links and PmWiki in a course activity.

Plans for evaluation are at an early stage. Initial user needs research has formed part of the Prowe project. A first survey of Plone web authors undertaken in May/June 2007 investigated early use and experience.

Initial views suggest that users value the system's flexibility, and the ability to reconfigure and extend it as needs change and new opportunities arise. And also having a greater degree of direct control, rather than being dependent upon expert or dedicated support for everyday creation and input tasks.

This short paper will review the UoL approach in developing capacity and capability for wiki/blog deployment. It will illustrate use in different contexts and in different application areas. Early user research will be reported and further directions outlined.

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