Distributed Education WordPress Pilot Project

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Executive Summary

Distributed Education would like to run a 9 month pilot project to evaluate the use of the WordPress publishing platform as a possible tool for faculty to use to develop and maintain stand alone websites and/or a blogs.

DE has identified 2 goals for the pilot:

1. The primary goal is to determine the feasibility of using the WordPress platform as a replacement for FrontPage and Contribute for stand alone faculty websites at Camosun.
2. A second goal will be to examine the use of WordPress as a traditional blog platform for faculty who wish to explore blogging as part of their pedagogical practice.

The rationale for this pilot is threefold:

1. The current standard website maintenance tool, FrontPage, has been deprecated by Microsoft and will soon become unsupported.
2. There is still considerable demand from faculty for stand alone websites that live outside of Desire2Learn, yet are still supported by the College (see June 2009 ITS/DE Staff Survey).
3. There has also been demand from faculty, departments and other organizations within the college for assistance from Distributed Education in setting up blogs. In the past 6 months, DE has supported the use of blogs for various projects in a number of schools including Health & Human Services (http://nepalfieldschool.blogspot.com/), Arts and Science (http://asnewsletter.wordpress.com/), and the English Creative Writing Program (http://besidethepoint.net/). These blogs have been developed on platforms outside of Camosun.

Pilot Outcomes

Through the course of this pilot we hope to determine answers to the following questions & situations:

1. What is the level of support required to support both experienced and new faculty?
2. How much effort is required to migrate existing website content to the WordPress platform?
3. What types of plugins and theme would faculty find useful?
4. What types of plugins and customizations would administrators require to effectively manage the system?
5. Is the platform easy enough for faculty to use?
6. What types of training would be required to support faculty?
7. Is the platform flexible enough to be used as a CMS to replace FrontPage/Contribute?
8. What types of Terms of Service would be required to roll out a service such as this to faculty (copyright, acceptable use policy, etc)?

9. What issues can we expect that might affect the scalability and general rollout of the service (disk space per blog, server and bandwidth stress, spam administration, etc.)?

Pilot Description

DE is proposing offering a limited pilot project to 5 faculty at Camosun.

- 3 current faculty website users (ideally 2 Frontpage & 1 Contribute).
- 1 faculty who wishes to have a website, but has never used a website tool.
- 1 faculty who wishes to use the system as a blog.

Faculty will be asked to perform specific tasks throughout the pilot related to common tasks a faculty member might be required to perform when using WordPress as a faculty website. These would include:

- Adding, editing and deleting HTML content.
- Adding, editing and deleting new pages and posts.
- Adding, managing and deleting common web file formats including images, PDF and Office documents.
- Adding, managing & deleting multimedia content such as podcasts and videos.
- Incorporating embeddable content from various Web 2.0 websites (such as YouTube videos).
- Incorporating library services (such as deep linking to documents in Library databases).
- Test a variety of plugins and themes that may be useful in an educational context.
- Other activities related to maintaining a website.

Timelines

The pilot will run from October 1st, 2009 to June 30th, 2010. For some tasks below I have added in a rough estimate of timelines within the phases and identified some task requiring support and work from IT Services.

Phase 1: Research & Deployment (October 1 to December 30)

- Research platform requirements (with IT Services by mid-October)
- Research default set of plugins and themes (October/November)
- Develop server environment (IT Services by end of October)
- Recruit faculty (by the end of October)
- Train faculty (November)
- Migrate existing content from faculty websites to blog platform (November)
- Set up domain naming convention (IT Services/DE)
- Set up monitoring systems (logs, develop baselines, etc) to measure traffic loads and system usage (ITS/DE by December)

Phase 2: Pilot (January 1, 2010 – April 30th, 2010)

- Faculty actively using WordPress for course websites.
- Research system integration with Active Directory (ITS).

- Monitor system usage and traffic to gather quantitative statistics related to server and system performance (IT Services/DE).

Phase 3: Evaluation & Clean Up (May 1-June 30th, 2010)

Evaluation will consist of both qualitative and quantitative data collected by DE at the conclusion of the pilot.

- An evaluation rubric will be developed during the course of the pilot. Faculty will be asked to complete the rubric to provide quantitative data related to their experience with the pilot.
- A face to face roundtable debrief with the faculty will also take part to provide qualitative research.
- Face to face debrief with ITS regarding their input and involvement in the pilot will also provide qualitative data with regard to network and infrastructure issues.
- Quantitative technical data (traffic logs, server loads, filtered spam, etc.) will be collected and compiled to provide a baseline for future resource requirements.
- Additional wrap-up tasks may be required. For example, website data may need to be transferred back to faculty websites at the end of the pilot.

Resources Required

The project lead for the pilot will be Clint Lalonde in Distributed Education, who will also provide primary support to faculty.

Network infrastructure support (server support) will be provided by IT Services. Specifically we are looking for the following support for the pilot:

- Set up of the appropriate network and server environment to run the WordPress application (see requirements below), including an adequate and appropriate amount of storage space.
- Installation of the WordPress application.
- Monitoring of, and support for, server & network infrastructure during the length of the pilot including reasonable and appropriate response time in case of downtime (with the understanding among all parties involved that this is a pilot project and not a mission critical application).
- Assistance as required with regards to network and server support

Additionally DE would like to be able to consult with IT Services on issues such as examining the LDAP integration with Active Directory, domain naming conventions, and traffic monitoring & server load during pilot.

DE would require admin level access to the WordPress application, but does not anticipate requiring admin level access to the server or infrastructure.

The Platform: WordPress

WordPress began as a blogging platform but has since become a more full featured CMS (Content Management System see http://codex.wordpress.org/User:Lastnode/Wordpress_CMS) that has developed traction with educators (http://blog.davelester.org/2008/10/28/wordpress-multi-user-on-college-campuses/).

In British Columbia, there is a burgeoning WordPress community in post-secondary education with both UBC (http://blogs.ubc.ca/) and UNBC (http://blogs.unbc.ca/) having recently run successful pilot programs of WordPress as both a traditional blogging platform and as a replacement for faculty websites. These pilots culminated in the recent WordCampEd conference (http://vancouverwordcamped.org/) in Vancouver this past February, and the development of the WPMu in Education community (http://dev.wpmued.org/).

The addition of a multi-user platform for WordPress (WPMu) in 2005 has added enterprise functionality to the platform, including LDAP support for possible integration with Active Directory (see http://techxplorer.com/2008/01/29/wordpress-and-ldap-authentication/ and http://wpmuldap.frozenpc.net/documentation/), the ability to spawn separate and discrete sites administered from a single instance, and the ability to manage users and roles (http://justintadlock.com/archives/2009/08/30/users-roles-and-capabilities-in-wordpress). WPMu is the blogging platform that powers the very popular EDUblogs (http://edublogs.org/) service based in Australia. This service currently hosted over 350,000 educational blogs.

 Advantages of using WordPress:

- Modular and extensible design with many plugins to extend functionality.
- Strong and active user community, especially in education (see http://dev.wpmued.org/) and within the province.
- Open source released under GNU General Public License.
- Centralized administration allows administration of multiple sites under a single instance.
- LDAP support.
- Post directly from Word.
- Web based (browser) interface requires no software installations on client machines.
- Support for syndication services (Atom/RSS feeds) allowing for aggregation and syndication of content.
- Robust spam protection using Akismet blog comment spam filtering tool.
- Many years of experience in DE with the platform, and experience in IT Services with both PHP and MySQL.

System Requirements
WordPress is Open Source and requires PHP (v 4.3 or greater), MySQL (v 4.0 or greater). Recommended web server is Apache with mod_rewrite enabled.

Pilot Deliverable

A final report on the pilot and recommendations for next steps will be provided to IT Services by Distributed Education by July 1, 2010.