



COMMUNITY

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Connect, Share, Create: The Development of an Online Community to Support Collaboration

Introduction

The recent explosion of social networking and community-oriented websites such as Facebook, Flickr, MySpace has changed the way that we function online. Instead of absorbing information in a passive way, these new web sites allow everyone, regardless of age or location, to collaborate and generate new information. As a result the Internet is no longer just an information delivery tool but it is also a knowledge creation and sharing tool for the masses.

The ability to collectively create and share content online in a networked fashion has major implications for education. Using social networking technologies, students can collaborate and become active creators of information as opposed to passive recipients. This poses a challenge to current systems, as conventional course websites have limited capacity for fostering a deep sense collaboration and community necessary for this high-level of interaction. A new generation of course management and delivery systems are required in order to support this new demand for networking and collaboratively creating educational content.

Objective

To develop a set of Community modules that integrates with existing systems to allow students and faculty to collaboratively create and share information online.

Project Description

A new Community system is currently being built directly into the custom-built e-learning portal and learning management system, Online Course Resources*. This central system houses student and faculty schedules, lecture and course materials, and curriculum map tools and is accessed thousands of times a day by students and teaching faculty. The Community system will be tightly integrated into the central system to compliment the existing components and to ensure ease-of-use.

Community Modules

A number of key features have been identified within the Community system that are required in order to achieve a basic level of usability. The development strategy has been to build each key feature as a "module" that can then be enabled or disabled at any time by the creator or administrator of each community. This method allows the system to grow, and new modules can be developed and added as they become available.

Discussions Module

This module allows community members to freely discuss and collaborate on any topics they choose. They can create new topics and respond to existing topics. Community administrators are able to moderate topics and edit / remove topics and replies as required.

Announcements & Events Module

This module allows community administrators to post announcements within their community. These announcements are available on the front-page of the community website and via RSS syndication. A unique feature of this module is that it is tightly integrated with key calendaring features. For instance, an announcement about a calendar event, such as a Staff Committee Lunch, can be added to the calendar as well as in an iCalendar (.ics) calendar feed by simply checking a box.

Pages Module

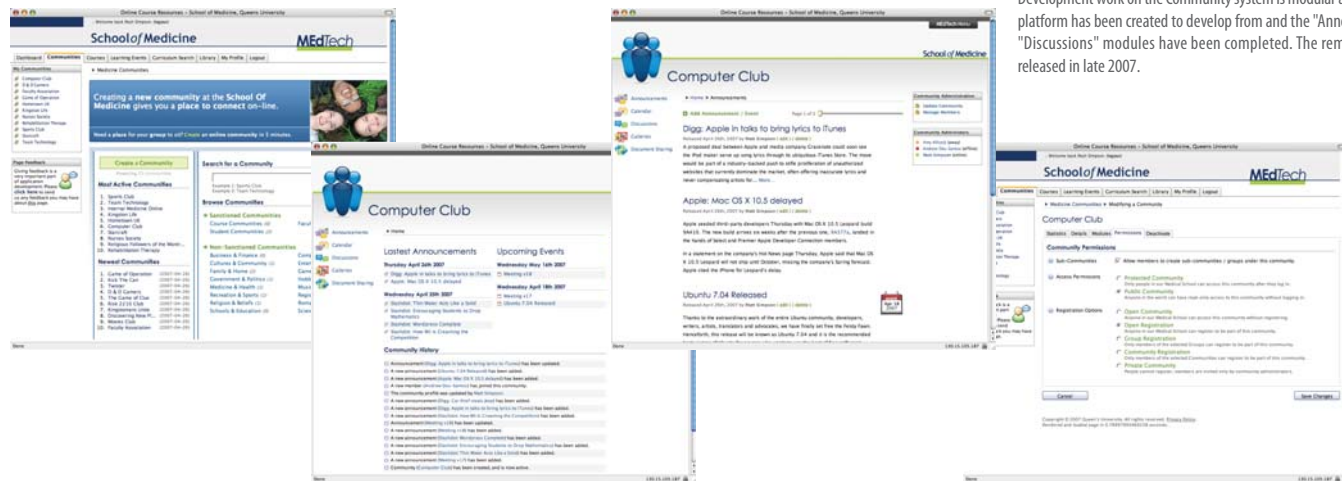
This module can be used to turn a very structured modular based community into its own completely unique website by allowing community administrators to create an infinite number of HTML pages within their community. Pages are created using a built-in WYSIWYG HTML editor so it is easy for anyone to create and maintain content within their website

Wiki Module

Wikis are a powerful tool for online collaboration. Using a wiki, multiple authors can collaborate on document and changes are tracked as well as reversible. This module will allow for the collaborative creation of wiki pages on the community site using standard wiki mark-up and methodologies.

Project Status

Development work on the Community system is modular and on-going. A functional platform has been created to develop from and the "Announcements & Events" and "Discussions" modules have been completed. The remaining modules will be released in late 2007.



Galleries Module

This module allows for the creation of multiple image galleries (or folders) within a community where photographs or illustrations can be uploaded and stored. Community administrators can also choose whether or not they wish to allow community members themselves to upload images to selected galleries. This feature can also be used to share digital learning objects for sanctioned course communities.

Document-Sharing Module

Much like the galleries module, this module allows for the collaborative creation of multiple documents (or folders). A key difference is that the documents are version-controlled. The proposed uses for this module include everything from online storage of single-document group collaboration projects, to course materials, to student assignment drop-boxes. Community administrators are able to set basic read / write permissions on each share, allowing for many organic uses.

Conclusion

The goal of the Community system is to extend the existing e-learning platform to allow students and faculty to collaboratively create and share information online. The hope is that this new avenue for online interaction will result in increased involvement in activities, from class discussions to external social clubs, by increasing the visibility and awareness of these communities and groups. The modular architecture of the system is scalable so that the undergraduate e-learning platform can be expanded to accommodate postgraduate training programs, CME courses, and alumni groups creating a dynamic and thriving e-learning ecosystem for the entire School of Medicine.

* For more information on our learning management system, please visit our website for copies of posters presented at previous AFMC conferences. <http://meds.queensu.ca/medtech/about/presentations>