Using Blogs, RSS Feeds, and Podcasting in Teaching

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What are Blogs?

- “Blog” = shorthand for “Weblog”
- “basically a journal that is available on the web”
  (http://www.advancinginsights.com/mybiz/?q=node/99)
- “a type of Web content typically created by independent writers (although some reporters for media companies create blogs on newspaper or magazine sites). Some are personal journals; others resemble newsletters or columns. Often, they contain links to other sources of content.”
  (http://www.bnet.fordham.edu/carey1/glossary.htm)
Intro to Astronomy (Fall 2004)
[http://www.phy.duke.edu/~hsg/55/blogs.html]
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Literacy, Writing, Tutoring (Spring 2005) [access to blogs restricted to class members]
Exploring Medicine Honduras Trip (Spring 2005)
[http://pilot.cit.duke.edu/blogs/interdis422c/]
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Movable Type

- Licensed product from Six Apart: http://www.sixapart.com/movabletype/
- Limited free version
- Education license options
  - Single professor / classroom or
  - Based on number of enrolled students
- Okay to modify source code as long as do not redistribute without permission
Issues Encountered using Movable Type

• No batch facilities for creating multiple blogs
  – Time/effort to create or modify $n$ blogs is roughly linear
• No built-in capabilities for grouping related blogs
• Permissions within a blog not appropriately granular
  – E.g., same permission that lets blog author change display options (like blog name, number of days displayed, etc.) also lets blog author specify location of blog data on server disk
Authentication and Authorization

• Reading a blog
  – Easy to set up using Apache web server and campus WebAuth

• Authoring a blog
  – Movable Type has own author database with no easily discernible hooks for connecting into WebAuth authentication
  – Experimented with some hacks to Movable Type source code to integrate with WebAuth but results not entirely satisfactory
Next Steps for Blogs in Instructional Context

- Interest by faculty in blogs is increasing
- Investigate other blog software options, including free / open-source
  - WordPress (http://wordpress.org/)
  - b2evolution (http://b2evolution.net/)
  - Roller (http://www.rollerweblogger.org/page/project)
- Beginning conversations with OIT about campus blogging service
- Investigating Journal LX, a blogging plugin to Blackboard
What is an RSS Feed?

- RSS = Really Simple Syndication
- “basically a list of headlines encoded so that it can be easily read or displayed by another program or website” ([http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/wiki?IntroToRSS](http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/wiki?IntroToRSS))
- XML document
- Produced automatically by most blogging tools ... but can also be produced in many other ways (e.g., many news sites provide RSS feeds)
RSS Feeds available from CNN

Extract from CNN Technology RSS Feed

<rss version="2.0">
  <channel>
    <title>CNN.com - Technology</title>
    <link>http://www.cnn.com/rssclick/TECH/?section=cnn_tech</link>
    <description>CNN.com delivers up-to-the-minute news and information on the latest top ...</description>
    ...
    <item>
      <title>Shuttle launch moved to May 22</title>
      <description>NASA announced Wednesday it had moved the launch date for the space shuttle Discovery to May 22, a week later than previously scheduled.</description>
      <pubDate>Thu, 21 Apr 2005 10:02:53 EDT</pubDate>
    </item>
    ...
  </channel>
</rss>
How to Use RSS Feeds: RSS Feed Readers / Aggregators

- Raw RSS feeds, while human-readable, are not intended to be read by humans
- RSS aggregators provide a human-usable interface to RSS feeds:
  - Bloglines (http://www.bloglines.com/)
  - Sage extension to Firefox
  - Firefox built-in “Live Bookmarks”
Exploring Medicine Blog RSS Feed

Using Sage in Firefox
Firefox “Live Bookmarks”

• View RSS feed headlines in bookmarks toolbar or menu

• Look for the orange icon in the lower right corner of the browser—click the icon to add the RSS feed to your bookmarks

• Can add a live bookmark manually if orange icon does not appear but you know the URL for the feed
What is Podcasting?

- Like using a desktop RSS feed aggregator ... except that, rather than collecting textual contents of the feed, it collects enclosed audio content (usually in the form of MP3 files)
- Not restricted to use with iPods – can work with many types of media file players
- Technically, a podcast is an RSS 2.0 feed with enclosures
Podcasting Advantage

Content *comes to* the student rather than the student having to *go get* the content

Scenario ...

- Media file links occur in RSS feed for course
- iPodder checks subscribed feeds at student-defined intervals (or on demand)
- iPodder downloads media file and adds it to iTunes library
- Student syncs iPod – media file added to iPod
First Weblog

April 25, 2005

Interesting sound file

Here is an interesting audio file that I found: Download file.

Posted by coblej at 09:49 AM | Comments (0)
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Podcast

<rss version="2.0">
  <channel>
    ...
    <item>
      <title>Interesting sound file</title>
      <description>
        <p>Here is an interesting audio file that I found:<br />
        <a href="http://dev.cit.duke.edu/blogs/first/archives/sf_mp3_34sec.mp3">
            Download file</a>.<br />
        </p>
      </description>
    ...
    <enclosure url="http://dev.cit.duke.edu/blogs/first/archives/sf_mp3_34sec.mp3"
               length="555366" type="audio/mpeg"/>
    </item>
  </channel>
</rss>

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http://cit.duke.edu
iPodder 2.0

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http://cit.duke.edu
Podcast Audio File
Loaded into iTunes
Podcast Technical Requirements

• To **produce** a podcast ...
  – A server that can generate an RSS 2.0 feed with enclosures
    • E.g., Movable Type with the MT-Enclosures plugin

• To **receive** a podcast ...
  – Client software that can receive an RSS 2.0 feed with enclosures and download the media files referenced in the enclosures
    • E.g., iPodder (http://www.ipodder.org/)
MT-Enclosures - Movable Type Plugin

- How it works ...
  - Either upload the media file (e.g., an MP3 file) to Movable Type or have the media file available for download on another server
  - Create a blog entry that includes a link to the media file using a standard `<a href="...">` tag
  - MT-Enclosures plugin "mines" the blog entry for the media file link and creates an `<enclosure>` tag in the RSS 2.0 feed
Challenges in Podcast Use

• Have to either have or produce the audio files

• Media files must be accessible in non-streamed format

• Access control
  – No easy way (that I know of) to restrict access to podcast (other than through security by obscurity)
Podcast Use in ISIS 270


- Working in small groups, students produce weekly podcasts of group discussions and expert interviews
Selected Resources


Interested in trying out these technologies in your teaching?

• If you have a definite idea of something you want to do …
  – Apply for a Jump Start grant (http://cit.duke.edu/help/funding/jumpstart.do)

• To explore ideas with a CIT consultant …
  – Send an email describing your interest in as much detail as possible to cit@duke.edu
Questions?

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