

The wConnect Final Report

There is a lot of things that go into making a social network. My summer DREU experience at State College, PA has proven that to me. I was relocated from Minneapolis, MN to delve into this matter with the team lead by Mary Beth Rosson.

Project Description:

The project that Prof. Rosson is working on is an online community called wConnect. This community is an effort to nourish women in a computer related field at the lowest level so that they may learn from mentors and may, when they've gained sufficient experience, be a mentor in return. The wConnect community currently has its web appearance as a Facebook application. The first project is to use the information about the members via their profiles and create visual representation of the data. (i.e. a map that shows where they are all from or a list of people with the same name as you) These should be based on queries to the data base. The goal is to be creative in finding ways these members can interact with each other.

Although Facebook, a preexisting online social network, is a good way to get members right away, some people don't have a Facebook account, nor want one. This brought up a research project on how we can make an easy, dynamic site that can take in ideas from the community and display it in an organized fashion. The question is whether or not Drupal would make a sufficient replacement for the Facebook group. Taken from Drupal.org, "Drupal is a free software package that allows an individual or a community of users to easily publish, manage and organize a wide variety of content on a website." This description appears to be a very attractive solution to creating such a website, so the question is "can our vision be represented effectively with Drupal?" and "Will this work better than Facebook?"

Review of prior Work:

There is a lot to be said about a community's online presence. For groups that rarely meet face-to-face, an online base may be the best thing they have and what keeps the group

alive. Challenges come with however because you need to make enough of a presence to let people know you exist while keeping them interested in it once they get there.

Facebook. It is the social network that most know and love. At the moment, wConnect has a presence in the form of an application, but it doesn't really feel like a home. The target of Facebook was originally college students to regain contact as they were dispersed throughout the country. This is not the goal or dream of the wConnect community. There are a lot of reasons one would make a social network, but they all provide some type of information to the user. "Such information may be as simple as an invitation to a party, or as consequential as information about job opportunities" [1]. We wanted to provide a nurturing environment that emphasizes that they are part of something local.

Other existing social networks that exist and flourish include: mySpace, Xanga, Twitter, and so many more to list. These social structures let people interact at a level made for their users. All of the above examples however are built around the individual level and are hard to use on their own to make a web presence of wConnect known. Members of wConnect should all be members of the group and aspiring towards the common goal, not cluttered with all the users that only have one because everyone else does.

After knowing that we want to attempt a new social network, the new question how we would want to implement it. According to Martin Streicher, he describes Drupal as a system that "provides essential features, such as user management, session management, and templating" [3]. He goes one to say how it is good for companies that do not want to spend a lot of money making a reliable and dynamic content management system. Other content management systems that we looked into briefly were Joomla, Wordpress, Plone and Xoops. Plone and Xoops didn't seem to be as reliable as the two leading CMS tools, Drupal and Joomla. Thinking that what other people use and why would be important, we found several surveys that supported Drupal for our needs. One survey found that "... users rated Drupal higher than Joomla users rated Joomla for their support of multimedia, social networking, SSL, forums, event calendars, blogging, ... and permission features..." [2]. These being the primary thing we want our site to have, we made the important decision to go with Drupal. It also appeared to have a better

online community on its website to assist with any roadblocks we were sure to hit, no matter which tool we decided to use.

Going the Joomla route would be nice if we needed things such as shopping carts and document management. However, Drupal is much better at user permissions and hierarchies while being better at handling user-added content.

Results:

At the end of the summer, it seemed that Drupal is better at making a sub community that a Facebook group does on Facebook. The FacebookAPI is limiting because when talking to avid users of the website, they do not go on to be a part of a small community. It made a lot more sense to just have their own site that has the look and feel that encompasses the visions of the community.

The idea that it prevents users from remember yet another password by having it link the PSU authentication. If they are students at the school of the community, they will not need to make a new account anyways. This problem is avoided, but it expands the creative freedom of the organization to implement any features without constraints from the Facebook template.

Overall, Drupal is a great program to use when making an online community. It's fast, easy to learn for new users, and efficient enough for the backend programmers to implement the needs of the group. Our ending product looks like it will sustain the women group in technology and hopefully expand to a multi-campus level.

Citations:

1. Jackson, Matthew O., and Alison Watts. The Evolution of Social and Economic Networks, Journal of Economic Theory, Volume 106, Issue 2, October 2002, Pages 265-295, ISSN 0022-0531, DOI: 10.1006/jeth.2001.2903.
(<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6WJ3-478RY9Y-3/2/a6727601ffb469d33da50388775e3c58>)
2. Leblanc, Dee-Ann. "Drupal vs Joomla: Which CMS is Best?" CMSWire. May 19 2009. <<http://www.cmswire.com/cms/web-cms/drupal-vs-joomla-which-cms-is-best-004645.php>>
3. Streicher, Martin. "Exploring Drupal V6; Build a Web site that won't break the bank" IBM. Aug 11 2009. <<http://www.ibm.com/developerworks/opensource/library/os-drupal1/>>.