

Open Source - bigger than Texas!

Michael Chalk interviews Marty Cielens - an open source user.

'Open Source' is big news at the moment. Once known as 'free software' (as in 'free speech' rather than 'free beer'), it is now the driving model behind the development of operating systems and an extraordinary abundance of software.

*Essentially the idea is that anyone who uses the software is entitled (even expected) to access the original code - the 'source code' - and that any user may contribute changes to improve the software. Eric Raymond has famously claimed that this development model - similar to an open, crowded **bazaar** rather than a cloistered, private **cathedral** - is far superior to the traditional development model favoured by proprietary companies (Raymond, 1998).*

All around the world people are getting involved in using programs and applications from the highly collaborative communities that produce Open Source softwares. Educational organisations are creating CD's for their members. Governments are talking about using open source platforms instead of proprietary commercial software - or at least considering the options. Web designers everywhere are being influenced by the hugely popular 'GNU/ Linux/ Apache' web server platform combination, and by free 'open source' programming languages such as PHP and Python.

It's been in the news - so who in Australia is getting involved in this potentially subversive community? Are there any individuals in the local education system who are using it?

I was lucky enough to track down Marty Cielens, who has worked extensively in the South Australian TAFE system - particularly the Communications department in Adelaide Institute of TAFE. He has worked extensively in online and professional development, and in 1996 became distracted by his growing fascination for the development and implementation of online learning resources to complement the distance programs he was managing. He's now helping to review program management in S.A. We caught up via that centuries-old technology known as 'tele-phone'.

Marty discovers moodle

Michael Chalk interviews Marty Cielens - <http://prace.vic.edu.au/pd/flex>

Marty Cielens had been asked by his partner Marie Jasinski to put up a web site for her innovative training games and simulations company - but needed her to provide the content - so the project was stalled for a while.

About 6 months ago, Marty started using a program called 'Moodle'. Marie saw that it was easy for her to use - because you don't need to know anything about that "hypertext markup language" (HTML - the code that makes a web page).

Marty: Marie's business needs dynamic - not static - content, so Moodle suited her, and she was flying within weeks. It was a liberating experience - even though Moodle allows very little control over the site structure for a beginning user.

One problem with high-end learning management systems such as WebCT, is that you can almost do too much - in terms of 'bells and whistles'. With Moodle, the idea is to keep it simple, and it encourages you to focus on the essence of what is it you want to do.

Immense possibility

This all started when Marty looked at the site which describes the Moodle platform, and realised the site was built in Moodle itself. He could see applications for a wide range of contexts. His brother, for example, was working with a country community organisation developing a design for the townscape that would encourage tourism. It looked like Moodle had the potential to allow him to post the designs as they were being developed - allowing people to comment asynchronously on the ideas, with everyone being able to see the feedback, and contribute to the dialogue.

Right at the beginning, it seemed there was immense possibility in this new program.

Marty: All those platforms can do it (the basics of learning management), but not a lot have the capacity to be easily managed and easy for human beings to use at the same time.

For example, groove has been a great product, but it's very resource-hungry and expensive - too costly for community organisations, small training providers and individuals. It's also an intrusive program - every 15 minutes there's a new message about ads or upgrades.

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Too complete a solution?

Marty was looking for a system which just offered a range of simple tools - and presented them really well.

Marty: Most platforms and programs try to give you too complete a solution. However, most people start with a small problem - requiring one or two functions. The metaphor of phone and fax came up - very simple tools to achieve a wide range of purposes - so you can add a simple tool as you need it, rather than start with an entire 'console'.

In contrast to this 'control panel' approach, Moodle has the basics you need; and it allows users to add in extra things - for example 'Cmaps' (collaborative concept mapping), or additional modules such as MS NetMeeting.

The South Australian online innovator has also found Moodle completely stable and bullet proof, after six months of working with it.

Marie's site - the technical details

Marty: Marie's site was up and running very quickly - amazingly for someone with little inclination to learn any web editing software. In fact, now that Marie has developed a sense of confidence, she's getting enthusiastic and wants to learn more about web editing processes - because once you cross the first hurdle, the next step is quite easy.

Being a geeky sort of interviewer, I wanted to know all about the technical details –

Michael: Did you find it easy to install the software? How did you manage to work out all the technical aspects? Uploading and so forth?

Marty: We paid our hosting service to do it! I'm amazed that anyone would suggest otherwise. They did all the work to try it out and put it up for us. The nice thing was that it only cost us \$150, which means that for many small providers, the cost-benefit ratio is great.

This is a man who says that when it comes to technology, he knows the difference between what he can do by himself and what he can't. When all is said and done, he's much more interested in instructional and learning design, than in the details of the technical know-how.

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Simple and low cost

Many people have probably heard the hype that systems and applications from the open source community are far too complicated and technical for ordinary 'non-geeky' people to use. Quite the opposite! - especially if you have a good relationship with your service provider or technical support staff.

Marty: These technologies and programs (open source) are quite simple and low cost, so that if you did want to engage with them, they aren't hard. Their simplicity also makes them easy for ISPs and web administrators to manage.

References

Raymond, E. (1998) 'The Cathedral and the Bazaar', Retrieved 3rd October 2003 from http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/index.html

Related Links

Marty was a popular presenter at NetWorking2003 - in his session on Open Source for Educators, he called on the people to embrace the concept of Open Design - a philosophy that would allow teachers to share resources more freely.
<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/nw2003>

Marty Cielen's site - <http://www.designplanet.com.au/Marty/moodle>

Marie Jasinski's site - Design Planet - <http://www.designplanet.com.au>

Moodle - <http://moodle.org>

(According to <http://moodle.org/sites/> - there are nearly 500 sites in over sixty countries using the moodle platform, only one year after its Version-1.0 release.)

CMaps - <http://cmap.coginst.uwf.edu>

Chalk Flexible Learning Leaders Project - <http://prace.vic.edu.au/flex>

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