Self-critique Memo

Site walkthrough

My content is structured in such a way that there are two sections to the site: course syllabi and course notes. Under the course syllabi, I have three views pages that display the syllabus information stored in nodes. The views pages have been styled for appearance and readability; they are also arranged based on a non-viewable filed (sort) which ensures that they display in the correct order.

There are nodes that exist to house the information, but they are not meant to be browsed. The main purpose of this site is to aggregate the information stored in the nodes and display it on views pages accessed through the main navigation block.

Content reuse

My past system for assembling information for course syllabi involved opportunistic reuse only (e.g. cutting and pasting text from previous syllabi and course materials). The purpose of this site was to facilitate systemic, locked reuse and to utilize Drupal's CMS features to update content site-wide and across courses. Having information for my syllabi assembled in one CMS would also facilitate speedier derivative reuse if changes needed to be made for a new version (it's easier to locate and modify existing content types when they are all in one place).

Original strategy

Based on strategies in Rockley (2003), I performed a content audit and developed an information model as shown in my project notes. The model took into account maximum granularity, which I ideally envisioned as providing for a myriad or reuse and display opportunities for my site (i.e. I could construct views to display not just syllabi and course notes, but also a list of courses taught, a list of all the textbooks I have used, etc.).

This strategy rested on the use of metadata to categorize information. For information to be displayed and reused according to course, I developed a generic taxonomy vocabulary to assign content to the different courses I taught (example tag: HUM 106 Fall 2009).

For the course notes, I wished to associate information by the textbook that the notes contained information about. For required texts, I added a semantic taxonomy vocabulary to apply tags that utilized the URL feature of Drupal's taxonomy module; the result was a set of tags that linked back to the required text nodes that they were, respectively, associated with, creating a strong URI reference that could be used to retrieve additional information about that text book (though I never completed the final step of linking the tag pages back to the required text nodes, the reasons for which are explained below).

The problem of information granularity and Drupal system limitations

When I first developed my information model as described in Rockley (2003), I was only

concerned with maximum reuse and did not consider system limitations. I encountered problems with my views pages as nodes with multiple tags displayed repeating information and certain fields would not display in the correct order. As a result, I was forced to abandon my original information model in order to develop a functioning site.

Restructured information model

I created an individual content type for each instance of content specific to a single course, and was only able to have one truly reusable content type (Universal Element), though I did take advantage of an opportunistic reuse opportunity by using some HUM 106 content types for both course pages. The new content types make use of the “large text” field types more than my previous content types, reducing the amount of granularity but increasing their display accuracy on views pages. In this new information model, a taxonomy is not necessary to group information for reuse or retrieval, so I abandoned the metadata I created. The resulting information model provides for a working site that displays information correctly at the expense of granularity and reuse.

Final Conclusions

I am disappointed with the limitations I encountered when using Drupal. I feel that while I grasped the principles of content management and reuse, my project was not ideal for implementation in Drupal and thus my information model suffered. Of particular frustration was the fact that I carefully fashioned a system of metadata that would have been highly useful to me on a professional level, only to abandon it in favor of content types that display information correctly, but restrict the amount of reuse potential.

Were I to objectively evaluate Drupal for my use as a professional educator, I would reject the system as being too prone to catastrophic failure or unexpected results. As a CMS, the amount of time spent inputting data and configuring Drupal versus the amount of time saved through data reuse is not justified for my individual needs.

However, personal information storage and retrieval is often different from institutional or organizational information storage and retrieval. We bring a great deal of idiosyncratic baggage to our personal information which may translate in to structures which are not supported by a CMS like Drupal. For instance, my use of two controlled vocabularies in conjunction with content types that housed highly granular information may have been a complex but sustainable model for my own content reuse habits, but was possibly too complicated for Drupal given my limited experience with the Views module and its relatively complex system for organizing and sorting information. In the future, I will be more weary about developing a complex or detailed information model before I am well aware of how that model my be limited by the CMS application I must use.