

Authoring via an MS Word Plugin

The use case for content authoring that I'm thinking about is really for creating the course "home page" (or syllabus, or outline). In other words, the view of the course structure that is presented to students. Melete (and soon OpenSyllabus) both attack this problem from the one end by providing a structured online tool that is easy to use and generates a good result. The other end of the spectrum is free-form editing using the iframe tool (and soon the Simple Page tool) or wiki to build up the page you want. I generally like Melete (and OpenSyllabus looks good too) and I wouldn't want to create a competing project. But I do think we need better ways of allowing free-form authoring so my thinking is about how to do that.

Several years ago (2001 or 2002, I think) I was involved in the development of a content authoring strategy for an online learning platform (at a company called DigitalThink). I wasn't allowed to spend any money (the company had just killed a \$6M+ content management system project in the weeks before launch). There were a number of classes of users we had to satisfy but one of them were subject matter experts--those individuals at companies who knew something that the company wanted other people to learn. These folks, in many ways, were quite like faculty members. They were technology users, of course, but didn't have the time nor inclination to learn a custom content authoring tool.

Our solution was to meet the users inside the tool they were already using to author content, namely, PowerPoint. We found a company that made a PowerPoint to Flash converter and they extended their tool to produce SCORM packages which we could then deliver from our platform. (On a side note, this company was later acquired by Macromedia and the product was Breeze, now owned by Adobe and called Acrobat Connect or some such nonsense.) Now this didn't create great e-learning content. But the product was successful and we incurred almost no training or support in rolling it out because users already knew most of what they needed. And adoption was good.

The analogous product in our world is Microsoft Word. People are already creating/editing their syllabi with Word. Why not meet them where they already are and make a tool they are already using "Sakai aware"? I think this is better than trying to teach all of our faculty wiki markup or HTML.

Here's what it would allow things like:

- Authenticating into a Sakai instance with a username/password
- Selecting a site from that instance
- A "link" picker interface that allows users to insert links to a variety of files or learning activities such as:
 - resource files
 - assignments
 - tests/quizzes/assessments
 - discussion forums
 - chat rooms
 - wiki pages
 - etcetera
- It would be fantastic if the local machine could keep a cache of the items above so that this would work when the user was offline.
- Uploading the result, including any images the user added to the page, to the site. I'm assuming the main document would be an HTML file (or set of them).
- The result on the site would then be editable with existing Sakai tools (wysiwyg html editors).
- We could provide a set of default MS Word templates for various types of course structures (weekly, topic-based, etcetera)

I can think of a wide variety of problems with this approach but I think it is sensible enough to at least be explicitly rejected rather than ignored 😊