Tool Ideas

Please add sections or sub-pages to describe ideas for tools that embody particular approaches to pedagogy or learning.

From Harriet

I'm going to kick this off with some thoughts about how the Faculty I work for at Cambridge University use Sakai in general, which I hope will give people an awareness of the context of my requests and problems - hopefully as this page gets more stuff on this will be tidied away somewhere with other people's thoughts...

A lot of the users I work with are entirely new to online learning. The first thing they ask me is 'what is this online learning and why would we want to do it?' Sometimes they're hostile, but often they just don't know. I usually start by giving some examples of dull things that we do all the time - in a UK university, this isn't Assignments or Gradebook - instead, for me I begin by saying that I expect they often have articles they'd like their students to read, and that they often need to contact their students to notify them about changes, etc. I always get some nods at that. So I say that Sakai can help them and their secretaries to make sure that the students get useful research papers, copies of research handouts and appear in the right times for lectures. So for a significant category of my users, we have Sakai sites consisting entirely of Home, Resources and Announcements - and we have happy staff and students. Many of our Faculty haven't been offered IT training except what I do specifically for Sakai, and they aren't confident users. What's more, my Faculty strongly suspect some overseas students haven't used a computer before (but are ticking the box for having computer skills because it's required for the course). Of course, if you have a site which is just Resources and Announcements, it can get a bit tricky. There's nowhere to actually explain things to the students, such as what they're meant to read each week, or how the resources are supposed to fit in with their seminars. (The box on the 'worksite information' site is too small to write long text; if you put explanations in announcements they get hidden by new announcements). I suppose we ought to be using Syllabus as a simple web page creating tool - but you can only have one Syllabus on a site, and what happens when the staff member announces that they want a second web page? Also, I haven't really got my head round Syllabus. What's it meant to be for? Why would you want to get digests of it? Does it relate to some US concept we don't have? Perhaps in the future we'll start using Melete, but at the moment we get people using the Wiki tool, because it makes any number of pages that they can edit with very little skill. I create a nice template for the course in the Wiki tool, each Faculty member gets a page which tells them explicitly what to write on it, and then they do their bit. We have a bit of an incentive to train people in Wiki use because we are a research-led University and the Wiki tool is very useful for collaborative researchers, so I can sell it to people as 'one tool - two uses', which I can't for many Sakai tools.

However, being new to online learning isn't a bad thing - we have some immensely creative thinkers, with real pedagogic expertise. They demand incredible new tools, just because it hasn't occurred to them that they have to do things a certain way. They don't come to me and say 'I want a Drop-Box', they say 'And then we'll have the students create a multi-media collection which represents their personality and culture to the other students'. This has been very slow work for me, as I'm constantly translating weird ideas into Sakai tools - or saying that they can't do it after all.

Having said that, we have some Schools which have been using our previous VLE, CourseWork (from Stanford) for a couple of years, and who felt ready to start designing exciting new tools within it. Some of these tools will be moving over to Sakai, I hope.

Generally, one problem we have with Sakai is the lack of flexibility of terminology - we're having to do a great deal of rooting around in code to remove terms like 'recitation' and 'section'. I also sometimes find that US terms confuse me and stop me using what would be useful tools - I've just realised that 'Section Info', for example, is just what we need (with a few tweaks) for workshop sign-up.