

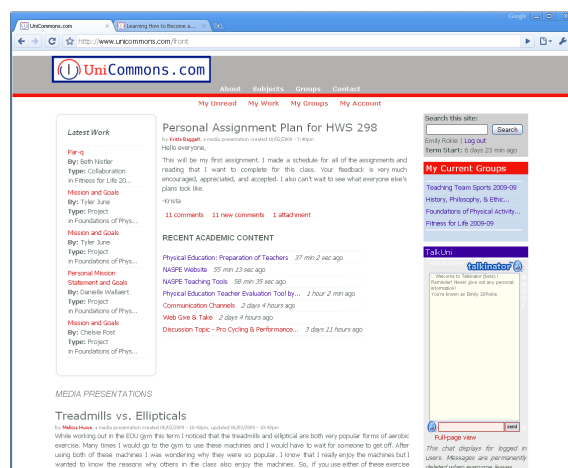
UniCommons.com: Developing a New Teaching Platform

B. A. Sather, Eastern Oregon University
June 10, 2010

PROJECT

It is very important to collect and document class work in an organized and accessible place. Furthermore, it is important that a system exists to facilitate collaboration and communication. UniCommons.com is a content management system I developed that allows me freedom to set up a class environment that is supportive of my teaching philosophy (Sather, 2009). I have implemented several online learning tools like wikis, media sharing, discussions, and other collaborative features that facilitate deep and meaningful student learning (Cullen & Harris, 2009).

The platform seeks to exhibit student work, rather than conceal it. Students are able to publish meaningful professional contributions with their work. Each class (or "group" as I prefer to call it) is set up to feature the presentation of work and make the rules, grading, and guidelines as transparent as possible--so they will not get in the way of the enjoyment of learning. As the mission states, the site is meant to enhance togetherness and return to a sense of a community of scholars.



The site operates on the following tenets: (a) scholarship is *learning* and *knowing* and *the process* for improving both; (b) everyone is a scholar; (c) scholars should actively and openly contribute scholarship to the global community; (d) scholars should realize the importance of feedback; and (e) scholarship is developed through both conventional and autodidactic means.

MEANS

The site is built with the Drupal open source content management system. The use of this application is applied elsewhere in education (Drupal in Education, 2008). Several modules (e.g. plugins) are installed to accomplish the objectives of the site including Organic Groups, Flag, Notifications, Web Links, Webforms, Workflow, WYSIWYG (with TinyMCE), and Fivestar. Moodle (www.Moodle.org) is also employed as a co-management system. There are two main areas of the site: subjects and groups. "Subjects" includes the hierarchical presentation of academic content, similar to a textbook. Instructors provide most of the content for subjects. "Groups" are venues for a selection of several users to communicate, interact, and present work. For example, a group can be the members of a university class for an entire term (and beyond).

OUTCOME

Albeit still in its infancy, the project is presented at UniCommons.com as live and active. The site focuses on providing a platform for university students *and* professors to pursue, develop, and present scholarship. Contributor accounts are currently only available to students taking (or that have taken) classes taught by myself, an associate professor of physical activity and health at Eastern Oregon University. It will likely be open to a wider audience of contributors in the

future. Content is currently provided mainly in the subject of physical activity and health. Future developments will present other subjects. The intent is openness and transparency in the learning process and presentation of information, which purposefully provides benefits to anyone interested in learning.

REFLECTION

Web-based networks abound. Popular examples include Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia. In education, the concept of "open" academic content has been implemented in several venues such as Academic Commons, Wikiversity, MIT Open Courseware, UC Berkeley Webcasts, eduCommons, Teachers Without Borders, and many others. In university education, Blackboard/WebCT is the most popular content management system in use. The system employed at UniCommons.com is meant to support a unique teaching and learning philosophy and includes several distinguishing features:

- Publicness: Scholarly contributions are presented publicly, not hidden as an isolated interaction (usually one way) between student and teacher.
- More holistic (less serial): Classes are not isolated from each other; thus, inter-class communication and collaboration may occur. Learners gain practical experience using a variety of current web-based technologies, which is an important general outcome in education. Collaboration projects (e.g. wiki type) allow for editing by multiple users.
- More dynamic (less static): Content, applications, and information can change more quickly, adapting in a flexible way that more closely mimics the fluidity of real-world interactions.
- Emphasis on the learning *process*: Communication and actions underlying the development of work is visible (e.g. drafts, feedback, revisions, flags). Work flow processes allow for certain projects to progress through various states like edit, draft, review, and completed.
- Read more at <http://www.unicommons.com/main-menu/about>

Research supports the use of online instruction--including online only and blended (face-to-face and online)--as superior for student performance compared to traditionally taught classes (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). The project at UniCommons.com is an attempt to actualize the potential of current communication technology to enhance teaching.

REFERENCES

- Sather, B. (2009). My University Teaching Philosophy & Method. Retrieved from <http://www.unicommons.com/instructor/brian-sather/my-university-teaching-philosophy-method>
- Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., and Jones, K. (2009). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online-learning studies*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.
- Cullen, R. & Harris, M. (2009, October 16). Online learning: More than technical savvy [Msg. 974]. In R. Reis (Ed.). *Tomorrow's Professor Mailing List*. Retrieved from <http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/posting.php?ID=974>
- Drupal in Education. (2008, March). Case study: running a small college site with drupal. Retrieved October 5, 2009, from <http://groups.drupal.org/node/10231>