

Workshop for the IT Support Staff Conference, 22 June 2006.

Apologetics

This session is not part of the formal consultation process that the ICT Strategy has been following, and no formal arrangements have been made as to what will happen to the output of this workshop. There are some people here who have been involved with the ICT Strategy process, and so if this workshop results in any insights or ideas that might be useful to that process I might, with your majority consent, find out the best way to submit those insights to the relevant working group.

Also, in this session, because we will be talking about institutional structure, I'd like us to say 'Oxford' when we are talking about the collegiate University as a whole, and 'the Centre' if we want to refer to the units that provide services across the whole University.

What Goes Where With Web at Oxford?

The way this session is going to work:

- 20 minute talk from me
- 10 minutes of group work
- 5 or 10 minutes at the end of gathering in the results from the group work and discussion points.

Preamble

I was invited to come and speak at this conference about standards in web publishing. I would like to talk about standards and why they are important. If you haven't heard the cases for standards in web publishing before I will run through them very briefly, and hopefully this will spark an interest in finding out more even if it doesn't convince you straight off that they are important. But I decided that I couldn't talk about web standards at Oxford without talking about resourcing first. So this session is all about the current structure of web publishing at Oxford, some of the new ideas people are starting to talk about to change this structure, and hopefully finishing off with some of the things you'd like to see happen. So why can't we talk about standards without talking about resourcing? Let me explain what I mean.

Core Structure

I am the Web Officer in the University's central administration, and about half of my job involves duties as the Secretary to the Web Strategy Group.

[Web Strategy Group website on screen.]

The Web Strategy Group, or WSG, is a round-table group with representation from the Conference of Colleges, the Divisions, the Departments, and Central Administration. It exists to define the institution's local response to the legal requirements imposed on us all as a public body and service provider. For around 5 years it has developed and provided:

[Draw a box for WSG on whiteboard. Add these bullet points:]

- some brief rules for web publishing for the whole of Oxford
- some guidelines and a toolkit for web managers complementing this

- (more recently) online training material for running web projects working in consultation with the web training provided by OUCS
- details of tools and resources to assist web managers around Oxford with their work
- a list to contact web managers under FOI
- WMD (not weapons of mass destruction)
- A free consultancy service

Running the consultancy service I have had the privilege to work with around 12 different units across Oxford in the 14 months that I have been here. This, coupled with the other part of my job where I maintain content and links on the University's top level web presence, has – I think – provided me with a unique insight into the University's overall web publishing; the levels we are at, the new things we are doing, and I want to share something with you from this learnt experience.

A story

Academic staff will come to me at the beginning of a new web project, and I will begin by showing them the WSG website, the set of rules and guidelines, and hopefully some useful starting points for their work. I also underline that, yes, standards are important.

Standards

Why are standards important? How do I present the case for this in the consultancy?

1) The legal argument

Looking around the room I think I can safely assume that we are all familiar with talking about the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, the sideways references its supporting material makes to the web content accessibility guidelines of the web accessibility initiative, and that following such guidelines are important because, if we do not follow them, then there is a danger that we are breaking UK law.

But the act is five years old, and there has been no case law under the act. So, if legal compliance is not enough, how about this:

2) Ethics of equality

Without following some shared principles for making web content usable across technology platforms and ranges of user ability, it's possible that some users of our websites will not benefit equally from our online material to that of their more able-bodied peers. Equality of opportunity in a leading educational institution must of course be a priority. But for some, even this argument is not enough. A website would have to be really bad, with content that really was inaccessible to a user, for this to be an issue. (Well, fair point perhaps. But it's not that difficult to build a really bad website. Just use flash. Or, get round the fact that the web is not WYSIWYG by presenting text as an image without alt text.)

OK, so maybe most websites aren't 'really evil'. So what about this.

3) Standards-based web publishing is a cost-saving exercise

Before I worked here, I did a one year contract at OUP in the English Language Teaching Division. In the contract it was my job to lead the division through a website rebuild, and you can check out the results at www.oup.com/elt.

We followed what's called a 'user centred design' or UCD approach to our project. We started by thinking about the key users of the site, and building an information architecture modelled on the ease of access to the priority information for each group. We took the information architecture plan, a hierarchical tree, and used it to develop our understanding of the required page elements. In turn this information was used to build wireframes – simple line drawings of the basic page layouts. We used these wireframes in paper prototype testing in front of a small sample group of potential real users – not OUP staff. And only then, after several iterations of testing, and sheer amazement at how easy it is to create user stumbling blocks by labelling links counter-intuitively, placing page elements in counter-intuitive places, or causing element blindness and confusion, did we commit to the expensive coding and design work. The ELT site, I heard two weeks ago, is now the busiest of OUP's websites to traffic. It wasn't before.

For a business this means a lot. The bottom line is what the big boss cares about. But this can translate well for us too. Our websites serve important internal functions. They also present almost all parts of Oxford to the world, and attract new students and academics. So stickier sites still affect the bottom line in a really big, and really tangible way.

When I go to meet people starting web projects I usually say that the easiest two mistakes are:

1. to think of websites purely at the aesthetic level. It's best to forget the aesthetics and semiotics completely until the very last minute (after the user interface – the feel of the site – is fully developed and tested). I call this the **work of art syndrome** because the aesthetics are always the controversial thing, which is bizarre, because the more you follow UCD the more you realise how little the aesthetics really matter.

Websites are computer interfaces to different sets of information. They're not works of art. So it makes sense to use the science that has emerged from software development around human-computer interaction and UCD, and this is what the web community is waking up to.

2. to think that content is king. OK, content is king, but if the interface to it is not intuitive, is not easy to use, then it doesn't have much of a populus to rule. Without the right technical delivery, one might as well write the award-winning content in copperplate on vellum and stick it in the Ashmolean museum (who have a nice standards-friendly new site by the way).

Unless you've got real problems with your content, it's best to forget about the content, and forget about colours, images, design devices, and focus on the users all the way through.

I don't know if any of you remember those wonderful coffee table books you used to get in the post back in about 1999 called 'What the Web Can Be'? There was a great one by Macromedia full of manga style flash based sites. The web was going to be a pretty land where any fancy of design was possible. It was a wonderfully creative time. Seeing dub dub dub and 'dot com' was still 'cool'. Well what can the web be? It's a tool. It lets you share and exchange information. If it does that in an easily usable way, then it's a good tool. If it does that in a counter-intuitive, badly coded,

fashion over comfort way, then it's a bad tool.

Back to the story

So – where was I? - members of units come to me for consultation and I tell them about standards, and hopefully they go away thinking – OK, so it's not all about high, hard-hitting visual design, it's not about making beautiful works of art on a screen, or getting a student to build something without a written design brief, or, it's not like a print publication and all about the content – and thinking instead, right, OK, I've got to make it user-centred. I've got to make it intuitive to use. I think some of them do do exactly this! The user-centred design. And that gets me buzzing. That gets me really excited. It's a little victory won for a more usable site, a stickier site, a site more likely to achieve its principle goals somewhere out there. I should get out more!

But of course, many people simply say, well that's great Trev – these WSG standards, and what you're saying, but we're on a shoestring here, and it's got to be live by September, so I just want to know John Thomason's email address for OUCS Registration, Rob Eadie's email address for training in XHTML and CSS, Barry Cornelius's email address for aggregating Oxitems RSS on my homepage, and how much it costs to buy Dreamweaver, and supersize me.

I'm reading a book at the moment by Alan Cooper called 'The Inmates are Running the Asylum: Why High-Tech Products Drive us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity'. In the foreword he says:

'During the last few years of the twentieth century, as the dot-com bubble inflated, truckloads of ink were used to sell the idea that there was a 'new economy' on the Internet. The pundits said that selling things on the ...Web, where stores were made of clicks [not] bricks, was a fundamentally different way of doing business, and that the old economy was as good as dead. [Instead, today] almost all of those new-economy companies are dead and gone[.] ...I believe we really *are* in a new economy [and that] the dot-coms never even participated in it. Instead, the dot-coms were the last gasp of the *old* economy: the economy of manufacturing.

...The classic rules of business management are rooted in the manufacturing traditions of the industrial age...[The fundamental truth of economics is that you have to either] reduce your costs or reduce your revenues [to increase profit]. In the old economy, reducing your costs worked best [because it gave you competitive edge over others who were producing similar products reliant on the same variable cost resources]. In the new economy, increasing your revenue works much, much better.

[In the new economy we don't have the old variable costs of mining, smelting, transporting, welding. We don't really have fixed costs either because programming is an ongoing task. Programming is not simply another corporate expense.]

When today's executives regard programming the same as manufacturing, they imagine that reducing the cost of programming is similarly simple and effective. Unfortunately, those rules don't apply any more. Because software has relatively insignificant variable costs, there is little business advantage to be had in reducing them.

...Architecture, the human design part of programming, in which users are studied,

use scenarios are described – is the part of the...process that is most frequently dispensed with as a cost-saving measure....The best way to increase profitability in the information age is to spend more...”

Perhaps it's just that we haven't yet grasped this new economy fully. And if we haven't, then how do we all make ourselves 'get the point' at an institutional level?

Maybe we should get like Cybus Industries in Dr Who and turn Battersea power station into a factory to churn out management-level standardistas.

So I was talking about standards. But we're still operating in an old economy mode, so we're under-resourced. So I find myself talking about structure: resources, awareness, planning.

Most of the people who come for consultancy have never built a website before in their lives. They've been tasked to do it because they spoke up in a departmental meeting saying 'we need a better website' and before they knew it they were on the fast train to the scary land of 'why don't the most popular browsers use CSS properly?' Because they were built by Microsoft!

So what are we doing in the centre? Are we doing the right things? How do we start to encourage a transition to the new economy Alan Cooper is on about? In the mean time, how do we properly support those tasked with building web presences?

The whole structure

We've already got WSG here. What else is there in the centre? I'll run off a brief verbal list of everything we're doing, and then if I've missed something please feel free to pipe up and tell me what I've missed.

- LTG training
- OUCS hosting services
- Registration
- Network infrastructure
- Domain strategy
- WebLearn
- ACDT do some web stuff
- Tools and training for administrative staff to be able to publish important central information for the University
- Web-enabled systems
- CMS project....no idea!

Anything else?

...then we've got something between 200-300 web managers across Oxford – this is going by the FOI email list.

New things being talked about? Some of the changes to this structure and setup?

How many of you have read Draft 2 of the ICT Strategy? Keep hands up. How many of you have read any version of the document? Those who have will know that there

are lots of details in there about what a better governance structure might be for ICT in the institution. One of the things we were talking about at the WSG meeting two days ago was the possibility of changing WSG's reporting lines so that it has proper reporting lines in this new governance structure.

- [Write on board "giving WSG clear reporting lines"]

You'll also find details in the draft strategy about a pilot project providing a centralised web consultancy service on a much more grand scale than is currently provided by the WSG Secretary, or, half of me.

- [Providing a bigger and better consultancy service]

Finally there is talk of:

- [Building and operating a central, federated, CMS]

This is an extremely crude summary to what is a very well put together and long slaved-over document, so all I can suggest is reading it if you haven't done so already.

So, that's a run down from me of what's been going on in the middle, what's been going on in my corner, and some of the things people have been talking about/ ideas for some of the things we should do.

Participation bit.

Now it's your turn. What do we need in the centre to support web publishing at a local level? Should we be concentrating on practically supporting new web managers? How do we do this?

- give WSG a more open membership?
- an annual get together for WMD?
- Better guidelines?
- A forum?
- Or what about solution collaboration pools and collaboration tools?

Or should we be challenging the system itself and finding ways to transition to this new economy?

- Take over Battersea powerstation?
- A conference on UCD and the new economy for senior non-technical staff?

10 minutes. Groups of about 10. Come up with one thing you'd like to see that would support web publishing across Oxford at a local level that does not already exist, This can either be a practical support measure, or if you're feeling brave, something to challenge the system.

We'll come back together for the end and get them up onto the board here.

Outcomes from the group work:

The outputs from this exercise were as follows:

1. The email lists maintained for contacting all web managers across Oxford ('web-managers'), as well as the community list (WMD), should link in with OUCS Registration so that any new web manager automatically joins the authoritative list and the web managers community. (Action TB to talk to OUCS Registration)
2. There was a lot of ground-level support for provision of a CMS, under the lines put forward in the ICT Strategy/ discussed at June 06 WSG. (I will feed this back to WSG)
3. There was similar ground-level support for a central web consultancy service. (Will be fed back to WSG).
4. Some people suggested that the WSG website should have a new section on 'how to generate a typical Oxford web page'. Another group suggested having a downloadable (zipped) XHTML / CSS2 template for use by any unit. Putting these two suggestions together, I will develop some new WSG web pages accordingly.)
5. There was a suggestion that WSG should develop some standards for metadata (in readiness for web2). (I will put this to the WSG, but it is likely to come up when WSG talks about information strategy discussions.)
6. A group suggested that it should be University policy that every web manager should review all their pages every 6 months to avoid out of date content. (Without checking, I think there is already something stipulated about this, but I will check, and put this to the FOI office/WSG if necessary.)
7. A group suggested that there should be a repository for documents, with authenticated update.
8. A group suggested that ht:/dig was still needed, and should be replaced. (This search engine indexes the 'oxonly' pages that the Google Free Search cannot see.)
9. One suggested a better favicon.
10. Others suggested that the WMD email list was not enough to build a web managers community in Oxford, and that other measures should now be taken, such as having a Wiki to develop shared ideas and understandings. This was in line with the suggestion that Oxford Web Managers should share a 'visioning' exercise (where do we want to be in 5 years' time? How do we get there). (I will discuss practicalities with ITS3, and explore the idea further on the WMD email list.). It was concluded that email was good for sharing knowledge, but not good for sharing ideas.

TB.