

Building an Online Community through WordPress

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Introduction

As the English Language Institute (ELI) of Kanda University expands, communication within the organization has become more and more chaotic, leading to inundated mailboxes and at times, confusion. These teacher notes document the ELI Professional Development (PD) Committee's attempts to create a website that disseminates crucial information to those in need in a timely manner. Given the circumstances of the current ELI, it will be argued that a WordPress blog is the medium of choice for building an online community of help and support. In addition, some suggestions will be made for the next steps to be taken in order for these attempts to be sustainable, as well as applications to other environments such as the classroom.

Literature on Web Logs

In the past decade, web logs, now more commonly known as blogs, have flourished, both in terms of number and function. In the past, blogs were seen more of as a public diary, a place for your friends and followers to read about your daily doings. But now, Douglass, Little, and Smith (2005) state that:

[B]logs have emerged in the last few years to become a very strong player in the online community arena...Companies have been hiring professional bloggers to do nothing but blog about things happening at their company and

help generate a ‘buzz’ around the company (p. xxvii).

In other words, blogging has evolved from being restricted to the personal diary-writing realm to entering the professional arena, where the PD Committee resides.

But what are the benefits of a blog? Cheng-chao (2005) explains that “by setting up a content-based server, educators can save and archive their files online easily, and integrate their online resources without needing web design skill” (p. 1). This means that the blog becomes a hub of documents and resources that the viewers can peruse and access freely, and this can be set up without programming skills. Cheng-chao also expresses a preference for WordPress “because of its simple management and installation, and protection [from] spam comments” (p. 5).

How does one set up a successful blog? Granter (2006) explains:

The developer of an online community should ‘work closely with members to understand their needs, to select appropriate software, and to develop good sociability and usability’ (Preece, 2001: 346). As an active member of [my] local community, I was able to understand the dynamics and structure of the group and attempt to mirror these when initially building the online space, whilst also encouraging member co-operation and influence on the designs (p. 1).

Granter’s account closely matches the current attempt of the PD Site – the PD Committee is part of the ELI community, and so we have the advantage of having an insider’s perspective, in addition to the ability to easily interact with our fellow community members.

Setting up the Website

Starting on Moodle

The scope of these notes will be limited to the duration of the author’s contractual obligations to Kanda, therefore beginning in March 2006. At that time, the PD

Committee had already made available some resources at the following address, which was only accessible with a valid username and password obtained through the KUIS Active Language Learning System: <http://kalls-moodle.kuis.ac.jp/course/view.php?id=163>. ELI members were able to find information on: (1) conferences; (2) publishing; (3) qualifications; (4) the formal Kanda PD system; and (5) guest speakers and peer workshops. The decision to have the site on Moodle was appropriate as Moodle was already being used as a Course Management System by the ELI. In terms of the benefits of Moodle, Cheng-chao (2005) maintains that "... Moodle provide[s] tools particularly appropriate to education, and also feature[s] easy installation and management" (p. 6).

Moving to WordPress

In May of 2008, former ELI lecturer Tara Waller and I made a decision to move the site from Moodle to a more public domain. Our main reason for the move was to make the information on the site available to new ELI recruits. At the time, ELI lecturers and advisors were not given a Moodle orientation until two weeks into their arrival, which signified that they would not be able to access useful information on the PD Moodle Site when they most needed it. New teachers are often eager to absorb any information they can retrieve about Kanda before their arrival, and we felt it was pertinent to have this information readily available to them as soon as they knew they were going to become a part of the ELI.

In addition, we were in search of a forum that encouraged active participation from everyone. Douglas, Little, and Smith (2005) point out that "[t]he user interaction in blogs comes from comments, which users can leave on each blog post..." (p. xxvii). Waller and I were ready to look for the right blog platform. After our decision in May to move from Moodle, we experimented with various blog sites, such as

WordPress (<http://wordpress.org/>), Edublogs (<http://edublogs.org/>), and Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com/start>). We found that the advantage with WordPress is that you can upload multiple types of documents such as Word, PowerPoint, and PDF, whereas Blogger could only handle photos, videos, and links. Being a professional website, the PD Site demanded the uploading of office documents, and so it was clear that the former was superior according to our needs.

As for Edublogs, ELI instructor and CALL Committee member Joachim Castellano advises against it since the platform has too many advertisements, requires a fee for features which are included without charge in WordPress, and offers much less free storage. Cheng-chao (2005) refers us to “comparisons between different blog systems [which] can be found at: Blog Software Breakdown (<http://www.asymptomatic.net/blogbreakdown.htm>) and Blogging Applications Comparison (<http://www.unc.edu/cit/blogs/blogcomparison/applications/>)” (p. 5).

Once we decided on WordPress, the new website was created at <http://elipdsite.wordpress.com/>. At first, only the information that was already on the Moodle PD Site was transferred. Then, we added some information that would be useful for daily life, such as the cost of living in Chiba and VISA information. As a side note, although the new site was public, we made sure to maintain relative privacy by not allowing the inclusion of the site to search engines such as Google and Yahoo! This meant that the site was only accessible from a direct link.

Trialing the Website

First trial – Oct 2008

We performed our first trial of the WordPress PD Site (<http://elipdsite.wordpress.com/>) by asking roughly a third of the ELI to try using the site for about a month and answer the following questions:

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1. Technical functions

- a. Are there any noticeable spelling/grammar errors?
- b. Are the links working?

2. Logical Sequence

- a. Is the layout logical to you, especially regarding the links?
- b. Can you easily understand how to go about finding information?

3. Content

- a. Do the categories make sense? Would you recommend any changes?
- b. Do the tags make sense? Can you understand the difference between categories and tags?

4. Overall initial feedback

- a. Any other comments regarding the site?

Upon receiving valuable feedback, we made revisions taking into consideration the gathered comments. An example of the feedback we received follows:

I love the site! The calendar is a great idea – how many people can update the calendar (and the site itself)? I think many people would like to be able to contribute to something like this – is it possible? I thought it was easy to navigate and a really useful resource. This would be a nice link to send new people before they start at Kanda.

We were happy to find out that many of the community members who trialed the site found it useful.

Second trial – February 2009

After making the proper revisions, we felt the site was ready to be made available to the new lecturers and advisors who were starting at Kanda in 2009. The link was sent, and we received some positive feedback. One teacher said,

I just wanted to thank you for posting that link to the Professional Development site. It was very helpful in answering the many questions I have about moving to Japan and also working at Kanda.

This greatly affirmed our convictions that we had made the right choice to move the site. However, one regrettable thing is that the link was not made available to the new teachers until February, when the new intake had already been accepted some time in December. It is our earnest hope that in the future, new teachers are given the link to the website as early as possible.

Improving the Website

The new school year 2009-2010 signified the departure of Waller, but brought a new member to the PD Site, Kamsin Alexander. With her help, it was identified early in the semester that the site still had a lot of room for improvement. To start off, as a mirror of the PD Committee and the larger ELI community, it was discussed that the site should reflect what the PD Committee is currently doing and be updated regularly. This meant the addition of all the PD sub-committees as categories on the site, the list including: (1) Abstract Circle; (2) Guest Speakers; (3) PD Site; (4) Peer Workshops; (5) Presentation Group; (6) Reading Discussions; (7) Teaching Discussions; and (8) Writing Circle. At this point we also decided to focus on such categories and remove the existence of ‘tags’ entirely, as this was causing confusion.

Moreover, although the site included a comment function and an online calendar, the website was still very much static. We pondered the question of how we could encourage more people to use the site and actively participate in it. With the help of Castellano, we identified possible improvements of the site, which included: (1) updating the site daily if possible; (2) getting buy-in from the ELI management team in order to promote the site; (3) making more community members able to

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add content directly; (4) featuring recent posts at the center of the page to make the site more active; and (5) putting recent comments on the sidebar to promote participation. Over the following weeks, we were able to accomplish the above, in addition to the following:

- We included non-PD committee activities on the site as well and encouraged people to use it freely to document their activities (e.g., Book Club and French Club)
- We obtained permission from guest speakers to upload their slides to increase traffic (e.g., Paul Meara and Rod Ellis)
- We renamed the site as “The (Unofficial) ELI PD Site” and removed all official ELI PD information to make the boundaries more clear

Finally, Alexander and I had a mission to choose the ideal blog theme for the site. In order to do this we created a sister site to experiment freely with themes and other aspects such as colors and taglines. The sister site can be found here: <http://testelipdsite.wordpress.com/>. We determined the most important factors to a blog theme for our purposes were:

- The header can be changed to accommodate a more personal photo instead of the generic type – as in our case, a photo of Building 7
- The tagline shows up, which explains the aims of the site clearly to the viewers. This can also be done through picture-editing as long as the header can be changed, as mentioned above. Our tagline reads: “Building a KUIS online community, where you can find and share professional and social information”
- The parent categories are clear to the viewers so that they can easily navigate the site and find the desired information quickly
- Posts can be edited directly from each post, which promotes efficiency

- Links to previous and later posts are displayed in order to allow easy navigation
- The theme is aesthetically pleasing to the eye without distracting colors or designs

In the end, we determined that “Digg 3 Column” was the most ideal theme for us, which can be seen in the following image:



Have all these efforts led to high visit counts? According to the free blog statistics provided by WordPress, we received 913 views in May, 875 views in June, and 793 views in July, 2009. In comparison, the site was only receiving 206 views in April and 44 views in March. Relatively speaking, we can say that the Spring Semester of 2009 was a success for the PD Site.

The Future of the PD Site

Although the site is currently enjoying relative success, there are still many challenges lying ahead. For one thing, we have found that it has been difficult to

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get more people to comment freely and frequently to the blog posts. We suspect this is because the community members cannot revise or delete their comments freely, unless they have logged into WordPress. In addition, there is the looming predicament of how to sustain the site once the current administrators have moved on from the Kanda environment. Everything in our power will be done in order to smoothly pass the reins onto the next administrators, but there is no way of knowing whether the same dedication to the site will be maintained in the years to come.

Additionally, as a logistical concern, we have been granting access to more and more ELI members for logging in and adding content to the PD Site. This has been a great way to promote participation, but there is also the risk that things can get accidentally deleted since a separate account has not been made for each author. Fortunately we have not had such an instance as of yet, but it is a concern nonetheless.

To address the above issues, one prospect of an alternative is the web community Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>), where everyone has their own account, thereby allowing free access to posting and comments. It is similar to Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/>), except that the community is more closed and secure, compared to the popular social networking site. However, this is not a feasible option for the current PD Committee, as we have no power to require the members of the ELI to create a Ning account. In fact, this is precisely why we had moved the site from Moodle to WordPress in the first place – to make the site more accessible. Therefore, this is an option only open to the members of the ELI management to consider.

Finally, these notes have documented the process for the ELI PD Site (<http://elipdsite.wordpress.com/>), an online resource for past, present, and future members of the ELI in order to promote professional development. However, the above process can easily be applied to the classroom. Cheng-chao (2005) says:

With full control of these different educational tools [such as blogs], educators can form a collaborative learning community based on their teaching goals. Thus teachers and students can build an online community as partners. They can learn from and with others, share and try out web learning tools, distribute leadership and inspiration, and support and interact with others from all over the world (p. 1). With proper guidance from the teacher, students will be able to create an online community that will benefit the class.

Conclusion

Through the process of maintaining the PD Site (<http://elipdsite.wordpress.com/>), I have learned that the following is necessary for a successful professional development site: (1) dedication of a few administrators; (2) support from management; and (3) valuable content. The PD Committee has also helped us immensely by including a link to the site in PD-related emails and providing us with such content. We are not sure whether our efforts will prove sustainable. However, we have learned that if done properly, it is possible to create an online community that is helpful and useful for disseminating information to all who are involved.

References

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