Faculty Web presence grows with Plone via Enfold Server, Proxy

enfoldsystems

About Houston Community College

The Houston Community College System serves more than 55,000 students in the Houston, Texas, area, with five area colleges, a health sciences college and a distance education program.

Course management blues

In 2000, Houston Community College Northwest purchased a site license for a course management system. Among the college president's priorities was for faculty members to post their course syllabi online. But after three years, use of the new system was less than expected. Nonusers said the system was too cumbersome and did not meet their expectations.

Instructional Web designer Jordan Carswell realized that while the course management system was necessary and was critical to distance education, the school also would have to offer an alternative. "It's simple: You've got a lot of different kinds of people, and you can't have just one kind of technology," Carswell says, citing a presentation that later validated his thinking. "I realized that we needed to offer choices."

Carswell's idea was to take advantage of open-source technology to create a site specifically for instruction, with tools that empowered faculty members to build their own online presences. The software should be customizable, use open standards and follow accessibility guidelines, with content publicly accessible. The open-source Plone content management system caught his attention because of its intuitive interface compared to the course management system. "Plone functions much more closely to the types of content management experiences people have on the Web," he says, citing sites like Flickr and YouTube as roughly similar, familiar examples.

Carswell put together a basic site, called the Learning Web, and started showing English department faculty members how to post their course materials. "It kind of grew organically from there," he says.

Finding comfort with Plone

In fact, the Learning Web soon became *too* successful. "We got to the point where we reached critical mass with the Zope server," Carswell says. When he asked the college's Windows-trained technical support staff to set up a proxy server using Apache, "They looked at me like: 'Why are you giving us more work to do? We're not trained in any of these things.'"
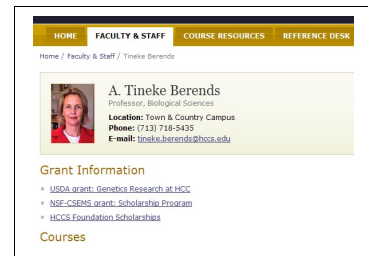
That's when Carswell and a colleague contacted Enfold Systems. Soon they moved the Learning Web to Enfold Server and Enfold Proxy, which increased system administrators' comfort by letting them manage Plone with their existing Windows Server skills, including easily setting up proxy servers with Internet Information Services (IIS) for better security and performance.

"The business requirements change when you move from a development to a production environment," Carswell says. Enfold Server and Proxy give them the best of both worlds: the open-source flexibility of Plone, plus easy administration. "They're extremely professional products," he says, allowing the college to "have the same kind of relationship as with other vendors."

With this platform, plus training provided by Enfold and Plone Bootcamps, Carswell could focus on customizations, including a look-and-feel and several content types. The custom member folder, where each faculty member places content, displays contact information plus the faculty member's choice of an automatically generated content list or a customizable home page. Other custom content types include course folder, syllabus and reading list. Carswell also added third-party products for blogs, bookmarks, help centers, image galleries and wikis.

The four other area colleges in the system have adopted the Learning Web, and the sites have increased faculty Web presence tremendously. Carswell says members generally find the system easy to use and adaptable to their needs, and they feel empowered to shape its future development. He sees the Learning Web adding new presentation capabilities for content collections of special interest to faculty members. "More and more, they'll be the narrators for the media that students consume in their courses," he predicts.

Overview

Business need: With students increasingly depending on the Internet for information, Houston Community College Northwest needed to make more of its course resources available online. Faculty members needed the ability to build and manage their own Web presences, with a platform that was easier to use and more accessible than the college's course management system.

Solution: Enfold Server and Enfold Proxy, plus training services provided by Enfold and Plone Bootcamps

Benefits: Faculty-member presence on the Web has grown tremendously, increasing student satisfaction and laying groundwork for better academic performance.

"The Learning Web is the creative platform on which we will build a twenty-first century learning environment. If we construct it correctly, it will fundamentally change and revolutionize the way we do business. It will lead the way."

Dr. Zachary R. Hodges
President
Houston Community College Northwest

For more information

Visit us on the Web at:

enfoldsystems.com/
Products