

Creating a new Plone site

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In the Summer of 2009 I began the job of moving our old School html website across to the new Plone system. I knew nothing about websites before I started this job, inheriting the website coordinators role from a previous member of staff in late 2008. In January 2009 I was being 'encouraged' to over haul the existing html site as it was considered inadequate for purpose and there were rumours of this new system called Plone. Our old website had grown organically over many years, was poorly organised, and visually looked like a car crash of 'dolly mixture' – horrendous colours, crazy mixtures of fonts and text, some bold, some italic with no consistency anywhere. Rather than upgrade the existing website I decided to find out more about Plone – which in our Department in early 2009 was only a rumour. Imagine my surprise to find a whole office floor of staff dedicated to Plone development!

I had my first meeting with Ben Coulthard and Michelle Heap in late February 2009 and finally launched the Plone site in August 2009. So from beginning to end the whole process took about five months. Within that time, I spend most of the Summer months of June and July working on Plone development. This was a job that I largely did alone – I wouldn't recommend that – it is a big job and with a concerted team effort, the time involved would be shortened considerably.

Developing the Plone website

I had no prior model to work from nor was I given any departmental advice about how to proceed and I was utterly daunted at the prospect of what seemed to be an enormous undertaking; so I decided two things from the outset:

- 1) listen to Ben Coulthard (I'll take my money from you later),
- 2) take the Departmental X Model and work with it as is.

It still surprises me that the initial reaction of many people to any new web design layout is to be initially critical and want to change it – even if they themselves have absolutely no experience with website design. This is nuts, a lot of thought had clearly gone into the Departmental X model already and you have no idea how much work you will create for yourself if you start fiddling around with page organisation!

The next job was to sort out what how our current web pages were organised. At first I just clicked through pages to try and get a sense of the site, this was fruitless. I then had someone in IT find a piece of software that unpacks the html site into a hierarchy of folders – excellent! In one view I could see all the pages and where they are situated in relation to each other. *Oh the horror, the horror!* In one second you could see the organic nature of the site, very little was in any real sensible order. Staff pages were situated in folders that had nothing to do with staff, images were floating all over just tied together with a variety of links – total chaos.

So next, I printed out the entire web site. This might seem a useless waste of paper, but it was an extremely useful thing to do and helped with everything that followed.

Using the Departmental X model as my bible I made up a series of cardboard folders that simply mimicked the organisational tree of the model. For most sections I only went as far as the first row beneath the *Home* folder. For *Existing Staff and Students* I went to tier two, for research I went down to tier three and for *People* and *About the Department* I made folders down to tier four.

I laid all these folders out on a big table that I commandeered for the life of the project in the same order they appear on the Departmental X model – this might sounds anal, but it helped me think about how the Plone site was going to be structured all the time. The top tier *Undergrad/Postgrad/DL* etc. was all in the same colour (yellow) – and all the subfolders contained within that folder were in another colour (red).

I then re-organised the old website content to fit the new Plone model. I completely ignored the old organisation – which was a mess anyway, so for me this was easy to do. Then I put content into the appropriate folders- or as near as I possibly could – I DID NOT create any new folders or deviate from the Departmental X model at any time – even though I was tempted to on several occasions.

I then earmarked people in the Department to edit and update the content of particular folders. I wanted to be sure that the Plone content would at least be up to date before launch. This was partially successful, mostly resulting in people providing updates, but little editing. Still it was one job I didn't have to worry about later on.

It was pretty obvious on looking at the content in any of my folders there was a lot of redundancy – and also some pretty terrible writing. So to make my job easier when time came to produce the new pages, I hacked down the text with some joy.

Without a doubt most of the pictures we had on the old pages were terrible, poorly lit, badly composed, and generally rubbish. So I junked nearly all of them.

What content to include?

Once I had the new text I started thinking about what content to put on the new pages. Again I didn't really have a lot of guidance here so I just adopted a few basic rules:

- 1) Less is more.
- 2) Where ever possible, reduce multiple pages to a single page.
- 3) I tried wherever I could to keep text within the visible field of view, so there was minimal need to scroll down a page. Some web pages seem to require endless down scrolling and it isn't at all clear why. Is anyone every going to read what is more than a page lower down?
- 4) I tried to find the most important text and put it at the top of the page. On some of the old pages, the most important parts, such as a link to a form or an important date, were often left right at the bottom of the page where no could see it easily. There are still places I could improve this on our own pages.
- 5) If you need to maintain a lot of text on a page, put Anchors right at the top so it is clear right away that there is a lot on the page and people can read the hot links and decide if they need to short-cut down the page.
- 6) Keep formatting to a minimum. The more you mess about with different fonts, italics, bold etc. the more untidy the page becomes.

- 7) I tried to create my own basic formatting rules on how to use headings and other text formatting available in Plone so the pages looked consistent across the site. Also I thought that consistency of layout within a particular section, such as Undergraduate courses, would help people find information quickly. Now I have handed management of sections of the web site over to other people I am finding that people are not following the basic formats I have set up. I think maintaining internal consistency is important and will help visitors find information on repeat visits. It may mean I need to write some kind of Style Guide for the website.

Moving the edited content into a new Plone Page

I spent a bit of time thinking about whether an area of the web site needed to be organised as a folder or as a page. If any section has more than one page, or you think that it will grow in the future with new content. Establish the section as a folder.

Physically moving the content into Plone took quite a lot of time. Making the staff pages was the longest single job – I had to delegate this to a graduate student. Before we started I established a basic page format.

Make sure that all text is cleaned by cutting and pasting it through Notepad. A lot of page layout and formatting issues arise if you don't do this simple, but admittedly tedious job.

Adding and managing images is a little fiddly in Plone. I always try and size the image in Adobe Photoshop Elements first and save it for the web to minimise its size before I move it into the web page container.

Problems with Plone

There are still some issues with Plone that I find problematic.

- Manipulating images is not easy – often what you can see in the edit window bears no relation to what appears on the page after you have saved and exited the editing window
- Editing pages remotely from home can be difficult. It is still best to edit pages from your campus workstation. **Note from Web team – Plone is not known to be slow if used from home – but it could be affected if the individual had a slow internet connection.**
- Plone is slow. This makes some editing jobs take a lot longer than they should, simply because of the need to constantly move in and out of the editing window, saving your changes, checking the new screen view, then re-entering the edit window, etc.
- While I seemed to understand the structure of Plone quite quickly I have found that the disciples of 'Dreamweaver' find it more difficult to adjust to how Plone works and how to manage and edit content. I think they also find it a bit more restrictive than the full creative control they had before. Having said that, our older website still ended up that looking awful and had little internal organisational consistency.
- I still have a bit of difficulty with Portlets. I only use the most basic content Portlets, but I know there is a lot more you can do with these little gizmos.

Good things about Plone

- Plone is essentially a content management system. Once you understand how it manages content, the rest is relatively straightforward. You don't need any particular skills in website coding or website design – I still don't have any!
- I like the look of the website (this is a big advantage of not having many options for page design and layout) and we get a lot of positive comments about it from 'users'. We have had parents and students say that the website was a deciding factor in coming to Leicester Open Days
- The Plone site helps you to create a consistent 'look' right across all your pages
- Plone helps you create 'clean' looking pages that are without unnecessary clutter

Handy tips

- When making decisions on content it is useful to try and think about who your 'audience' will be. Don't write content for other academics (this was one of the problems of our older web pages) write it for parents and prospective students
- Sort out your content FIRST before you even think of putting it on a webpage. I mostly work with word files ensuring that I have the words I want before I put them into a Plone page
- I do not worry about layout or pictures too much before I set up the page – I focus totally on the written content
- I like pictures but find that too many interfere with the written content – so I limit their use now – also I don't like it when pictures interfere with the written content at the top of the page (I still have some things to improve in my own pages here)
- Sort out all your pictures in Photoshop Elements first. Ensure they are as well lit and bright as possible. Resize for the web and if possible sort out their physical size too.
- Finding good pictures is difficult. I am always on the lookout for better ones. I keep a separate organisational Folder on my computer where I house content, such as files and images.
- If I know I am going to need a lot of links to documents, forms, pictures I always set up individual content folders marked as 'documents' and 'images' in each section of the website.
- Find out about Google Analytics or whatever system the University is signed up to now – it tells you a lot about 'users'. Also it is sobering and instructive to see how little time people might spend on a page. This will help you figure out whether you want to write 500 words or 50!
- Find out about Eye Tracking studies – this is also very sobering data on how people read websites.