

Meeting with Charles Matthews in Cambridge regarding our VLE

On Wednesday 9 January I travelled to Cambridge to meet with Charles Matthews to discuss the progress made with our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). We also examined what needs to be done next and how best to progress the project.

Course outline

The course is designed to encompass three levels of study, currently referred to as A, B and C. Level A is the level for absolute beginners and will cover the basics, such as what Wikipedia is and how it works. Level B is the intermediate, and touches on some of the finer points of editing and also looks at some of the principles of Wikipedia in more detail. Level C is more advanced, covering material that goes beyond everyday editing. To complement the three main levels of the course, over time an evolving database of case studies could serve as a vehicle for further study.

Each of these levels requires a different approach in terms of presentation. For example, Level A will include much more multimedia content as a way of ensuring that those people new to Wikipedia are engaged with the course. Level C, in contrast, is much more detailed and is aimed at more advanced users. Level B is the most appropriate section of the course for active community involvement.

As far as I can tell, the majority of the course content is completed and uploaded to the VLE. Modules are deliberately kept to about the same length, something like 500 to 600 words. Just a few are light on content, and these are some of the most technical (e.g. Wikipedia Technical Overview (B), Other Files (B), Non-Roman Scripts (B), MediaWiki (C)).

Technology

Below is an overview of where we are in respect to the technological aspects of the VLE. Please also see the recommendations towards the end of this document.

In Charles' view it is very desirable that some further software is designed to allow an import / transclusion function from the auxiliary wiki site (at <http://modulewiki.wikimedia.org.uk>) to the VLE. I don't entirely understand this but it involves a need to edit content in one place (the wiki), with the changes to be replicated within Moodle. This could therefore maintain consistency between the pages within the VLE and the relevant community-editable pages on the wiki. The existing software that has been written for the VLE allows a single sign-on. The key benefit of this development is, of course, to allow for wider, seamless community involvement.

Back-ups at the moment present some minor difficulties. The site is currently backed up manually. However, now we are able to host the system ourselves it would be less than half a day's work for a skilled developer to institute automated backups. This is especially important when learners begin to use the site. We need to mitigate against any potential loss of user data.

There is a need to upgrade to the latest version of Moodle. We are currently using v2.1 but v2.3 is available. There is a risk that if this was attempted by someone who is not a skilled developer that there is a loss of data occurring during the process. Moodle also upgrade their software every six months or so. Therefore there may be an ongoing requirement for a developer to spend a small amount of time updating the software at bi-annual intervals.

An additional technical requirement is for the VLE to be configured with the current authentication software. This involves the use of a Moodle plug-in and a MediaWiki extension. Again, the technical aspects of this are somewhat lost on me but this is likely to be only a couple of hours of work for a skilled developer. There is a GitHub page about this that apparently explains the procedure.

Presentation

With regards to the content, Charles is to propose to the Education Committee that I become designated as a sub-editor for the VLE. If the committee agrees, I am happy to take on this role. I have the necessary skills and equipment to not only edit text where there is a need, but to provide images, audio files and video files to support the text content of the course.

The current design theme used within the VLE is very dark and not very accessible. It is my view that this needs to be changed, either through the design of a custom theme or the purchase of one from Moodle directly, or e-Learn Direct. Charles has given me some information on this which is summed up in the section on recommendations. The impact of a new theme would not be inconsiderable.

Manual

One key piece of work remains from Charles' contract and that is to create the "manual" for the course. This will define what we want to achieve through the use of the course and how we want people to use the system. The manual pages that are for VLE users can be placed on the auxiliary wiki right now; Charles can continue working on this. The eventual form of the manual is up to the Education Committee.

Advanced content

Charles made a suggestion that there is a need to commission some advanced, bespoke content from experienced training providers. This would cover things such as case studies, tips for coaching and mentoring, and modules that may help Wikipedians develop the skills and confidence they would need to perhaps go through an RfA (for example). I'm sure Charles can go into more detail about this.

He suggested that the work to create the necessary VLE modules could be put out to tender. Those responding to the tender would outline how they intend to design the modules and segment the information. A good example of an advanced module would be around copyright. This also demonstrates the need for even advanced Wikipedians to continue learning. Charles also feels this would go down well with the WMF and the FDC and I'm inclined to agree.

Recommendations

Here is a list of recommendations from Charles about next steps and what is likely to be required:

- Set up automated Moodle back-ups (requires around 1 hour of developer time)
- Upgrade Moodle software to latest version (estimated to require around 2 hours of developer time)
- Configure wiki-Moodle system with the authentication software, some format upgrade of wiki (estimated to require 2 hours of developer time)
- Moodle theme / skin for custom look on the VLE (estimated cost £1,500)
- Software change to Moodle, allowing HTML to be imported directly from wiki pages, to give a transclusion function (cost estimated at £2,250 if the task is feasible – Charles will investigate)
- Tenders to be invited for the writing of advanced material for the VLE (estimated cost £4,000)
- Charles to propose to the Education Committee that Stevie is nominated as sub-editor for the VLE content.

Summary

On the whole work with the Moodle is progressing well. Excellent progress has been made in terms of course content. Refinements are required in terms of look and feel, accessibility and usability, including the use of an updated theme. If we can find a cost-neutral way to do this, it is to be preferred.

The first three points of Charles' list of recommendations appear easy to implement at minimal cost, although I add a caveat here that my technical knowledge is nowhere near sufficient to assess this. The final point that I become a sub-editor to the content should be discussed with the Education

Committee and Jon as my line manager for approval.

The three points with a cost implication I don't feel qualified to comment on and leave to the Education Committee.

To finalise this short report, I think everyone can feel confident that the final product is going to be excellent and will add significant value to Wikimedia UK and potential Wikipedians.