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Places to Go: IncSub

by Stephen Downes

In the space of the last year or so, a sea change has taken place in the world of online learning. While still widely supported and widely used, campus-based learning management systems have come under increasing criticism. Campus portals are on the wane, and the emphasis on institution-based learning environments is shifting toward personal or portable learning environments. At the same time personal publishing is on the rise, instantiated most widely by the weblog, audio syndication (or "podcasting"), and even mobile phones with built-in digital cameras. Content syndication has seen renewed life, and almost every major publisher has adopted the most popular format: really simple syndication (RSS). The pervasive trend toward closed, proprietary systems has been reversed—both on the user desktop, with open-source applications such as [Firefox](#) making a major impact, and on campus, with open-source learning management systems such as [Moodle](#) and [Sakai](#) gaining substantial market share.

In this new environment, *Innovate* debuts the column "Places to Go" and with it, the first site up for review: James Farmer's [IncSub](#), short for "incorporated subversion." This Web site combines many of the new approaches to educational technology just described. It is at heart a weblog, written by an Australian educational technologist; but in addition to the almost daily comments threading the tapestry of the new model of online learning, Farmer offers a mosaic of information and demonstrations of what the new technology looks like and how it works. Readers are invited not only to learn about, but to try for themselves some of the now widely popular open-source content management systems and learning support tools that provide alternatives to the centralized status quo.

The IncSub [home page](#) features a sparse layout: a set of boxes, with no particular hierarchy or beginning, that invite the reader to simply explore. Return visitors soon learn, however, to click on the "incorporated subversion" box in the lower right-hand corner; this takes them directly to the [incorporated subversion weblog](#), where Farmer discusses and digests the news of the day. The weblog design is a widely accepted format for this form of content: The main panel consists of a series of dated entries, with the most recent entries posted at the top of the page; returning readers can start at the top and read down until they hit something they have seen previously. Farmer deals with the day-to-day reality of an instructional technologist, reviewing and commenting on learning management systems, looking at aspects of current technology such as discussion board services or chat systems, and exploring the pedagogical and information theory behind their design.

On the right-hand side of the weblog, readers will find the sort of margin common to sites of this type: a lengthy list of links to other educational technology weblogs and related resources and links to weblog archives (dating only to October 2004—readers looking for earlier material will find it at an [older version](#) of the incorporated subversion Web site). Looking carefully in the "Other" section, readers will also find a link to the [IncSub wiki](#), their first indication that something more is happening behind the scenes. The wiki, a piece of software that allows anyone to edit the contents of the Web page, is where the interaction begins. The idea behind the wiki is that content created by multiple authors can eventually develop into something more rich and authoritative than content developed by an individual author. The content of the wiki is fluid, changing daily or weekly (depending on the inclinations of its visitors), thus allowing for the creation of dynamic content. To add to or change the wiki, users simply click on the Edit button at the bottom of the page. They can access a list of all such changes by clicking on the History button.

Returning to the main IncSub Web page, visitors will notice the box at the upper left with more interest than before; it is Farmer's introduction to the wiki. Those who follow the [Details](#) link will find a page devoted to the

wiki—what it is and how to use it in a learning context. In the right column are links to a few popular types of wiki software, including [PhpWiki](#) and [TikiWiki](#) (Farmer uses the latter). A helpful introduction, [What is a Wiki?](#), adds more information and a link to Brian Lamb's authoritative article, "Wide Open Spaces: Wikis, Ready or Not" (2004). From the IncSub home page visitors also may access the [IncSub association](#) Web site, a resource area where users can share information, join forums, and register for their own IncSub weblogs.

A second box on the IncSub main page is devoted to the other major technology employed on the site: the weblog. The thought behind IncSub's apparently aimless design is now becoming apparent. The box contains links to [Details](#) and [What is a weblog?](#); on the latter page readers will see a useful definition and have access to examples and articles—including [Into the Blogosphere](#) (an important collection of critical commentary on weblogs) and one of my own essays, "Educational Blogging" (Downes 2004). Returning to the weblogs overview page, readers will find a link to one of Farmer's essays (2004a) and to popular weblogging tools such as [WordPress](#), which is available as an open-source application, and [Nucleus](#), which allows users to create multiple blogs.

A third subject box on the IncSub main page leads readers to a similar presentation on the subject of [content management systems](#) (CMSs). Following the now-anticipated [What is?](#) link, visitors can learn about these systems and their role in learning. It is interesting that Farmer characterizes [Blackboard](#) and [WebCT](#) as content management systems rather than as learning management systems. The reason becomes apparent when one looks at the open-source content management systems listed. Those like [Drupal](#) and [Siteframe](#) perform many of the same functions as the commercial products, and their open-source design allows individual institutions to customize them to their own needs. The [IncSub association](#) Web site, mentioned above, is an example of the sort of community content management site that can be powered by Drupal. Visitors to the association page can create a Drupal account and use the system for themselves.

The blog, the wiki, and the open-source content management system have become the cornerstones of a new approach to online learning. As the reader may conclude from Farmer's Web site, these technologies have in common an ease of use and familiarity for instructors and students, combined with little or no cost and ease of installation for site administrators. The technologies supporting and linking these systems, aspects of which I will explore in future columns, have created what may almost be thought of as an online learning counterculture: one that eschews large investments in resources and development; that eschews static, prepackaged, and (usually) commercial content; and that leans toward a flexible, organic, and dynamic design based as much on personal publishing and interaction as on predefined pedagogy and course design. While the sample of such technology listed at the IncSub site is limited, readers with a sense of adventure may visit the [opensourceCMS](#) Web site, where they can obtain administrator access to numerous systems and evaluate the offerings for themselves.

A postscript to this review is necessary. It is not without a certain amount of risk that authors such as James Farmer explore and talk about alternatives to a now-entrenched educational technology infrastructure. The freedom to advance unorthodox ideas and to challenge institutional presumptions is limited, even in a university environment. In November of last year, Farmer was issued with what amounted to a "cease and desist" order from his administration, ordering him not only to cease advocating free and open-source learning management technology on campus, but to cease doing it at all. To their credit, Farmer's higher-ups relented, but not before a significant show of support from the educational weblog and CMS community demonstrated the importance of his work (Farmer 2004b). For the lesson inherent in such technologies is not merely that alternatives to static and stifled online course delivery are possible, but that a reconsideration of the organization and administration of learning itself is a likely result.

As I wrote in my own statement of support for Farmer: "One wonders what the motivation for such a demand [to cease and desist] would be. One wonders how it can be that in a university, of all places, it can be deemed appropriate to stifle inquiry, squelch dissent, and clamp down on expressed opinions freely voiced in an independent forum. I will state this very clearly, for anyone who cares to read this: James Farmer is an important part of our community. We need him. The names on this list—and the names of many more

people—are testament to that. Silencing James Farmer is to silence us all—and we will not be silent."

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