

AIM IM with blambubc

9/29/04, 10:25 AM

Alan Levine: Helloooooo Vancouver

blambubc: And a big "Good day, eh?" to our friendly neighbors to the south!

Alan Levine: We would say "

Alan Levine: Howdy pardner"

Alan Levine: This is a little experiment in using a chat tool for doing a long distance interview for an upcoming article in the Fall 2004 mcli Forum <http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/forum/>

blambubc: OK, I'll try to keep it clean.

Alan Levine: We are chatting with Brian Lamb, from the University of British Columbia...

Alan Levine: Can you tell us a little about your background and your current position at UBC?

blambubc: My educational background is in English Literature (American, actually). After I finished my MA, I stumbled into online learning via the Tec de Monterrey University system in Mexico. At a campus in Hermosillo just a few hours due south of where you are. I have since landed here at UBC...

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blambubc: ... originally hired to coordinate "learning object" projects. In truth, I think I was hired to try and figure out what "learning objects" are... and in that respect, I have been a resounding failure.

Alan Levine: Why would you say "failure?"

blambubc: Because like everyone else, I can't tell you what a "learning object" is... I have my opinions, of course, but so does everyone in this field. The fact people in our field still can't agree on basic terminology should be a warning sign.

Alan Levine: For those who may not be familiar with UBC, can you just give a general description of the university?

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blambubc: It's one of the bigger Universities in Canada, and I believe the biggest in Western Canada. In some respects it is very advanced -- with regards to technology at least -- for example, we have wireless access all over campus. It's also a decentralized place: historically (and presently) the individual faculties and units have a great deal of autonomy over how they conduct their affairs.

blambubc: My own role is to coordinate or facilitate collaboration amongst these disparate groups.

Alan Levine: What is the office/department where you work? What do they do?

blambubc: The Office of Learning Technology sits beneath the Vice-President Academic's Office. We are a central unit, though in terms of size and budget we are smaller than most of the Faculty units. We're more a hub than a Mothership.

Alan Levine: Congratulations on your recent EDUCAUSE Review article on wikis- it has gotten well-deserved praise from many influential people... First, why wikis? What is special or unique about them?

blambubc: We try to be an interface between technology units and users. Focus on the human side of technology.

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blambubc: Thanks for the kind words. That article drew heavily on the dialogue that the online community has been having the past few years -- which is the point. With respect to wikis, there a number of defining characteristics, but if I had to choose a single signature...

blambubc: It would be a link (usually at the bottom of the page) that says something like "Edit text of this page". If any online reader can edit the content on the screen, without providing a password or downloading any software, then it's probably a wiki.

Alan Levine: Wikis are actually old technology, what has made them rise to "buzzword" status now, some 10 years after they first appeared?

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blambubc: I think it's a response to how the Internet has tended to develop over the past decade. Technology has gotten more complex, and more restrictive. The tight structures of the most popular collaborative software systems -- and the obvious limitations of email -- have people crying out for simpler, more open alternatives. I quote Ross Mayfield in my article -- something to the effect of "if a disruptive technology appears in your organization, it means that your IT strategy isn't working." People want to use their tools to support what they

want to do, not learn new tools to do what somebody else has decided they should do.

Alan Levine: This approach of disruption runs counter to what seems like organizations desire for "stability", especially ones responsible for information technologies!

blambubc: And there are those in this organization who only see the "disruption" part of what is implied by wikis. But most wiki systems have sneaky structures to support their brand of stability.

Alan Levine: What is the technology that makes wikis work? What does it take to get one set up at an institution? Which software do you use? Why was it chosen?

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blambubc: There is no one technology that lies beneath all wikis. They use all sorts of programming languages and can be set up with a myriad of architectures. Most of them are open source, and fairly light in terms of server space and bandwidth requirements. We initially used UseMod -- and to be honest that initial decision was arbitrary and uninformed -- and that system has it's points... it's very easy to install (Perl) and it is as simple to use as any system out there. A majority of UBC users have figured the system out for themselves.

Alan Levine: Please describe for our audience some ways wikis have been used at UBC. How many are there?

blambubc: I don't think I can give you a number of users. (That gets me in trouble here.) I can say that on a typical day about 2-10 new pages get started, and about 10-20 get edited on our main system. In terms of what they do... I can give you a few examples...

blambubc: A fairly typical use if for an instructor to use it as a bulletin board for events, etc... and for simple discussions: <http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/wiki.pl?Mech410-550Z>

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blambubc: Our Career Services unit is in the midst of a major site re-design... they are using the wiki to mock-up content while the techies get their act together. Everyone is able to author content -- not just a handful of people who know how to use Dreamweaver -- and everyone can contribute to all the sections. They really have used the wiki well: <http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/wiki.pl?COL>

Alan Levine: Interesting use on COL-- group writing the specs for a project...

blambubc: It takes the web design process out of the hands of a handful of experts, and brings everyone in. I did a one hour workshop on the basics of using it, and away they went.

blambubc: One of the aspects of wikis I don't trumpet too loudly (internally at UBC at least) is how little support they require.

Alan Levine: That is a refreshing statement for technology... How do the instructors take to wikis? How about the students?

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blambubc: Only a handful of instructors have actually seen what wikis can do... but I've taken to doing all my presentations and workshops inside a wiki space. Invariably it really piques the interest of at least a handful of them. One element they have difficulty with is the "loss of control" implied by open access and anonymous editing. In many respects it mirrors the challenges of encouraging instructors to allow more constructivist philosophies to influence their instruction.

blambubc: Students have been more enthusiastic, although some of them experience the same disorientation that most newcomers do.

Alan Levine: What tips them over into being believers?

blambubc: I think when they begin to understand that the users are in control. That though they may sacrifice some functions such as security and organization, they gain a great deal of speed and autonomy.

blambubc: It really requires doing to become a believer.

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Alan Levine: How do you help people make the "Aha" step from that first look of puzzlement when you describe a web site that anyone can edit or destroy?

blambubc: I do have one gimmick, where I invite people in the audience to erase or deface all of my materials. Then I restore my stuff with a couple clicks of the mouse. That really is the key to the notion of "Soft Security" (which underlies this approach), it needs to be easier to fix damage than it is to inflict it.

Alan Levine: Have you had to deal with objectional content on the UBC wikis? Or spam? How do you monitor?

blambubc: I do regularly scan the "recent changes" on the system, and keep half an eye on things. To be honest, I have never had to delete a page because of objectionable content. Spam, on the other hand is a real worry...

Alan Levine: Why is this happening? How do your faculty and staff react to spam? If they want more "protection" the "wiki way" seems to be defeated....

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blambubc: On average, about ten to twenty pages per day get hit with spam links from outside the system. Typically I spend about five minutes per day cleaning things up. In the ideal wiki world, it wouldn't be just my job to remove wikispam -- it would be shared by all users. I suspect most of our users don't know this is happening. But there is an odd psychological element to our instance -- I don't think it is seen as a genuinely "community"-type system... it is seen as a supported service. It's one quirk of applying an open system approach inside a large structured organization.

Alan Levine: Have you been surprised by anything in the use of wikis at UBC?

blambubc: I've mainly been surprised by how diverse the uses can be... and though there are plenty of nay-sayers, I've been pleasantly surprised by how many users have accepted the conditions of a wiki. It is still a niche technology -- and I'm not sure it will ever be wholly mainstream in its current form -- but most days I see at least one new application of wikis that I never expected.... That's an immensely satisfying thing to observe.

Alan Levine: Could you share one specific example of a use you did not expect?

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blambubc: I was surprised to see the wiki page start out supporting a group of academics brainstorming a series of conferences, and then watching it evolve into a full-fledged conference page/discussion board/published proceedings: <http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/wiki?TechnoCulture>

blambubc: Then again, I think it's cool to watch people plan their group camping trips too.

Alan Levine: Is there some threshold of active users in a wiki group needed to make them thrive?

blambubc: I guess it depends on how complex the interactions are... I've seen the wiki work quite well for two or three users working together to build a list or a collaborative document.

Alan Levine: The most frequently referenced example of a wiki is the Wikipedia- the main objection is the concern over the authenticity of the information. How can we address those concerns?

blambubc: But it is vital that everyone feel empowered to make at least minor changes.

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blambubc: Well, first off we do need to recognize that there are limitations to the Wikipedia model... if you are looking for authoritative, vetted expert opinions there will always be problems with Wikipedia. Then again, there is a far wider range of subjects covered on Wikipedia, and material is generally more up to date. And community policing works remarkably well in most cases. I would point to Google as a comparison -- Google uses Pagerank (the number of people linking to a site) to determine the order of returned results, and leverages popular activity to allow for corrections of search phrases and spelling. Are Google's rankings more "authoritative" or "reliable" than your local library's online catalogue? No way. Is it an easier and groovier experience to get a quick answer via Google? You bet.

Alan Levine: Not to mention that you can "google" (or for that matter "wiki") when/where you need it....

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blambubc: Right. And nothing is stopping you from taking the quick information you got online, and using it to inform your library research.

Alan Levine: And this is a shift from just consuming information from the net to creating/adding to it....

Alan Levine: Two more questions.... First, where do you see wikis fitting in with other learning technology tools?

blambubc: I don't see them taking over, but I think they can make a wonderful and versatile option to fill in the many gaps in present online interaction.

blambubc: They make a perfect online scratch pad... even if users switch to a more powerful and complex technology later on.

Alan Levine: Where do you see wikis going? Are they the "real thing" or a fad? What should educators do to understand them better?

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blambubc: We will probably see wikis evolve to become more like traditional web authoring tools -- already

more structured systems with features like WYSIWYG editing are emerging -- and vice versa. It's a safe bet that wiki-like elements will be part of future content and course management systems (again, this is already happening). I can't think of any better way for educators to understand wikis than to try them -- you have a wiki system at Maricopa, don't you? I'd recommend starting with simple tasks -- try setting up a list of links, and inviting students to add to it. I am inviting students in a course I am teaching to share notes on the book we are presently reading: <http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/wiki?CharacteristicsOfOrality>

Alan Levine: Wow, there are 40 revisions on that, so it is active!

blambubc: that's just over the past couple days -- during the same time, we've had 8 postings to the WebCT discussion board. Last year, the students abandoned WebCT entirely and moved all their interactions into the wiki space -- that was their decision.

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Alan Levine: Now that is interesting... students choosing the technology! So as a former "Learning Object" champion, now a "Wiki Warrior", is there anything else you want to share with our readers?

blambubc: I guess my fundamental belief is that before we adopt complex, expensive, and rigid approaches to online learning, we should take a long look at simple and open systems too. There's an Errol Morris movie entitled "Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control", and that has become my mantra. Advocacy of this philosophy is supported by literally countless very cool things developing along similar lines in the Wider Web World. Wikis are just one piece of that.

Alan Levine: Thanks for participating in this first ever "chat" interview, have a great day in beautiful Vancouver! We will email you a draft of the "article" in about a week.

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blambubc: Thanks to you -- I have learned a great deal watching the great work you folks in Maricopa are doing... you are true pioneers.

blambubc: (Whew!)