Educational Use and Importance of RSS

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Abstract: - The elearning world is rapidly changing. The technology is getting easier to use and each upgrade adds increased functionality. Personal development depends on getting new information and understanding what’s happening around us. There are a lot of good resources available and the challenge is actually seeing the information. RSS is still not a very familiar technology; however, it's already very obvious what role RSS will be playing in the future of the Internet. Because the web has become a sprawling network of different services, RSS is helping the web connect these services in an organized fashion – the new Web 2.0. In the coming few years, RSS will definitely be seen on every website and blog. Some RSS ideas, directions and solutions are revealed here, for teachers and instructors, in order to get benefits of using RSS in education.

Key-Words: - syndication, RSS, RSS feed, Rich Site Summary, feeds

1 Introduction
Really Simple Syndication feeds have been growing in popularity with Web sites that produce written, audio and video content because they offer a convenient way for readers to subscribe to what they are interested to, delivering any updates almost immediately and maintaining traffic and stickiness to the sites.

The strength of RSS is its simplicity. The content comes to us instead of going to get it! It is exceptionally easy to syndicate website content using RSS. The types of feeds commonly find on web sites are RSS 1.0, RSS 2.0 and Atom. These are the structures that organize content which is being updated so others can easily retrieve it. This content could be as well articles, blog posts, and PDF or .ppt documents, as photos, audio or video files.

2 The Power of Feeds in Education
While RSS feeds started as a way to aggregate news into one application, the possible uses for educators go far beyond the basics [1].

Web content became a powerful communication tool by the help of feeds. RSS feeds were most commonly found in news web sites or blogs, but now it is natural to see them on any web sites that are updated frequently. There are also many directories dedicated to help finding RSS feeds on topics of specific and personal interests, like http://www.bloglines.com, http://www.technorati.com, http://www.ousub.com, http://www.syndic8.com.

Professors and students might think to embrace RSS as a means to educate [2]. Academia, educational institutions are using RSS feeds in their daily routines and this fact demonstrates that RSS can be utilized in very different ways. Taking all these in consideration, the power of the RSS can be successfully used in the educational domain, some directions being discussed in the next subsections.

2.1 Blogs and Blogs Comments
Many blogs are catalogued in an RSS feed, with each blog entry summarized as a feed item. This makes it easy for students to scan blog posts for items of interest. Starting a classroom blog to use for posting important information and sharing web resources, students can easily keep track of the content posted to the blog through the RSS feed. By creating individual feeds for courses, professors can choose a few key resources, while students get the benefit of a subject specific feed.

The RSS syndication feature can be used also to monitor the comments in the blog when using comment feature to encourage collaboration among students and professors. Some blogs offer a multiple author feature which allows students to work together on single project. All the postings are aggregated in a central area, but each student can contribute to the main space or comment on another students work. Using a class blog, the professor might try having students respond to his posts and
track the feeds, rather than each student doing his own blog [3].

2.2 RSS and Social Bookmarking
RSS in conjunction with social bookmarking can be used to create a set of resources accessible on any computer connected to the internet, to conduct research and share that research with peers and track authors and book updates.

In order to realize that, an account at http://del.icio.us/ or http://www.furl.net/ will be created to store, sort and share the web sites that professor feels having worthwhile information for his students and colleagues. This way, he will share his del.icio.us and furl bookmarks with his class using their RSS feeds.

2.3 Discussion Board
If the professor feels that a discussion board better suit the needs of the class than a blog, he can successfully use a discussion board like http://server.com/communityapps/discussionapp/, which are offering RSS feeds for interested participants to keep track of discussions.

Quick Topic - http://www.quicktopic.com/ helps to create a disposable discussion board that can be used with students. The professor can create a discussion board, invite contributors, and subscribe to the discussion RSS feed to keep track of contributors.

2.4 Sharing RSS Feeds
If students want to share feed lists or subject specific feeds list with each other, the solution is called OPML. Sharing a list of feeds around specific topics or on a subject area that includes research, blogs and other feeds implies the use of an Outline Processor Markup Language (OPML) file to import complete RSS lists to a news aggregator.

By the use of such a file, students can link to a list of RSS feeds and import them into another news aggregator to share with peers. The professor can use OPML to create a linked list of all his students’ subscription list on a particular topic and publish it in a central space so that all students can benefit from the feeds colleagues have found.

2.5 Web Searches and Research
Let's think about the differences between the web where Google and Yahoo were built to crawl, index, and search and the nowadays web which seems to be overflowing with sites pumping out RSS and Atom feeds on a regular basis.

The idea of creating RSS feeds for search terms is especially interesting because once a student wants to do a project or a paper on specific topic, that student could actually create an RSS feed that would bring any news about the topic to his aggregator as soon as it was published [4].

First case is when create RSS feeds for news searches: say students want to create a feed for what’s in the daily news about a particular topic. They can make a syndicated feed of search results of Google News, so they have to take the following feed address and add their search terms where indicated. So, for instance, if they want to have a feed for the search term “rss and weblog” it would look like:
http://news.google.com/news?q=%22rss+weblog%22&output=rss. Copying that address and paste it into Bloglines aggregator, anyone start getting any news that’s in the media about the topic right away.

Second case is when create RSS feeds for weblog searches: getting a regular feed of searches in the blogosphere is just as easy, but say the professor might want to experiment with searching posts on his own before bringing students into the fray. The easiest way is to go to Feedster.com and type in the search terms. On the page of results, the 2.0 RSS box will be seen and when clicked on will give a number of standard newsreaders to choose from: if logged in at Bloglines, a click on the Bloglines link will automatically add it to his account. Another option is Technorati.com which is a leader in indexing weblog content. Once signed up for a free membership, students can create what Technorati calls watchlists: each watchlist created has it’s own RSS feed that can be added to Bloglines.

Third case is when create RSS feeds for website searches. There is some more: students can even create an RSS feed from a search of Google sites, so, if there is new content about some topic added to a site that’s already on the Internet, or if there is a whole new site created about the topic, he’ll find out about it in his aggregator. Going to http://www.googlealert.com/, the web's leading solution for monitoring professional interests online and sign up for an account, once registered, up to three searches can be created that can bring back up to 150 results total. Feed addresses obtained at the end of the process will be copied into the Bloglines account.

It is also possible to create a metasearch feed by building a library of exemplary search feeds for
students to scaffold research for projects or use http://www.Gada.be to quickly create a metasearch feed. This is an excellent tool for searching blogs, news and web search feeds with a single step.

2.6 Sharing Learning Objects
Learning object repositories represent the benefit of reusability when using Internet resources for education [5]. Blogs and RSS feeds also offer the benefit of reusability.

The unit that you as a professor put together for your class and posted as part of the class blog can serve as a resource for another professor elsewhere. Even better, many blogs allow you to track those that have linked to your blog with a trackback. By linking to your lesson with a trackback, some other professor makes the work your class (and you) put into the unit available to his class – and lets you know that your work is being reused. Stephen Downes, one of the leading education bloggers, said about RSS aggregation that “provides greater exposure of education and training resources to the wider community. Aggregation also promotes the reuse of resources and encourages the development of interoperable resources.”

The operators of learning object repositories have also started to experiment with RSS feeds listing recently added or topical learning resources; collections providing feeds now include the Maricopa Learning Exchange, Merlot, EdNA, CAREO, and the UK Centre for Materials Education. These feeds may be read in any RSS headline reader. In addition, such software as the Distributed Learning Object Repository Network (DLORN) harvests the feeds from these repositories and displays the results in a centrally accessible site, which greatly eases the search for learning objects from a wide range of sources [6].

2.7 Combined RSS
If the professor has a classroom full of students who each have their own weblogs, accounts at Furl, and a number of search feeds that they are tracking to collect even more information, from the teaching standpoint, if he wants to monitor all of that information flow, there is a way to combine all of those collective feeds into one so that he can keep all the related work together and get a clearer picture of a student’s workflow.

Blogdigger.com (http://www.blogdigger.com) has a way to create what is called groups of feeds, blending as many different feeds as wanted into one. Using the Groups feature of the Blogdigger site, and entering the various feed addresses wanted to be combined, Blogdigger gives this new feed a unique address that can be taken and used in Bloglines.

3 Syndicated educational content
RSS is a working example of a XML data network. In a world of learning objects and metadata files, just as news resources are indexed and distributed in the RSS network, so also educational resources can be indexed and distributed in a similar learning object network.

The model provided by RSS is very different from the model provided by learning content management systems where everything is contained in one very large software application. Insofar as content is distributed at all, it is distributed in bundled content libraries. This means that educational institutions must make a major investment in software and expertise in order to access learning content.

By contrast, RSS is not centralized, it is distributed. Content is not distributed in bundles, it is distributed one item at a time. It is all over the internet, there is no central store, repository or library of RSS content. To access and use RSS content in a viewer or in a web page, a large software application is not needed, but a simple RSS reader or aggregator. For this reason, the distribution of educational content over the internet will look a lot more like an RSS network than it will an enterprise content management system. People will use a distributed learning object network not only because it’s easier and cheaper, but because they can access much more content.

As a result, the concept of syndicated educational content can be really taken into account. There will always be a need for reusable learning objects, so anything that can have an educational application – including images, videos, journal articles, can be distributed through a learning object syndication network [8].

4 Benefits of the RSS Factor
The next step in RSS integration into education and e-learning practice is to present the benefits of using RSS as an information tool, while using this opportunity to expose faculty and students to relevant information resources in their course websites.

Feeds provide critical benefits to any digital media, and some of them are:
I. RSS provides the right platform to try out content distribution in many ways:
- Content delivery can be categorized because RSS helps widen present distribution: it’s nothing to worry about publishing a monthly or weekly publication;
- RSS enables to efficiently provide daily content updates to subscribers or as often as wanted;
- Providing useful content to subscribers from time to time, that helps building a deeper relationship and a better understanding, and creates a persistent link between publisher and subscribers;
- Easily providing better updates according to various interests or supply hard to find information to different target audience.

II. RSS drives quality traffic from other websites.
Syndication is the process sharing content; therefore RSS allows to easily publishing content on other websites. Doing that, real profits will arrive for a long time because:
- giving the website the ability to gain new visitors from the different corners of the web it can very well reach new audiences of different interests;
- sharing the content with other similar websites it gains recognition as an expert in the field.

III. RSS can bring new targeted subscribers to the website because:
- since most of the people today are reluctant to give out their email address (thanks to heavy spamming), RSS can act as a real savior;
- unlike email an RSS feed is zero maintenance, the messages will never get blacklisted or filtered and will always be delivered promptly, unless and until the subscribers choose to end the relationship;
- the messages, which are send out, will appear directly on the user’s desktop in their favorite RSS reader because they want to receive new updates, being serious subscribers.

IV. Improved search engine ranking: since search engines seek to provide the best and the newest available information to their users, it’s obvious they give a lot more priority to websites which update their content from time to time. It has already been proven that search engines frequently index websites, which have RSS feeds. RSS not only helps business gain more exposure through all the major search engines but also through RSS specific search engines and directories like Feedster and Syndic8.

5 Conclusion
RSS is well suited for the world of academia and educators have embraced it as a medium. Technology and communication have helped advance the educational field for years. RSS feeds and Podcasting is a natural fit for academics, and it’s obvious when we look at how teachers, students and professors are using it to further education. RSS will definitely be seen on every website and any service without RSS would lag behind [8].

RSS is a great supplemental communication method that does not burden the publisher with maintaining lists or following strict privacy guidelines. RSS feeds are compiled according to the user’s choices, removing any burden that is placed on publishers of email newsletters. Publishers no longer need to be concerned with spam, privacy policies, and age guidelines.

Any publisher using RSS as a communication vehicle is able to create keyword-rich, themed content, establishing trust, reputation, and ongoing communication with current and prospective customers.

Rarely in the last 10 years has there been a technology with so much potential to explode online exposure. A part of Web 2.0 has been the increasing popularity of RSS feeds and aggregation-syndication [9]. Traditional education will not be replaced, but the RSS technology proves once again that the future of education will be based on online training and development. It is the learning trend of the 21st century.

References: