Using active websites to engage U3A members & enhance learning

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Developing a web page, until very recently the province of specialists using complex file management systems and sophisticated platforms, has become a more democratic process. Today, user friendly web platforms such as Weebly, Word Process and Wix are available with a range of design templates. Files are stored and managed in the 'cloud'. Most offer a 'free' component, usually of a set number of pages (5 or 10) or a set file size eg 3G.

Faced with the challenge of moving from a complex web platform system requiring external specialist management to a more user friendly platform, a new website for U3A Benalla and District was launched recently.

Three cloud based user friendly web platforms which have a free option appear well worth considering when setting up a new website.

Weebly   Free platform www.weebly.com; U3A eg: Dorchester and District U3A

WIX Free platform www.wix.com; U3A example: U3A Adelaide Hills

Wordpress   Free Platform: www.wordpress.com U3A Example: Bayside U3A

Wordpress is widely used throughout NSW and U3A Network Victoria has information on its website in relation to a partnership they have established with Word Pressed There are many others - for example YOLA and JOOMLA –Horsley U3A in the UK uses the JOOMLA platform and like the new Benalla website has pages for each group, eg Astronomy, Music Appreciation, Wine Appreciation .

Weebly was chosen for the U3A Benalla and District website. It is similar to Microsoft Word to use and very user friendly as the layout of the page can be viewed as it is being built up. The www.weebly.com website has excellent support resources including Weebly's You Tube Beginner's Guide to Weebly.

Having a less 'static', more 'active' web site was also considered important and factored into the design of the new Benalla website. We introduced a regularly updating calendar with a rolling agenda on the home page and ensured that content would change regularly by synchronising web updates with the monthly publication of the newsletter. The President's column in the front page is linked to the President's blog page so changes regularly. Course page content is also changed monthly. The copy which each convenor/tutor submits to the website is added to their group's page on the website every month using a rolling 'blog' format.

Regularly changing photos are a feature of the website, feature in banner headings and also in a gallery page.

Some tutors have begun to use their course/activity blog page to publish course resources and link these interactively when conducting classes Introducing a 'blog' based page for each course/activity group at Benalla has facilitated opportunities for creative thinking about how to use this page, or linked pages, to enhance learning. It is early days – but some creative things are happening. One example which seems to be working well is the publishing of monthly 'Writing Workshop' stories on 'blog pages' created for each class member.

A key step after building, piloting, reviewing and launching a U3A website on a user friendly web platform is to engage convenors and tutors in learning how to add and edit content. We are particularly mindful of this at Benalla as we make the transition from an older, static website to a new more interactive one. 'Making the Most of the Internet' tutor Ian McLeod is one of our 'early adopters' and can now embed YouTube videos and other resources in new posts on 'Ian's Blog' quite confidently.

Learning to develop and edit content on a web page is worthwhile as the skills learnt are transferable to other platforms, and some convenors and tutors may decide to develop their own website which they can then link to the main U3A website. Those who have used word processing will be familiar with many of the required skills - eg highlighting text then bolding or italicising; cutting and copying then pasting; moving highlighted text by holding the cursor down.   Sometimes they will learn a new name for 'Save' - eg. 'Update' or 'Publish'.

Other skills involved include hyperlinking text to the internet; uploading and downloading documents; copying and pasting web addresses and - a particularly important one - resizing or compressing photographs for web pages so that they don't take too long to load when people are using your web page.

The U3A Benalla website moved from the Free to the Starter then to the Pro option as additional features were required. The Pro option enables a search function; allocation of editing rights to people responsible for authorised pages; password protection of some or all pages; and the use of the slide show feature in banner headings and more.

Time constraints meant that it was impossible to present a detailed practical session on developing user friendly webpages for the information session. Instead we decided to model the possibilities by developing and demonstrating a simple, free website for the information session http://u3anortheastdlw.weebly.com to model the possibilities. This website was screened on the day and is now being updated with power point presentations from the day being added.

It was very easy during the session to locate and link to the humorous YouTube video 'A Seniors Moment' which had been embedded in the 'Internet' session page on this website.

The way in which use tutor Ian McLeod began to use the 'Making the Most of the Internet' class web page and 'Ian's Blog' on the U3A Benalla and District website as a teaching resource was also briefly modelled.

For those interested in costing, the U3A Benalla Website uses the 'Pro' Version of Weebly which costs $159.00 US for a two year subscription.

The following resources may prove useful. They are also available on the 'free' Weebly platform used for the Information Session website - http://u3anortheastdlw.weebly.com under 'Internet' on the top menu.

U3A Benalla and District website links - DIY Website #1   DIY Website #2

Information Session Handout (open here to use links for online viewing)

Useful Handout on setting up a Weebly website

A beginner's guide to Weebly - video.

'Making your website senior friendly' - a useful research based guide.

Please don't hesitate to email Beverley Lee on bevlee47@gmail.com for further information and support.