Drupalâ€™s Lacunae for First-Time Users

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Although Drupal's flexibility is perhaps its greatest strength, for new users, the system's seemingly endless array of options can be its greatest weakness. Users who are unfamiliar with content management systems or courseware will likely be overwhelmed when they install Drupal for the first time. Although the most recent version of Drupal has made great strides in terms of simplifying the system's administrative interface, some modules can be configured only by navigating to three or four different administrative pages. First-time users will likely spend a few hours trying to understand the system's organizational scheme, and nervous novices may abandon the software before seeing what it can do, worried that they might "break" something. Fortunately, it is quite difficult to damage Drupal beyond repair, but unless users have a do-it-yourself mentality, they may find Drupal too finicky and too complex for their first foray into content management systems.

The DrupalEd installation solves some of these problems by coming configured with pre-defined user roles, some sample data typical of what might be used in a university course, and some additional "getting started" documentation. Users who are new to content management systems would do well to start with the the DrupalEd version of Drupal. A second shortcoming of Drupal is one that is typical of open-source software; namely, the tendency for certain features to "disappear" as the software evolves and matures. Drupal's hundreds of contributed modules and themes must be updated each time a new version of the Drupal "core" is released, and since all contributions to the Drupal project are voluntary and unpaid, some developers abandon modules or themes as their interest in the project wanes. In theory, any user is welcome to pick up where another developer left off, but in practice, this doesn't always happen. As a result, users who rely heavily on contributed modules and themes but who lack the technical expertise to update those projects may be forced either to delay installing new versions of the software, or to sacrifice functionality to which they have grown accustomed. Finally, Drupal lacks some features typically found in learning management systems, most noticeably a grade book and a secure, private method of providing individual feedback to students. Although a grade book module is currently in development and other modules can be customized to allow for individualized feedback on student work, these solutions aren't available "out of the box," and instructors may need to make a significant time investment to add such functions to their sites. Where Drupal excels in small courses that emphasize writing and collaboration, it may fall short in large classes that rely heavily on tests and quizzes. Instructors who are interested in learning management systems primarily for their ability to administer multiple choice tests or to automate grading will be disappointed in Drupal.

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