Comparing Blackboard *Confluence* with a customised *WordPress* installation to support the 'National product supply management workshop – exercise'

Malaria, HIV/AIDS & TB Management
Masters in Public Health (MPH)
MHAT MEDN62212

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Outline

The aim of this document to describe the process involved in replicating features of the WordPress-powered collaborative exercise currently offered to students of the MEDN62212 unit on the Masters in Public Health programme using the Confluence wiki tool which is 'powerlinked' from the Blackboard (Bb) VLE system.

This document should be read in conjunction with Cheryl Belch's MHAT Collab Space Spec V4 document which outlines clearly how the original WordPress collaborative space was set up and some of the issues and involved in doing this.

General set up

Setting up a Confluence wiki is simple. A wiki can be created by anyone with Build permission within Blackboard by clicking the **Add Content Link >> Confluence Wiki Space.** Once the wiki is set up, students can automatically access it (an account is created the first time they access it) they do not need to enter their log in details again. The confluence wiki can be set up to appear within the Blackboard frameset or in a new browser tab/window.

Customising the Confluence look and feel

It is not currently possible to replicate the look and feel of the MHAT WordPress (WP) space (Figure 1A) using Confluence. Blackboard/Confluence - Principal Instructors do not have admin rights within Confluence and are not permitted to alter the template. *Note: users do have a little control over the way their **personal pages** appear within the wiki system (position of menus, colour schemes from a restricted palette etc).*
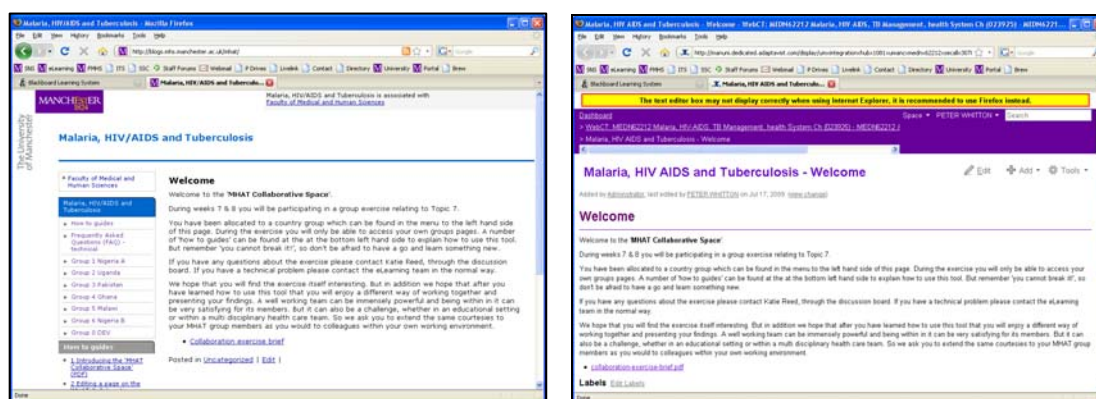

Figure 1A: MHAT WordPress and 1B: Confluence home pages

The University of Manchester Confluence wiki has been set up, within the institution, to look as similar a possible to the Blackboard environment and consequently does not look like the WP site. This is just a superficial difference between the two environments, what may be more important to the project team is that the menu system down the left hand side of the WP site can not be replicated in by someone with Designer/Instructor rights in Bb. The navigation between pages in Confluence works differently by default and new users need to become familiar with the idea of page hierarchies. (The look and feel of Confluence can be changed through the wiki administrators console, this level of control is not given to Bb Principal Instructors at the moment)

Customising the Confluence user experience

The level of control that the Bb Designer/Instructor has over the student experience of Confluence is limited. Unlike WP, rights to the Confluence admin console are

restricted; future access to this console may allow Designers/Instructors control over the layout and tool set available to students using each individual wiki.

Confluence navigation

Figure 2 shows what a Designer/Instructor sees on entering the Confluence wiki. Notice, that at first glance there does not appear to be any navigational pages linked to the home page (not including the link to the collaboration-exercise-brief.pdf). In order to view linked pages users must click on either the **Show Children** or **View in Hierarchy** (see Figure 3) links at the foot of the page – which then presents the user with the pages that that they have been allowed to view or edit.
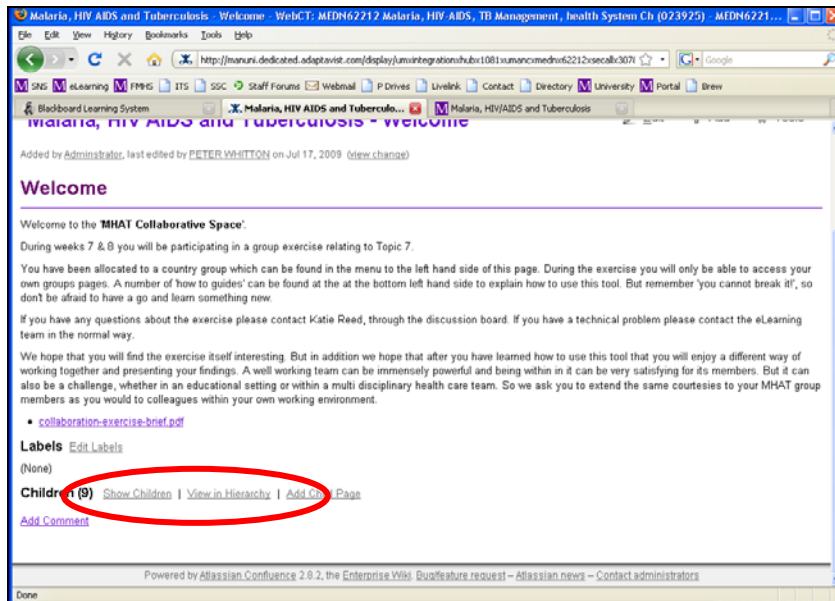

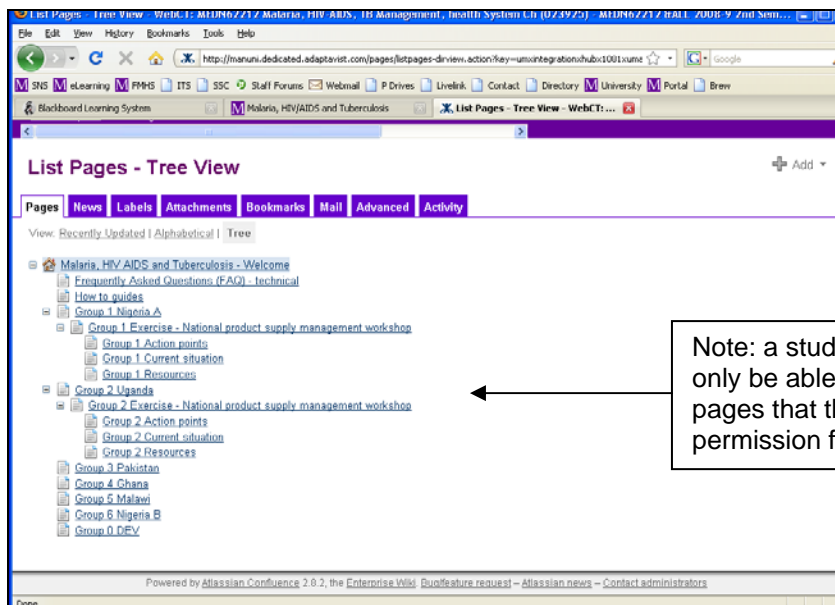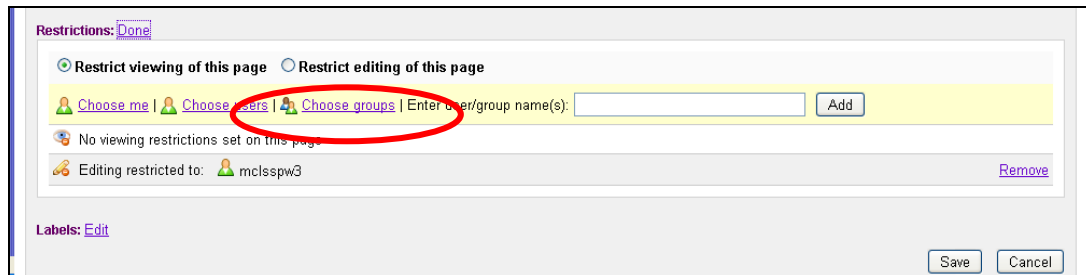Figure 2: Confluence home - notice that no obvious navigation is visible

Figure 3: View in Hierarchy (Principal Instructor's view)
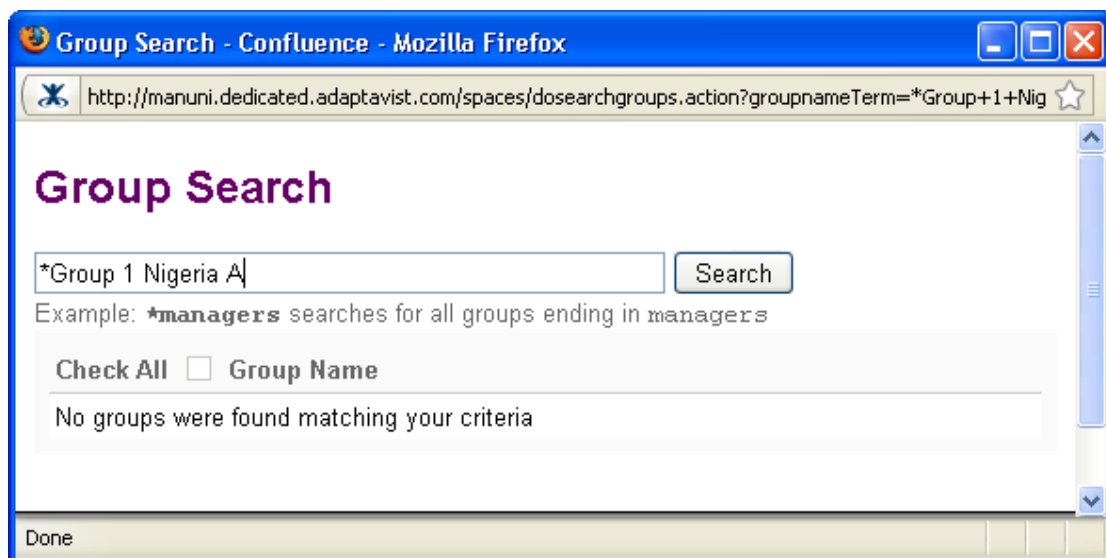
Administrating groups

Groups do not need to be created separately within Confluence. Provided groups have been created in Blackboard, Confluence will create an account for each student

the first time that they use the wiki it will also recognise which Bb group that student belongs to. Blackboard groups should be given names that are as distinctive as possible to help with the search process in Confluence (e.g. *MEDN62212GroupA* is preferable to just *GroupA*).

Where working with groups in Confluence becomes slightly more complicated is when editing or viewing restrictions need to be placed on areas of the site (so that groups can only see and edit their own sections).

Using the **Choose groups** tool is a little problematic. When a search for an existing group in this case *Group 1 Nigeria A* is carried out using the wildcard search **Group 1 Nigeria A* – no groups are found and the message *"No groups were found matching your criteria"* is displayed.

It is only by converting **Group 1 Nigeria A* to **group-1-nigeria-a* (converting to lowercase and substituting the blanks with -) that the search system finds anything. This is because actual group name used by Confluence is the lengthy string of characters shown below (not the name defined in Blackboard). This search returns **two** results not the expected **one.**

1. umxintegrationxhubx1081xumancxmednx62212xsecallx30780--group-1-nigeria-a
2. umxintegrationxhubx1081xumancxmednx62212xsecallx30780**wa**--group-1-nigeria-a

This throws up some, as yet, unanswered questions
- which one of these similarly named options should I select?

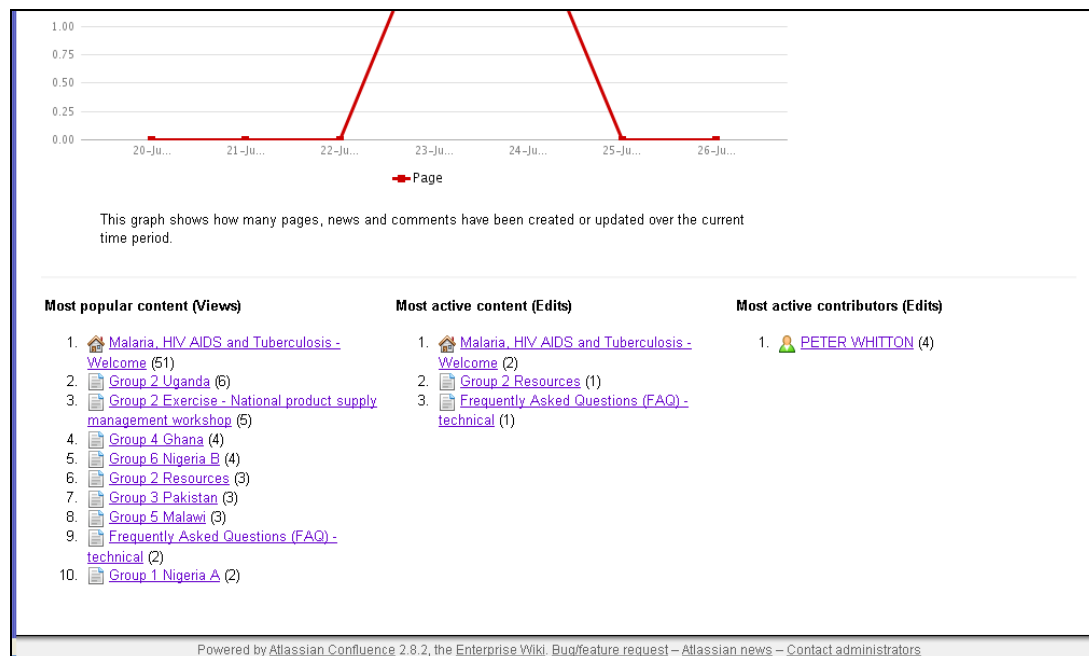- what do the "wa" and the other appended letters on group names mean?

Also, if a Blackboard course rolls over, year-on-year, using the same group names for the same exercises (not an unreasonable scenario) with a new cohort of students
- will this make the problem of identifying the correct group worse?
- should group names be created as unique so they are not duplicated across years/semesters?

These questions have all been asked but definitive answers have not yet been received (as of July 2009).

Assessing contribution

Assessing student contribution should be easier with Contribute than WordPress. Contribute has a number of tools available to Instructors through the dashboard that allow activity to be monitored.

Dashboard > WebCT: MEDN62212 Malaria, HIV-AIDS, TB Management, health System Ch (023925) - MEDN62212 &ALL 2008-9 2nd Sem (ENDED) > Browse Space > Activity

Designer /Instructors can see overall activity over months, weeks and days and assess who is contributing and who is not.

Dashboard > WebCT: MEDN62212 Malaria, HIV-AIDS, TB Management, health System Ch (023925) - MEDN62212 &ALL 2008-9 2nd Sem (ENDED) Malaria, HIV AIDS and Tuberculosis - Welcome > Information > Page History

Designer /Instructors can see all the versions of a specific page at a glance and then compare them.

Other resources

Technical spec for the Confluence/WebCT (Blackboard) powerlink
http://www.spvsoftwareproducts.com/powerlinks/confluencesso/

Good resource from the University of Edinburgh on their Confluence implementation. It is interesting that they give greater administrative rights over to developers
https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/CONF25/Home

Promo video from Atlassian about Confluence
http://www.atlassian.com/software/confluence/videos/overview/overview.jsp

Pros and Cons

Issue description	Confluence	WordPress
Initial set up	Simple involving only a few mouse clicks	Complex involving working with MHS Faculty web team
Access to collaborative area	Single sign on through Bb	Students have to sign in for a second time to access WordPress
Support	Through eLearning teams and eLAT	Through eLearning teams and Faculty web team
Extensible	Yes, producing more wikis to support Blackboard units is easy	Maybe, this depends on the good will of the Faculty web team
Change the look and feel	Not customisable by Bb Instructor	Customisable
Navigation	Blackboard hierarchy may take a little getting used to	Looks just like a website navigation is straightforward
Editing tools available to student	Not customisable by Bb Instructor	Customisable
Creating groups	Confluence can understand Blackboard groups (see my notes)	Groups need to be created again in WordPress duplicating what is already in Bb
Adding students	Students don't need to be added they are automatically able to see the wiki through LDAP	One at a time at present more development needed (bulk enrolment)
Creating and maintaining groups	Confluence recognises Bb groups (see notes)	Students drop off WordPress groups
Students adding new pages when they should be editing the existing pages	No fix at present. Have asked whether there is a way for the wiki administrator to remove the Add Page facility (have not had a response)	No fix at present
Assessing individual student contribution	Straightforward, there are a number of ways of viewing activity at page level and at wiki level – although appending an initial is not a bad idea anyway	Complex, relies on students appending their initial to each contribution and edit
How to guides and documentation	Some generic guides are available that could be modified	Excellent guides already created
Student export options	Students can export wiki pages individually to Word and PDF format	Don't know
Designer/Instructor export options	Can export the entire wiki in Word, PDF, XML and HTML options	Can be download as an XML file for import into other WordPress spaces