



# An organic approach to an intranet

## *WebLearn with 'green fingers'*

**WebLearn offers improved support for teaching, learning, and research.**

**This case study demonstrates that WebLearn can be stretched far beyond the expected applications of a Virtual Learning Environment**

*"WebLearn has proved to be an invaluable asset in helping the NDORMS IT staff to develop a useful intranet, among other practical applications."*

**Wulf Forrester-Barker, IT Manager, NDORMS**

weblearn@oucs.ox.ac.uk  
www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/weblearn  
OUCS, 13 Banbury Rd., OX2 6NN



### Introduction

WebLearn is a highly adaptable virtual learning environment that, at the same time, is well equipped for straight-forward set-up and manipulation. This ease of flexibility allows the development of a departmental intranet from scratch, as has been implemented in the Nuffield Department of Orthopaedics, Rheumatology and Musculoskeletal Sciences (NDORMS). The work of the department is primarily research focused, with diverse research requirements, but it is also involved in teaching. Output from the department continues to shed light on issues that are a daily concern for large numbers of the population. The recently publicised debates about metal on metal hip resurfacing, for example, have in part been underpinned by NDORMS research. Three and half years ago the department had a fairly rudimentary web presence and no Intranet provision.

### The Challenge

NDORMS required a virtual learning environment that was primarily suitable for a research-focused department, but could also facilitate teaching: an environment that could provide timely solutions to a diverse group of users. The department has tripled in size over a three year period, and this rate of growth, alongside a significant number of external connections to other departments and organisations, presented challenges to the creation and successful running of a departmental intranet.

### The Innovation

Given a finite amount of time, an expedient solution was to consider existing tools. WebLearn was an obvious choice, with its security framework, wide selection of tools, capacity to meet diverse needs, and encourage participation. Rather than planning an all-encompassing structure and then trying to enforce it, the decision was made to incrementally develop a web of sites, meeting immediate needs and refining the structure later.

*To borrow a horticultural metaphor, this was an organic or even a permaculture approach. Groups of users could be given favourable conditions. Those who thrived would encourage others to use the site; those who sat dormant would not have cost a large amount of development time and, even if dug out and thrown on the compost heap, would contribute to growing experience of how to use the available resources.*

## Examples of use of WebLearn tools in the department

Challenge	Solution
MSc in Musculoskeletal Sciences: Create a site that supports current students and share some of the information with prospective students.	Perfect for existing students (part time with monthly meetings). WWW site polls public HTML documents and extracts information for prospective students. Experiments with podcasting.
Athena SWAN – Charter for Women in Science: Run an anonymous 50+ question survey for all members of the department	<b>Survey tool.</b> Grouped sets of Likert scales made questions less overwhelming; tool sends reminders to non-responders; tidy summary report. Response rate was over 30%.
Ultrasound test: Provide a way for sonographers at remote sites to demonstrate they are suitably skilled at interpreting US images and videos.	<b>Tests tool.</b> Videos and images on departmental site but WebLearn takes care of presenting questions and saving answers for marking.
Room and/or Resource Booking: Provide a way for staff to book seminar, meeting and clinical appointment rooms or equipment.	<b>Calendar (Schedule).</b> Either self-service or managed. Can be aggregated to show overall calendar for a set of resources.
Who's who: Provide department with easy access to names, photos and contact details of their colleagues.	<b>Web Content</b> link points to page on WWW site. External addresses get WWW contacts page; internal ones get local, more extensive solution.
<b>My Workspace:</b> Don't ignore an opportunity!	Works like an online memory stick. Also potential solution for publishing data that doesn't fit on WWW (although ORA may be better).
Health and Safety: Make essential information available in a read-only format. Track usage to make sure eyes are reaching the pages.	WebLearn <b>Resources</b> are more suitable than a shared folder. Will eventually migrate to Sharepoint for proper document control.
Support a clinical trial: Provide information including an online calculator for the 'Oxford Shoulder Score'. Many non-Oxford participants, mainly in the NHS community.	External access is easy. Shoulder score calculator hosted on another website and integrated with a <b>Web Content</b> link.

### Tops tips for success

1. Don't abandon a site too quickly. Some aspects have taken a long time to germinate before establishing themselves as useful tools. It took over a year from the suggestion that WebLearn could provide a simple room booking system to the point where it became the mandated system for a number of different rooms and resources across the department.
2. Seize the opportunity to try out new tools. They might not work exactly as expected in some of the places you deploy them, but they won't work at all if you never try them out in your site. Wulf reports that he attended the Surveys course several months before he found opportunities to apply that knowledge.
3. From time to time, weed out areas or tools that are not being used. This brings more light to the areas that are healthy. You can move things around too, although do warn your users first!



Wulf Forrester-Barker, IT Manager; organic gardener

### More Information?

See 'WLUG Presentations' at  
<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/info/eas>

Contact Wulf Forrester-Barker, NDORMS IT Manager if you would like to discuss this organic, WebLearn-based approach to growing an intranet.  
[wulf.forrester-barker@ndorms.ox.ac.uk](mailto:wulf.forrester-barker@ndorms.ox.ac.uk)  
<http://www.ndorms.ox.ac.uk>

*Wulf Forrester-Barker, Jill Fresen and Alexandra Paddock, July 2012*



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