

Selecting Amongst Open Source Options



By Russ McGuire - russ.mcguire@gmail.com

We're continuing the series on "Launching Online" – capturing the decisions faced and lessons learned in launching a new online ministry/business. Last month we talked about why we selected an open source starting point for our online social network ministry.

As you'll recall, I noted that an open source solution gives us the benefit of a fully featured starting point, plus the opportunity to create unique capabilities that will set our service apart from all the secular services already out there. But, as I noted, I want to both make changes to the open source foundation, and also benefit from advances introduced by others to the open source starting point. This can get messy and it was critical to consider how we would manage this messiness before jumping in.

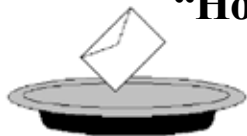
What Options Are Out There?

In starting our search for an open source social networking platform, we first needed to identify the functionality we wanted. The goal was to connect Christian families with the people, resources, and tools to train up young men and women to the Glory of God. We envisioned three dimensions to this task: academics, social opportunities, and homeschool administration. We also needed a way to generate funding for the service, so we needed to think about revenue generation from the beginning.

Some of the specific functionality we envisioned included:

- Tools for finding other like minded parent educators (forums, blogs, etc.)
- Online reviews of curriculum, social opportunities, books, videos, etc.
- A classified ads system for buying and selling used curriculum and resources
- Bible study tools
- Library search tools
- An online writing journal
- Calendar and scheduling tools
- Online photo albums
- Lesson plan and grade book tools
- Online checklists and homework assignment/tracking
- Typical social networking tools including status, messageboard, messaging, chat, etc.

However, the most important feature for us was giving parents the authority to set bound-



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is "Elgg is free and open source software. It provides the components you need to build a fully-featured social environment, including: Profiles, Activity Streams, Blogging / Microblogging, Groups, Access controls, and Web Services API."

Elgg is true open source. There are no fees associated with the software, although Curverider, the

aries for their children in using all of the above.

Of course, I didn't expect to find all of this in a package already out there – in fact, if it already existed there was no reason for us to create Hschooler! But we needed to find a package with the flexibility to create these capabilities. (As a side note, we haven't yet created all of these features, but have implemented the parent controls and about half of the other capabilities.)

What we found was a broad selection of open source social network tools. Many were single function packages, such as to create a book-mark sharing network or a news headline sharing service. So we quickly narrowed our consideration down to two different packages: [Dolphin](#) and [Elgg](#).

Dolphin bills itself as "the world's most advanced community software" and describes itself in this way: "Open-source, independent, downloadable, scalable, customizable, full-featured, free software for building social networks, dating sites and web-communities. Loaded with video chat, recorder, video player, forums, groups, events, video messenger, mailbox, desktop app, video sharing, photo sharing, iPhone app and much more. Build your own business or advance your hobby with Dolphin!"

Dolphin's licensing is a bit different from most open source projects. You can download the code, use it, modify it, etc. just like any other open source package. But, unless you pay them a fee for a commercial license (\$99 for a year+ or \$299 for lifetime) you must leave in fairly intrusive links back to BoonEx, the developer of Dolphin. The Dolphin software also appears to be completely developed by the BoonEx team.

Elgg's tagline is "a powerful open source social networking platform" and their description

original developer, has recently introduced [hosting and customization services](#) as options. Elgg is also constantly being extended by developers around the world who develop and share "plugins". There currently are over 900 plugins available and 5 new ones have been submitted in the past week.

We first experimented with Dolphin. The feature list for Dolphin is much richer than what comes out of the box with Elgg and the user interface is much more polished. We were able to quickly get into the source code and make simple modifications. However, it concerned us that the modifications we were making were directly into the core functionality of the package. It also bothered us that Dolphin seemed particularly oriented towards developing dating sites. Our initial work effort was digging in to turn off many of the features that apparently are popular in worldly dating and that certainly didn't represent the kind of information that Christian parents want their children to share.

So, we quickly switched our focus to Elgg. Elgg is architected as a core set of functionality supplemented with plugins. Aspects of the core (for example, formatting how information is presented) can be modified by a plug-in extension or override. Plugins can provide virtually limitless additional capabilities, and much of the value in Elgg comes from plugins that have been developed by independent coders.

Elgg is also very focused on control over privacy. Every entity in Elgg (a user profile, a blog post, a photo, a photo album, etc.) has an access setting that limits those who see the entity. This access structure became our first priority, giving parents the ability to set the broadest access boundary within which their family members can share information.

Perhaps most importantly, since Elgg keeps the core separate from the plugins, if I make all of my modifications within plugins (including overrides for core functionality), then I can easily upgrade to the latest version of Elgg without fear that I'll lose the modifications I've made. Since starting on Hschooler.net, Elgg has progressed from version 1.5 to version 1.7.1. Dolphin, meanwhile, has progressed from 6.1.4 to 7.0.1.

Making the Choice

By now, you may have guessed that we went with Elgg. The major factors in our decision included:

- Elgg is really free and enjoys the full benefits of open source
- Through plugins, Elgg's capabilities are constantly being extended and provide a good starting point towards our desired functionality
- Dolphin's focus on worldly dating activities is in conflict with Hschooler.net's focus
- Elgg is structured around privacy controls that could be modified to meet our most important need
- The separation of our enhancements from the core Elgg software simplifies our ability to take advantage of Elgg updates

Your evaluation criteria undoubtedly will vary, but hopefully considering how we approached our decision will be helpful in developing your own criteria.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (<http://hschooler.net>), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by three homeschooled students under Russ' direction.

