

Places to Go: Sakai|<http://www.sakaiproject.org/>

by Stephen Downes

In 2005, two major commercial learning management system providers, Blackboard and WebCT, merged, prompting many colleges and universities to investigate lower-cost open source alternatives. In the Places to Go column in the last issue, we looked at an alternative to commercial learning management systems called Moodle (Downes [2005/2006](#)). In this issue, we continue our exploration with a look at [Sakai](#).

Started in 2004, the Sakai project is a "community source software development effort to design, build, and deploy a new Collaboration and Learning Environment (CLE) for higher education" (Sakai [n.d.](#), ¶ 1). Its flagship product is the Sakai content management system, which is now being used in numerous institutions. For example, dozens of American [universities](#) have adopted the software; meanwhile, the organization itself recently gained its one hundredth [partner](#) and was recognized by 75% of the respondents in a recent Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness survey (Abel [2005](#)). These trends represent significant growth for open source software in a market that has otherwise been stable for the last few years.

The Sakai project Web site does not lend itself to easy navigation and exploration. A large center column filled with recent news items released by the foundation itself dominates the space; while these can be read, they do not lead to further information. Thus, the bulk of navigation occurs in the left-hand column; new visitors should begin with the [About](#) link to get a brief overview of the project. Upon clicking this link, readers should notice the additional menu of links that appear beneath the About link (it is very easy to miss this), allowing navigation to the [People](#), [Community](#), and [Adoption](#) pages of the site.

The Community page introduces readers to the different facets of the project, styled as "the Sakai universe" in a small diagram. Major components include the Sakai Educational Partners Program ([SEPP](#)), an arrangement that allows academic institutions to become part of the project itself (institutional fees range from \$US 5,000 to \$US 10,000) as well as the Sakai Commercial Affiliates (SCA) program, which consists of "commercial firms that offer for-fee support and expertise for the Sakai Project's community source software" (Sakai [2005](#), ¶ 1). The commercial partnerships demonstrate the sort of presence Sakai is gaining, with names including Sun, IBM and Pearson Education among them.

As the Community page also indicates, Sakai is related to a number of other educational projects including the Open Knowledge Initiative project ([OKI](#)), which "defines open architectural specifications that support the development of educational software" (SourceForge.net [n.d.](#), ¶ 1); [uPortal](#), a widely used academic portal system; and the Open Source Portfolio Initiative ([OSPI](#)), a collaborative project devoted to the development of non-proprietary portfolio software. More partnerships, collaborations, and affiliations could be listed here; for example, Sakai was recently [integrated](#) with Learning Activity Management Systems ([LAMS](#)), an open source learning design toolkit. Sakai thus occupies the center of an emerging constellation of related online learning products and initiatives—a far more widespread challenge to commercial software than the emergence of a single tool would be.

Returning now to the menu on the left side of the home page, after the news link (which merely repeats the items already found on the front page), readers will find some gateways into the Sakai community: the [Events](#) and [Discussion](#) pages, respectively. Entering the Discussion page, the user will find three major forums—one each for SEPP and SCA and one for the general public—the latter of which is further divided into an area for developers and an area for users. Guest access is available for both areas of the public forum. For new visitors, it is recommended that they first enter "guest" as a userID and password when prompted; once they have done so, readers can then visit the [User's](#) forum to get their first taste of Sakai itself.

When readers log in to the User's forum via the "guest" userID and password, they can select from the topics in the menu bar at the top of the page (again, easy to miss) to access the [Playground](#) or [Sakai](#) discussion groups. Once the link is selected, a previously invisible menu will appear in the left column; the Playground has more selections but, not surprisingly, less interesting content. Here, readers can see the other features of the Sakai user interface; while these features vary according to the discussion group selected, they include Schedule (an easy-to-use calendar), Announcements (general information on recent developments), Resources (release information, program documentation, planning materials, or other items), Drop Box (for uploads), Chat, Wiki, and Email Archive. To return back to the home page of the site, readers will need to scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on the [Sakai Foundation Home](#) link.

Once readers have accustomed themselves to the interface, they may then explore the site's contents in greater depth by creating their own personal account. After clicking again on the [Discussion](#) link on the home page, readers can establish their own account via the [How to Join DGs](#) link in the menu on the left side of the home page. When first logging into the User's forum with their new username and password, readers will initially see a generic portal page with sections designating the current Message of the Day, Recent Announcements, and Recent Discussions. In order to join specific discussion groups, readers can click on the Membership link in the menu on the left, and then click on the Joinable Sites link under the Membership tag. A varied list of designated groups then appears, accompanied by descriptions of their respective roles within the Sakai project; group topics range from broader public issues concerning governance, policies, and promotion (Advocacy & Strategy) to much more specialized issues such as content management (Content), the integration of Sakai software with other systems (DG: Integration), and multimedia development (DG: Web Video and Audio Tools). After clicking the "join" option for selected groups, readers can then view their customized portal page via the Home link in the left column. Group topics appear listed at the top of the page for convenient access to their respective streams of information. To leave their customized portal page and return back to the home page of the site, readers will again need to scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on the [Sakai Foundation Home](#) link.

After extensive navigation through the site (and several conversations with our editors about how this is to be done), it can only be concluded that navigation in Sakai is hostile to the user. Common navigation features, such as a link back to the home page in the upper left, are missing. Popup windows appear almost at random; sometimes the menu on the left will open a new page, sometimes it will launch a popup. The readers bounce back and forth between sites with no real guidance or heading to indicate where they are. There are breadcrumbs, but they are partial and misleading. This is an aspect of Sakai that will have to be reconsidered from the ground up if the system is to be taken seriously as an alternative to commercial learning management systems.

From the home page, information about the Sakai software may be found on the [Software and Resources](#) page; this link, like others in the column, also expands into its own menu when selected. Worth noting in the extra menu is the [Features List](#), which may be used for a point-by-point comparison to other systems, and the [Software License](#) featuring the [Educational Community License](#), a type of open source license for educational use. Numerous [Presentations](#) describing the software are also available.

After clicking the Software and Resources link, readers wanting to download and try the software for themselves can also do so via the [QuickStart](#) guide that appears linked on the far right—although the material may be opaque for readers not experienced with Web technologies. Written in the Java programming language, Sakai requires a Tomcat web server, and there is a download version with the server included (a good idea, since version conflicts are a common issue); Sakai also requires a database system (either the free MySQL database engine or a commercial Oracle system can be used). For fast and easy testing, the site offers a convenient demo version for its readers as well as binary and source versions for experienced Web developers.

The Sakai project is a large initiative, and the Web site reflects that. It is also very much membership-driven, and the Web site reflects that as well; for example, casual visitors will be frequently greeted by login screens

restricting resources and discussions to members only. This reflects a different approach, and perhaps a different philosophy, than that of Moodle, discussed here last issue. Moodle is a small, nimble application that developers can install in a snap and change on the fly. Sakai, on the other hand, represents a larger commitment to install and run and exacts a clearer delineation between those who develop the software and those who use it. That said, Sakai enjoys the advantages of the enterprise approach; it has arguably greater scaling and stability than Moodle and thus provides a well-resourced foundation to offer ongoing development and support.

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