THE MINNESOTA CURRICULUM DATABASE: A TOOL FOR ORGANIZING AND ACCESSING COURSE CONTENT.

Stuart M. Speedie, University of Minnesota Medical School, Minneapolis, MN

Introduction: This abstract is targeted to those who are responsibility for providing curricular support for students and faculty members as well as those who are responsible for developing educational software applications. The database represents an innovative application of open source tools, text indexing and free text searching to organize and retrieve information and materials associated with a medical school curriculum.

This tool was developed with three goals in mind: 1) record and retrieve detailed information about what was taught in each session of each course, 2) store and retrieve electronic materials associated with each session, 3) support for other applications that can make use of this information. The Education Informatics group developed a secure web application that controls access to the database implemented in mySQL and PHP. Security is linked to the University's X.500 authentication system in order to protect the faculty's intellectual property. The database, which took three years to populate, is driven by a master schedule of all class sessions in lecture and lab courses and clerkships. It maintains a collection of "resources" that are each linked to a schedule entry. Those resources include but are not limited to topic lists, handouts, PowerPoint presentations, URLs and streaming video. A unique system feature is that it uses a variety of methods to extract text from those resources in order to build a searchable index. The database has two user interfaces. One is a dynamic calendar that lists class sessions in an easy-to-use weekly, day by time matrix within which links are embedded for each session. This supports the websites for each of the classes, provides one means of accessing online course materials and is the primary interface used by the students. The second is a search interface for free text searches of the database using the system's index that returns all sessions that match the entered search criteria.