

Supporting Learners using On-line Delivery

Reflective Log

Jon Witts

Preparation

I conducted an on-line discussion about interoperability and open standards in e-learning technologies. I hoped to raise some discourse about the merits of the proposed governmental strategies for interoperability and to also discuss what the benefits of open standards may be to the e-learning world. I researched a number of websites that would provide a starting point for the learners to discuss the topic and posted the links to the discussion forum. There were not any clearly defined learning objectives, as I felt that this subject was best tackled by leaving it open for everyone to raise their own point of view. Also, as the world of e-learning is relatively new, there is still no clearly defined solution to the issues around interoperability, thus making it hard to lay out a clear set of learning outcomes to the learners in the first place. I hoped that the links I provided would spark some interesting discussion about a topic that I myself am very interested in. I felt slightly nervous about conducting the discussion though, as I do not have much experience of delivering learning materials to students, and was concerned that the topic may have been too technical and could possibly not engage the learners for this reason.

Before being able to conduct this on-line discussion I had to be sure that the technology I was intending to use would meet a number of requirements, and that I was confident in its use. These requirements were that it needed to be easy for the learners to use; it had to be reliable and available to learners through a number of means. I decided that I would use the forums within my testing install of Moodle that I have at work. This seemed like the best plan to me because it is a technology that I am very comfortable using, so I would have no problems addressing any of the technical issues that could arise for my learners. It also lets learners receive posts to the forum directly in their email inbox at the end of every day, meaning that they do not have to remember to log into the system to keep up to date with the way the discussion is developing. To ensure that all of my learners could partake in this discussion I had to ensure that everybody had an account to use the system and that they were all enrolled in the course where my discussion would be taking place. Finally, I had to ensure that the learners all knew how to access the system.

As I had used my testing install of Moodle for a previous module on the course, I knew that everyone in our group already had a working log-on for the system. However, all of the group remembering their username and password was a different matter! At one of the day schools, when the whole group was present, I asked everyone if they remembered their log-ons. Most did not, and those that did had forgotten their passwords. I logged into the system as the administrator and reset all of the user passwords and told them which email address they had used to sign up to the system with. This then let me check that everyone could log in to the system.

My next task was to set up the course and discussion forum where we would carry out this on-line learning. As I have quite a lot of experience in Moodle, having set it up at my school and regularly delivering staff training in its use, I was confident that I could successfully set up the required course. I created a new course for this unit, and created a discussion forum in this course. I set the forum up to be compulsory for all members of the course to follow (this ensured that everyone would receive email notifications from the discussion forum) and also set it so that students were not allowed to unenroll themselves from the course (again, ensuring that all students would receive all of the posts to the discussion forum).

Having created the forum, I then enrolled all of the members of our course into the course in Moodle as students of the course.

The final stage in the preparation for this was to research the information that would be the starting points for the discussion.

Within my role at work, I have to try and ensure that as many of the systems work together as possible. The point of this being, to reduce the administrative overhead on moving data from one system to another, and to create as seamless an environment for the end users as possible. To be able to achieve this, interoperability of systems is a topic that I have had to look into in great detail already. This meant I had a good idea of some places to get information regarding the educational stand-point on this matter.

The Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) was conceived in the USA as a set of open standards to enable school data to be interchanged seamlessly between disparate systems. Microsoft were one of the main companies involved in its development and in 2007 Becta declared the SIF as the adopted national standard for data exchange in schools here in the UK.

Some information about this initiative seemed like the obvious starting point for this discussion, so I posted links to the Wikipedia article about it and also to the home page of the SIF Association in the USA.

Futurelab are a "not for profit" organisation based in Bristol, who research, develop and pioneer innovative resources for effective use of ICT in education. They have produced a report on the potential of open source approaches for education. They compare the approach of community software development in the open source world to the principals of Wenger's Communities of Practice and also highlight many other benefits of open standards and code within software made for schools. With these and a few other links to relevant stories posted to the opening statement about the forum, I posted the first message.

Engagement

To get the discussion going I started a thread that informed people that said:

“All being well with technology (how often is that the case!), you should all be receiving emails from this forum in your inbox’s.

I have set up the discussion board on my testing install of Moodle at school and subscribed everyone to the course. If you email me at jonwitts@gmail.com I can re-set your passwords and remind you all of your login names. Alternatively, you should be able to use the "Help me log in" button on the login screen of the site.”

One by one, the people I had enrolled on the course earlier replied to this message to let me know, and the rest of the group that they had successfully managed to get logged into the forum and were receiving emails of the posts in their inbox. Everybody managed to get logged in without too many difficulties, apart from a few forgotten passwords!

Once the majority of people were into the forum I posted the links and started a new discussion forum to get the ball rolling. Colin was the first person to respond to the links I had posted up, and picked up on the link to the e-portfolios system developed by the School of Medicine at Newcastle University. This system is an e-portfolio solution that was in part funded by JISC. Colin's point was that it seemed to him like it took an awful long time for this project to release their findings, and in the light of the speed of developments in the current e-learning and web 2.0 sphere, was it too slow to be of use. I responded to Colin's post as I felt it was a very valid point that should be discussed more by the rest of the group. Diana then responded to and raised another point, that of whether or not students would be able to access their portfolios once they left their institution. This point is an interesting one, that highlights the need for interoperability between systems.

The discussion then seemed to fall quiet for a while. It was probably because of the time at which I started it. Everyone on the course had a lot of different units to finish and may have found it hard to find the time to contribute.

After fifteen or so days of no activity, I decided to post a scenario up to try and engage the users in discussion on the topic raised by Diana. I posted a real life example from the school I work at to try and get people thinking about the technicalities and requirements of moving an e-portfolio from one institution to another. This prompted another branch of the discussion to develop, regarding the amount of storage space that will be involved for institutions to maintain all of these e-portfolios for students.

Cheryl then developed things further by asking what would happen once a student would leave education entirely. It would no longer be a case of transferring this e-portfolio from one institution to another. What if the learner still wanted access to all of that information for their job or life-long learning?

Can we expect institutions and software companies to hold our information on servers indefinitely?

Colin then made a very valid point regarding whether he would want his data to remain available indefinitely. I replied to this saying that it raised another interesting issue around data protection and what is held by who.

Processing

Overall, I felt that the discussion had moved away from my initial topic of interoperability and open standards, but that diversion had been lead by the people discussing and not by myself. At first I found this quite hard to deal with, as I had a clear idea about the topic that I wanted to discuss before the out-set of the forum. However upon reflection, I think that the fact the discussion developed organically in its own direction is a sign that there was a high level of engagement and thinking taking place by the participants on the discussion. It certainly met with stage four of Salmon's model "Having Discussions" and at some levels I felt it met with level five of "Branching Out", too.

If I was to carry out an on-line discussion again, I think I would ensure that the timing of the discussion did not overlap with a large number of other deadlines for the people involved, as it is quite a time consuming activity, both for student and teacher, to take part in. I feel that on-line discussion is a valuable tool for e-learning, and that if directed properly and related to the topics students are currently engaged with, it will benefit learners a great deal. I think the key to good on-line discussion is having a clear idea of what you want learners to get out of the discussion, and how it fits with their course.

In the secondary school environment, I think that on-line discussion would need to be incorporated into the homework tasks of students and be a graded activity to encourage the vast amount of students to partake. However at higher levels of education, I think that learners would be more likely to willingly engage with the process.

In order for me to become a better moderator of on-line discussions, I think I need to apply a more pedagogical approach to setting the groundwork for the discussion, and ensure that there are clear learning aims and targets set out for the learners before starting the discussion. I feel that this would help to focus learners minds on the subject in question, and hopefully engage more of the learners in the process.

Evaluation

During my time on this course my role at work has changed considerably. I no longer find myself working with teachers so closely and seem to have less time to discuss the relevant merits of e-learning with the academics at my place of work. However, I still get the opportunity to engage with teaching staff at training sessions on how to use the VLE, and often the point of how to effectively utilise discussion forums in education does get raised.

I feel that having carried out this module has given me, not only a sound theoretical understanding of on-line and face to face communication, but also a solid grounding and real life experience in conducting on-line discussion. This can only help with my comprehension of the subject and hopefully help me to work with teaching staff to effectively embed some of these techniques into the teaching patterns.

I feel that I have developed a good understanding of how e-learning and technology can enrich teaching and help to engage learners. My hope is that I can take this learning and help to develop the use of e-learning and technology in all areas of the curriculum at our school. In the future I would like to see a global approach to systems and technologies being adopted by all of feeder primary schools too, so that the learners who come to our school are already used to the software and systems that are in place. This wish may not be too far off, either...

Bibliography

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Appendix

The discussion forum

Main Discussion by Jon Witts - Thursday, 7 February 2008, 11:40 AM

Use this topic to start to talk about some of the information presented in the links provided.

Re: Main Discussion by Jon Witts - Thursday, 7 February 2008, 01:03 PM

The links are available here: <http://shunsley.eriding.net/hack/mod/forum/view.php?f=10>

ePET by Colin Bell - Monday, 11 February 2008, 10:24 AM

Hi Jon

I was reading about ePET portfolio and when I saw the name it reminded me that I had heard of this, what seemed many years ago. I was right an e-portfolio project that started in 2002

http://www.eportfolios.ac.uk/FDTL4/fdtl4_docs/FDTL4_Final_Project_Report_141_02.pdf

I probably first heard and got excited about this in late 2004 so to read the outcomes now was interesting. The project produced a substantial piece of work costing nearly £300k and finished in late 2005. What struck me as interesting was how dated it all seemed. When you consider the explosion of social networking sites and how each one addresses many of the generic issues ePET was designed to evaluate, maybe we should be asking the question 'is the academics research and evaluation process extinct and out of date'.

To spend 3 years evaluating an area of growth that by its very nature must out strip the research itself seems wasteful and unproductive. Should the academic community look inward and develop new and more appropriate methods of carrying out this type of work. The results of this work would have been useful in say 2003/04 but by late 2005 much of the work was already out of date.

I appreciate the hindsight is a wonderful thing but at the same time researchers should have been able to see the emergence of social networks as it happened.

Re: ePET by Jon Witts - Monday, 11 February 2008, 06:59 PM

You might have a point there Colin. The model that academics adopt in their research and development does seem very long winded. Perhaps this is because they need to justify the expenditure of public funds!

I think that the pace that the social networking sites are moving at, and the new web based software that is being developed in these environments, is something that the educational sphere could take heed of. I think that there are inherent problems in the educational sphere, in that most large scale drives come from the governmental level rather than the grass roots level. Once something has filtered its way up through the layers of local and national government, it is bound to be some what out dated!

Perhaps we really should be looking at the more innovative and developmental work being done by people at the grass roots...

Re: ePET by Diana Wyatt - Monday, 18 February 2008, 08:58 AM

I've had a look at the document Colin put on. It does seem pretty much outdated now. What I'm wondering - and I don't know if the document mentioned this (as I skimmed it quickly) do students have access to their portfolios once they've left the institution? I'm

wondering this because I have used the BB portfolio to upload my files from the last two years. But once I'm no longer enrolled as a student, can I access this?

Re: ePET by Jon Witts - Wednesday, 20 February 2008, 08:33 AM

The issue of students having continued access to their e-portfolios is an interesting one. I do not know the answer regarding BB, but I am certain that the drive for e-portfolios in the light of the E-Learning strategy was to develop a common framework that would allow e-portfolio material to follow a student from institution to institution.

I do not know how far this had progressed, but certainly highlights the need to have a set of standards and agreed rules that allow disparate systems to communicate with one another.

Re: ePET by Jon Witts - Sunday, 9 March 2008, 06:58 PM

OK, to try and move this discussion on a little, I can give a real life example that illustrates the issue of being able to access your e-portfolio as you move from institution to institution and how this fits into the topic of interoperability and open standards.

As most of you are already aware, we are using Moodle as our VLE at school. The LEA have just bought into RM's VLE and are planning to roll it out across the rest of the county. Both RM's VLE and the latest version of Moodle have an e-portfolio facility. We are not intending to change from Moodle to RM's VLE.

So the issue is going to be; how easily could a student move from a school using RM's VLE to our school using Moodle, and bring their e-portfolio with them?

Do you think there should be a defined standard that all e-portfolio systems should support, or should individual software development companies be left to make the decisions themselves?

Re: ePET by Diana Wyatt - Monday, 10 March 2008, 02:59 PM

Hi Jon,

I'm not sure what the answer to this is either. What happens to all these e-portfolios? It's going to take up a lot of storage space on a school server. Does the school have to keep portfolios indefinitely for every student who attends the school? (And, of course, the same for FE institutions and universities?)

I think there does have to be a common standard but who's going to decide what that is?

Diana

Re: ePET by Jon Witts - Monday, 10 March 2008, 07:22 PM

Good questions Diana.

In my role the issue of storage space on school servers is a very real scenario. I think the policies for keeping student's e-portfolios would fall into the same policy as keeping students work on the servers. As far as I am aware there are no set time periods that this must be kept after a student leaves, although we keep backups on removable media for at least a year after the students have left.

In the world of the Internet it is the World Wide Web Consortium (www.w3.org) that decide the common standards. In the world of education things are not as clear cut! Should it be Becta that make the decisions, or does the answer lie down the route of the School's Interoperability Framework?

Re: ePET by Cheryl Reynolds - Monday, 21 April 2008, 08:28 AM

I think there's also a question about what happens to a student's e-portfolio after they leave Education altogether, rather than progressing on to another institution which may be

able to host it for them. Portfolios might strengthen a job application or an application for Accreditation of Prior Learning if a student decides to return to education after a break of a few years.

Blackboard made a commitment to host e-portfolios created whilst you're at the Uni indefinitely after you leave - I made a query about this on Saturday so it will be interesting to see the response and to find out what the detail of this offer is. In any case, at the very least, the portfolio ought to be simple for students to download and to retain or publish it however they like, independently of an Educational institution...

Learner Storage by Colin Bell - Tuesday, 22 April 2008, 08:35 AM

I wonder what sort of disk space will be allowed for each learner and how the long term security will work. I am not sure how I feel about my work being hosted live indefinitely - even if it was password protected. My view about the world 30 years ago were very much different to today and in some cases contradictory. Someone accidentally reading that work in today's context could form a very wrong opinion.

Wasn't someone's university work found on the internet, manipulated and then used to make a decision to go to war in Iraq? Does everything need to last for eternity?

Re: Learner Storage by Jon Witts - Tuesday, 22 April 2008, 10:56 PM

That raises another interesting point regarding who has access to our data... Are we even aware of how much data about is already held on different servers? Or is that just me getting paranoid?

Re: ePET by Kathryn Cartmell - Sunday, 20 April 2008, 06:07 PM

Hi, as far as i am aware college has now started to do e-portfolios in some areas, unfortunatley i'm not sure where but may be able to find out.

Capita and the SIF by Jon Witts - Monday, 21 April 2008, 08:31 PM

Here is an interesting blog about Capita and their current position on the SIF.

<http://www.siriusit.co.uk/myblog/capita/index.php>