Chapter XI

Integrated Tools and Environments

_one Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them._

(Tolkien, 2002)

Introduction

So far, this book has focused mainly on tools that embody a particular kind of identifiable functionality. However, such single-function tools represent only facets of what are usually described as e-learning environments, not so much the environments themselves as what is found there.

By and large, e-learning environments are composed of a package of tools and functionalities including publishing, synchronous communication, asynchronous communication, assessment, learner management, and many other features. While the lessons learned from examining such tools in isolation may be applied when they are used as part of such an environment, the potential gains from combining them can be great. Conversely, there may be hidden dangers, especially those that relate to control.

This chapter is an investigation of learning environments that provide rich and varied functionality. Their strengths and their weaknesses as a means of enabling
learners to choose to choose will be explored. The centrepiece of the chapter will be an analysis of a particular learning management system, in the context of enabling learners to choose to choose, and the levels of institutional, administrator, and system-designer control that it entails. In the process, the benefits and perils of centralised versus decentralised control will be examined, as will the potentially unwanted effects of structure on behaviour. This analysis is provided by way of example and is a critique of the genre rather than a critique of the specific tool. The chapter goes on to describe a number of alternative models that offer hope to those seeking an alternative to centralised control.

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There are many purpose-built virtual or managed learning environments, course management systems, learning management systems and so on, not to mention a vast array of similar software (e.g., MUDs and MOOs, portal servers, knowledge management systems, content management systems), which can be pulled into the service of online learning. Indeed, they represent among the oldest classes of computer-based learning: the first MUDs appeared in the late 1970s, but the PLATO system made its first appearance nearly two decades earlier, developing into a system with both communication and content presentation that was built as early as 1973 (Woolley, 1994).

Nowadays, these environments are nearly all Web-based and typically contain an assortment of other tools, including content management and creation, discussion forums, chat, assessment systems, user management, announcements, scheduling, wikis, blogs, monitoring, polling, and often much more. The smorgasbords of opportunities that are enabled by such tools should, at least in principle, make it easy to pick and choose the modes of delivery and interaction that best suit learners in different situations.

A wide range of terms are used to describe these integrated online environments used to support learning. In the United Kingdom, the term virtual learning environment (VLE) is commonly used to describe a system that incorporates a range of tools to deliver a learning experience. A subset of the VLE is the MLE or managed learning environment, which is a VLE that provides tools to manage learners (rather than learning). For instance, they may provide user management, tracking, and statistical analysis of behaviour and test results. In the United States and elsewhere, it is more common to use the term “learning management system” (LMS) for such environments, although this terminology varies somewhat in its application and a further classification of course management system (CMS) is sometimes used to distinguish those intended for use in academia. For the majority of this chapter,
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