LearnOnline: Personal Learning Environment Implementation in University of South Australia

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ABSTRACT

Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) help the learners to take control of their learning. PLEs enable the learners to set their own learning targets and manage their learning by communicating with others in the process of learning. As latest technological advancements have brought revolution in every field of life, so as in the PLEs. Modern PLEs are the integration of a number of latest technologies i.e. blogs, Wikis, RSS feeds, where content is shaped as per the individual needs and interests of the students. Focusing on these latest aspects of the PLEs, University of South Australia initiated a three year new learning platform project in 2010, called LearnOnline, which will replace the University’s current online teaching environment UniSAnet. LearnOnline was launched with a vision to foster richer learning through promoting students’ active involvement in their courses and involving the students in a deeper learning experience. LearnOnline is built on modular approach and consists of different components i.e. ePortfolio, Course Outline, Lecture Recording, Copyright Monitoring, Student Email, Assessment and Feedback, Virtual Classroom, Course and Teacher Evaluation. Each component is developed separately and is fully independent. This methodology is helping the incremental implementation of the LearnOnline. As soon as a component is completed, after testing, it becomes the part of LearnOnline. In this paper, the author explains the features and workings of LearnOnline in detail and also evaluates its design methodologies.

Keywords: Learning Capabilities, Learning Platform, Learning Tools, Online Learning Environment, Online Teaching Environment, Teaching Capabilities

1. INTRODUCTION

In mid 2000’s the discussion emerged that how blogs and wikis can be used for learning. It was the time when the idea of Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) evolved (van Harmelen, 2006; Dolog, Henze, Nejdl, & Sintek, 2004).

Although, there was no consensus about the final shape of PLEs but most people agree on the idea that PLEs must be more than a software application and should use new technologies for learning. As per Attwell (2007), the idea of PLEs recognizes that learning is continuing and seeks to provide tools to support that learning.

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Moreover, PLEs are based on the idea that the learning contexts and situations are different for each individual and cannot be fulfilled by a single learning environment.

In the remaining paper, we first elicit the characteristics of good PLEs and then we describe the PLE implementation in University of South Australia called LearnOnline. In the end of paper, we benchmark the LearnOnline with three other implementations of PLEs (Liber, 2000; van Harmelen, 2000; Beauvoir, 2005).

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT SYSTEMS

Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) are creating a center of attention in the domain of e-learning. Due to rapid advancements in technology, the PLEs also have absorbed rich features of many modern technologies i.e. blogs, social networking and multimedia streaming (Selater, 2008). Currently, a PLE is an e-learning system that provides access to a variety of other learning resources. The major traits of a good PLE system are as follows.

2.1. Personalized Control

Learning very much depends on personal satisfaction. If a person is not satisfied with his/her learning environment then such a situation directly demerits the learning. Personal satisfaction is the combination of individual preferences and dis/liking.

As it is clear from its name, the personalization is the key of any good PLE system. A learner should be able to shape the PLE in such a way that can adjust individual preferences. These preferences depend on individual dis/liking and if a PLE is dynamic enough to shape itself to satisfy these preferences then the learning curve of users improve significantly (Wilson et al., n.d.).

Personalization includes many useful features and some of them include:

- Dynamic layout of PLE components where user can change the arrangement of components as per his/her preferences;
- Changeable color scheme for components where user can specify the color scheme of components as per his/her liking;
- Dis/Enabling extra features where user can dis/enable extra features of the PLE as per his/her need.

Due to the emergence of Web 2.0, the personalization of PLEs has become much trivial. All modern PLEs support the dynamic personalization.

2.2. Modularity

Robust PLEs can be divided into different modules (sub-systems) and each module can execute its functions independently. Such modularity is very useful in the expansion of PLEs; where modules are developed one-by-one and after proper testing each module is integrated into main PLE. The major benefits of the modularity are as follows:

- Modern PLEs have become complex systems and modularity helps to enable incremental development approach for PLEs. In incremental development approach, a module can be integrated and separated from a PLE at any time. This dynamic integration and separation ensures the smooth working of rest of PLE even if some module(s) are separated from PLE;
- Modularity also helps the efficient and robust development of PLEs. As per the availability of development resources, different modules can be independently developed at the same time. In the case of limited development resources, a single development team can start the development from core module and as soon as other modules are developed they are integrated with main module;
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