Exploring the Possibilities of an Institutional PLE in Higher Education: Integration of a VLE and an E-Portfolio System

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents an exploratory study on the potential for offering students elements to construct their own personal learning environments, by integrating an institutional virtual learning environment and an e-portfolio system. The study was conducted in the University of the Balearic Islands (Spain) and 73 students enrolled on a graduate course on Pedagogy took part in the study. The course was project-based, and the study was carried out in phases. The collection of data was undertaken through observation and monitoring the evolution of the e-portfolio activity, a student questionnaire and the observation of student output. This data showed that this kind of environment is used almost exclusively for academic purposes. The conclusions include that the e-portfolio is a good tool for the organization of academic information; it is useful for collaborating and working in groups.

Keywords: Communication Tools, E-Portfolio, Higher Education, Personal Learning Environment (PLE), Project-Based Method, Shared Learning

INTRODUCTION
A personal learning environment (PLE) can be a response to the technical and policy-based limitations imposed by institutional learning management systems (LMS or VLE), both in educational settings and in the workplace, which are seen as representing obstacles to personal learning styles (Salinas, 2009; Weller, 2009; Álvarez, 2010). In such contexts, the different
applications that can be combined to form a PLE can be situated at the intersection of VLEs, web 2.0 tools and e-portfolios (Lubensky, 2006).

Within this framework, the exploratory study presented here is derived from the EDU2008 05345 project, “Designing Methodological Strategies for the Use of Shared Knowledge Spaces through Software Tools and Knowledge Management Systems in Virtual Learning Environments”, directed at developing new learning models. From a technological perspective, the aim is to overcome the rigidity of VLEs by integrating other environments and, from a pedagogical one, to use student-centred educational strategies.

The importance of this study resides in the necessity for the universities of adapting to the characteristics of the actual society. Nowadays, life and work require lifelong learning due to constant change and information overload. In addition, informal learning has gained in importance. This leads to a need for autonomous and independent learners (Siemens, 2004).

On the other hand, there is still limited research on personal learning environments from an educational point of view, rather than from a technological standpoint. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to this field of study.

REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

PLEs are becoming an important in achieving widespread recognition for their educational value, for the framework they offer and for their components, as we can see in Buchem, Attwell and Torres-Kompen (2011).

From among all the different perspectives from which PLEs can be viewed (Fiedler & Väljataga, 2010), in this paper we will concentrate on an institutional one (iPLE) and on the integration of different environments within an institutional context (Casquero, Portillo, Benito, Ovelar & Romo, 2010a).

Background

PLEs have already sparked off considerable reflection, debate and research (Buchem et al., 2011). Leaving aside some dichotomous proposals - which are all too common in this field - that confront schools with the Internet, formal contexts with informal ones, accreditation with social recognition, teacher control with student control… interesting issues on the subject of virtual learning environments have been revived in educational circles:

- The rigidity of VLEs. The model currently used in higher education in VLEs continues to be mainly transmission-based, and not customized or collaborative;
- Relations among formal, non-formal and informal education. This topic ranges from a refusal to lend any value to formal education - and, by extension, to university or school - to proposals for integration of different forms of learning (Liber, 2005; Attwell, 2007). Our stance is that the three are inseparable: just as informal or social learning largely depend on previous formal education, so we can also improve formal learning by integrating informal and social learning, integrating social networks and virtual learning communities in order to construct Personal Knowledge Networks (PKN) (Couros, 2010);
- The increasing potential for group work and exchanges offered by new developments in web technologies. We highlight the importance of social networks in informal learning as tools that bring people and knowledge into contact;
- The need for new teaching/learning models that take into account individual student’s specific characteristics and involve them in their own learning process. The aim is to incorporate aspects of social networks and personal environments and offer increased learning opportunities through a new, emerging learning model integrated into conventional VLEs (Salinas, 2009).

We focus on seeking more open models that can improve teaching and learning processes in higher education. We are therefore exploring the possibilities of different technological
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