Chapter 7

Trajectory of an Institutional PLE in Higher Education Based on an e-Portfolios System

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study during four academic years (from 2010/11 to 2013/14) on the potential for offering students elements to construct their own personal learning environments, by integrating an institutional virtual learning environment and an e-portfolios system. The study was conducted in the University of the Balearic Islands (Spain) and a total of 232 students enrolled to a graduate compulsory course of the fourth year of the studies of Pedagogy took part in the study. The course was performed using the project-based method, and the study was carried out by phases. The collection of data was done through observation and monitoring the e-portfolio activity, a student questionnaire and the observation of student output. These data showed that this kind of environment is used almost exclusively for academic purposes. Some conclusions are that e-portfolio is a good tool for the organization of academic information and that it is useful for collaborating and working in groups.
A Personal Learning Environment (PLE) can be a response to the technical and policy-based limitations imposed by institutional learning management systems (Learning Management Systems: LMS or Virtual Learning Environments: VLE), both in educational settings and in the workplace, which are seen as representing obstacles to personal learning styles (Weller, 2009; Álvarez, 2010; Salinas, 2011). 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 study presented here is derived from project EDU2011-25499 “Methodological strategies for integrating institutional virtual environments, personal and social learning”. Its research focus is on emerging models for VLEs, together with the configuration of learning scenarios and professional development aimed at training teaching competences to deal with different teaching-learning modalities. 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 the constant changes and information overload. In addition, informal learning has recovered importance. For these facts, an autonomous and independent learner is needed (Siemens, 2004).

PLEs are becoming an important reference, since they are achieving widespread recognition for their educational value, for the framework they offer and for their components, as can be seen in Buchem, Attwell & Torres-Kompen (2011). They have already sparked off quite a lot of reflection, debate and research as well (Buchem et al., 2011; Fiedler & Väljataga, 2010; 2013)

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

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.
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