Changing the Interface to High School Education

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INTRODUCTION

How do you cater to 21st century learners in a secondary school, and how can we personalize learning so that the value of education is enhanced for every student? This was the question that challenged us at our school.

With e-learning, e-teaching, and e-everything becoming part of our everyday life, Lowanna College began investigating a range of different software products that might provide a solution to our question. After a number of trials and tests, we decided on Microsoft Share Point Portal to create a portal that would meet our staff, student, and college needs. The portal would need to be a one-stop shop for all our education needs and provide access to educational resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

BACKGROUND

Lowanna College (2006) is a state secondary school with approximately 1,200 students. These range from year 7 through to year 12. The college has a strong ICT focus and has been at the forefront of many of the states ICT education initiatives. The college is also well known for its multimedia, music, and drama programs as well as providing a full range of main stream education programs. Lowanna College is located in Newborough, which is 130 kilometers east of Melbourne.

OVERVIEW OF PORTAL DEVELOPMENT AT LOWANNA COLLEGE

Our challenge was to develop an e-learning tool that would cater to 21st century learners in a secondary school. In 2002, Lowanna College began investigating a number of intranets and extranets from a range of suppliers. The college’s vision was to develop an online education platform to facilitate teaching in the classroom and externally. After trialing several products the college agreed that most third party products were too expensive or they provided a stock standard solution, that had little scope to be tailor made for our college’s individual needs. Then, Microsoft launched SharePoint Portal (Microsoft 2001). This software product provided a solution that matched the college’s vision.

The initial aim of the portal was to provide online curriculum, however, as it evolved it grew to include discussion boards, college notices, image libraries, digital portfolios, and a significant document management system for the college. The key factor in gaining staff acceptance was the advanced functionality and the simplicity of the program and interface. To upload content, assignments, worksheets, and other material, staff only have to click a button, select a file or type a message, and press the save function. This user-friendly design also enabled staff with low ICT skill levels to quickly develop confidence in this new platform.

In one instance, one of our staff members who was a reluctant user of technology, has become one of our college champions. The ease of use of the portal, was the catalysts for this change of practice. This staff member also became one of the drivers for the use of the portal in his teaching area. Many of the portals features were developed so that they had significant impact on day-to-day learning. Curriculum material was provided in many formats. These ranged from Microsoft Word sheets and Microsoft Power Point, through to online video tutorials and Flash tutorials.

Students found it very easy to download information and navigate the portal. In many cases, students had a better understanding of the portals navigation than their teachers. It was not long before teachers wanted to do more, and the next step was to enable students to submit work online. This again proved very successful with staff. Security was set up to enable student material to be deposited without other students being able to modify or delete assignments.

The music faculty were the leading lights as they moved all their resources to the new online repository and then began developing advanced functions, such as calendars, that enabled students to easily identify the times they were booked for one on one music lessons. They also began to put samples of graded work online so that students could look at the teacher’s expectations for particular projects and assignments. Other groups began to use the portal as part of their teaching and learning, rather than as a reference site. This meant that the portal was used just as often in classes as it was outside of class time. Downloading assignments and uploading assessment became popular with staff then progressing to the use of discussion forums and video tutorials. There was an increased use of
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