Chapter 4
Community@Brighton: The Development of an Institutional Shared Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT
This chapter details the implementation of a university-wide social networking platform “Community@Brighton” – using the open source Elgg platform and describes the technical, institutional and educational issues arising from the two years of experience in running the platform. The strategic vision of providing a social network platform alongside an institutional VLE to provide an integrated Shared Learning Environment is also explored, including key case studies and discussion on the challenges such technologies place on existing models of online learning and teaching.

INTRODUCTION
In 2006 the University of Brighton launched Community@Brighton, an institutionally hosted social network using Elgg (http://elgg.org) as the underlying technical platform. Community@Brighton is currently believed to be the World’s largest HE-based social network with some 36,000 registered users comprising students, staff and associates of the university.

Whilst part of the remit of this service was to provide an online social arena for students based on geographically disparate campuses to communicate and socialise, it’s implementation was also part of a wider strategy of evolution towards a Shared Learning Environment (SLE) aimed at extending the learning, teaching and research opportunities of the institutional VLE and realising the potential of Web 2.0 technologies to support and enhance learning and research.

This chapter will outline the strategic and theoretical background to the development of an SLE, present the technical framework used for implementation, describe, by way of key case studies, the experiences of users so far and discuss the issues and challenges that have arisen over the first two years of service.

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BACKGROUND

Since the mid 1990’s, eLearning within HE has been largely underpinned by the use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). During this period, the VLE product market has seen the emergence of just a handful of key products, leaving little choice or variance in the services provided and the dominance of these key players in the market, combined with a lack of competition between products, has resulted in a virtually uniform set of features and, consequently, little variation in use across institutions. Virtually all VLEs provide facilities for structuring information according to existing curricula structures – providing areas dedicated for each school, course, module or other unit of study. Within these areas, tutors can be allocated control, students can be registered and tools are provided to support learning – including document upload, online testing, discussion fora and other communication mechanisms. In effect, most VLEs model themselves on “traditional” teaching environments, offering almost total control of the teaching output to recognised tutors, absolute privacy within units of study and protection of the institution’s intellectual copyright. It could be argued that the success of VLEs has, in large part, been due to the fact that they represent a mirror of teaching practice in the real world and thus a comfortable metaphor for academics to adopt who otherwise might be reluctant to use technologies within their teaching. There is little doubt that VLEs have played a significant role in enhancing the learning experience within HE, even if only at the level of information delivery to learners. However, an understandable emphasis on ease of use has led to inflexibility, it could be argued that a lack of market competition has resulted in a lack of innovation and creative development of new facilities and, by continuing to model “traditional” practices, VLEs have erected artificial barriers that actually limit learning opportunities and artificially enforce learning models that would otherwise be easy to extend and adapt given the technological developments that have taken place since their inception.

In short, VLEs erect barriers across a number of key perspectives of learning:

- Institutional ring-fencing – the majority of VLEs require an institutional account for access – i.e., participation from external users is largely barred
- Absolute tutor control – whilst VLEs do allow learners to be given various levels of control, the implementation model most commonly adopted is one where the tutor is god and frequently the only type of user who can post learning materials, provide access to tools and determine what is learned and the routes through that learning
- Course-specific – students can only engage in the courses/modules they are registered on – participation across courses or subject areas is generally prohibited.
- Limited learner participation – at a most general level, the only facility available within a standard VLE toolset that allows learner participation is the discussion board and even these rarely allow learners to do anything other than make comments and add file attachments. In short, the VLE model reinforces a didactic approach to learning & teaching.

Even amongst early adopters of VLEs, concerns over the model leading to passive rather than active learner engagement were being raised:

Using Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) poses important educational issues for Universities. Without addressing the issues of effective learning, their use can compound the mistakes of the past and leave the learner with a passive, unengaging experience leading to surface learning. Educators need to recognise that learning is a social process and that providing an effective learning environment which facilitates the active...