Chapter III

Keeping Your Eyes on the Prize: Using Inquiry to Increase the Benefits of Institutional Portals

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes eight potential educational uses of institutional portals (e.g., helping instruction become more spontaneous and adaptive; supporting learning communities; reducing cost of service delivery). It then describes a long-term program of data collection that can improve the educational effectiveness of portals, and control the costs and stresses of portal operation. Studies include: a. baseline data (how well are those goals being met without a portal?), b. debugging studies (what factors are tending to block portal effectiveness?), c. cost studies (what aspects of portal development, operation and use are so costly, time-consuming or stressful that they threaten system success?) and d. outcomes assessment (is portal use contributing to outcome improvement?). The non-profit Flashlight Program has developed a number of evaluation tool kits that can be helpful in doing studies of these kinds.
WHAT IS AN ‘INSTITUTIONAL’ PORTAL’?

For the purposes of this chapter, an “institutional portal” is defined as a tailorable user interface that provides efficient access to an extensive set of institutional resources, communications channels and external resources.

WHY BOTHER TO STUDY YOUR INSTITUTION’S PORTAL?

Without a study no one can really tell whether a portal is educationally successful. So (skeptics might argue) it’s safer and cheaper not to do the study and to simply assert that your portal is educationally successful. Besides (their argument might continue) if you do a study and find out that your portal has been a waste of money and effort, it might cost your job.

Read this chapter and then decide for yourself whether to do a study. As you’ll see, the chapter argues that evaluation can play the same role for a portal that headlights play for a car driving on a twisting road at night: the right kinds of evaluation can help increase the portal’s chances of success and efficiency.

FIRST STEP TOWARD DESIGNING A STUDY: WHAT KIND OF EDUCATIONAL OR INSTITUTIONAL PROGRESS IS THE PORTAL INTENDED TO ASSIST?

Like a cabinet full of flasks, test tubes and chemicals, a portal can potentially be used for several different educational purposes, depending on choices made by the institution and the users. That will determine the shape of these studies, so we need to define the portal’s purpose. Which goals are most important for your institution?

• Enable faculty to offer instruction that is more spontaneous, flexible and adaptive (because they know that all their students are logging on at least once a day).
• Create a foundation for learning communities (by providing effective groupware and providing multiple reasons for people to log on at least once a day).
• Help the users and providers manage an increasingly large and diverse constellation of information for the purposes of teaching, learning and research.
The Content of Horizontal Portals

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