

Are the Open Issues of Social Software-based Personal Learning Environment Practices Being Addressed?

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Outline

- Motivation
- Key concepts
 - Communities of Learners
 - Portfolio
 - Personal Learning Environments
- Considerations
 - Motivational aspects
 - Portfolio-thinking
 - Software solution strategies
- Conclusions

Who are we and what is this presentation for?

- Joanna: researcher with background in ICT support & learning environments for higher education
- Mika: researcher & senior assistant with extensive experience in LMS, moving towards social media platforms
- Myself: researcher preparing thesis on using smart phones & weblogs as portfolio tools in teacher education
- Why: arguments for discussion → research will ensue

Key concepts

- Communities of Learners (COL)
- Portfolio
- Personal Learning Environment (PLE)

What do these concepts have to do with anything?

- COL structure changes profoundly when moving from informal to formal learning setting
- Portfolio aspect is a major driving force for PLE: repository of life-wide activity blurring leisure-work learning
- Take your pick: PLE is either seen as 1) organizational learning environment or learner controlled space or 2) concrete technological solution or philosophy that cannot be tied to one specific solution (Laakkonen & Juntunen 2009)
 - Our pick: access to own & others learning resources, learner ownership of content, possibility to interact with people outside institution (Downes 2007; van Harmelen 2006)

Motivational aspects

- Learner orientations in formal learning context are complex, in COL four can be identified (Martinez & Bunderson 2000):
 - Transforming, performing (good expected learning outcomes)
 - Conforming, resistant (poor expected learning outcomes, need support)
- Common (and old) argument for computer-supported learning: alternative for traditional learning activity could better support individual learner orientation
 - We see the transparency of social media-based PLE as the single most important motivational factor

Motivational aspects

- Motivation by transparency; is it a carrot or a whip?
 - Carrot: meaningful activity as somebody will read my content (other than myself) and I can get feedback
 - Whip: this is control measure (I am being supervised that I produce x amount of content)
- We have no idea yet how the different motivational student groups will react (although strong hypothesis that conformist/resistant students will only see the whip)
- Possible problems with open collaboration: friends & likeminded will mingle?
 - Which epistemology do we promote; traditional vs postmodern?

Portfolio-thinking

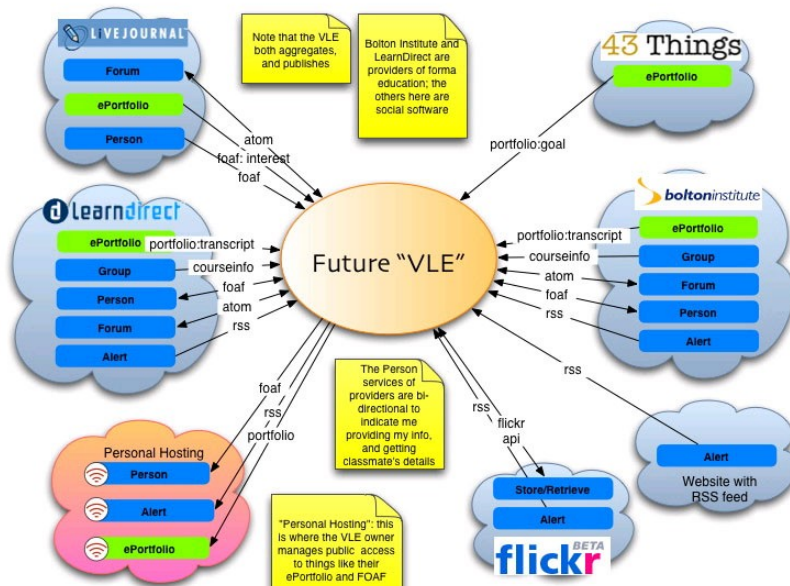
- PLE supports broader definition of portfolio; not only a product (formal dossier, CV) as the learning process will also be documented
 - internal motivation: could the conformist/resistant become tricked to self-development?
 - external motivation: the possibility to use process content could improve the quality of the product portfolio -better portfolio for job application use?
- But could the focus of personal development be lost with the allure of the learning community and operations model social media solutions already have?

Software solution strategies for PLEs

- Architectural choices of PLEs can be divided to **distributed** and **integrated**:
 - A distributed solution is a mash-up which combines user-selected tools and networks on one administration interface. 2 types of mash-ups:
 1. Mash-ups which are assembled by aggregating information from different sources using easy-to-use widgets and feeds. The end user does not need any programming skills.
 2. Mash-ups which integrate data from different sources using APIs (Application User Interfaces). This solution requires more complex programming skills
 - An integrated solution is more reminiscent of a traditional web-based learning platform into which tools are pre-built
- Solutions can also be divided into
 - web-based browser and server systems and
 - client systems which are installed on the user's computer
- Critique: the student's computer and overall operational environment form a PLE

Distributed PLE solutions

The most essential idea behind the distributed PLE solutions is that a student can build his own PLE from the tools he has already used for different purposes (wikis, weblogs, feed readers etc.):



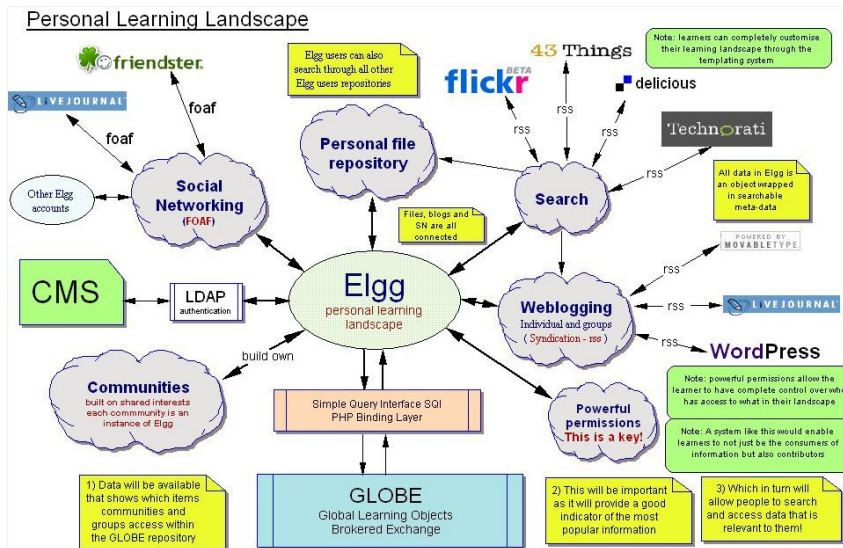
Wilson, S. 2005. Future VLE. Available from <http://www.cetis.ac.uk/members/scott/blogview?entry=20050125170206> accessed 2 June 2009.

Advantages and disadvantages of distributed solutions

- Student-centeredness is an advantage of a distributed PLE, since the user has control to tailor the environment to fit personal needs
- An organization may offer 1) a distributed solution platform of their own, 2) a possibility to combine the applications students already use with organizational systems (~ partly integrated solution) or 3) let students choose the PLE platform on their own
- No easy-to use PLE exist- we challenge someone (you?) develop it!
 - PLE platform should interact with applications offering proprietary (yet public) APIs and with interfaces that support general web standards
- For teachers it can be challenging to have different PLEs
- Students may be on their own when in need of user help for diverse PLEs
 - However, could promote gaining information searching and problem solving skills
 - Social networks outside institution as sources of support may also be emphasized (but support could be misleading)

Integrated PLE solutions

Depending on the openness of the application, an integrated PLE solution can be modified and integrated with other applications and systems, or more tools can be aggregated in the solution:



Tosh, D. 2005. ELGG – a Personal Learning Landscape. Available from <http://tesl-ej.org/ej34/m1.html> accessed 2 June 2009.

Advantages and disadvantages of integrated solutions

- Clear advantage from the point of view of the teachers and students
 - All the study-related information systems combined: easier to find and administer, diminishes the need for many separate systems
 - Teachers benefit, when all the students use the same system
- Considering PLE as part of organizational ICT infrastructure:
 - ICT support service is able to instruct students and teachers & help with problems
 - But integrated solution causes support and maintenance costs
 - Without an integrated PLE solution offered by the organization it is almost impossible to build a comprehensive, organization wide learning approach based on the use of PLE: not possibility to oblige students to use a PLE
- To increase student motivation:
 - By control over content: need to be exportable!
 - By control over environment: modifiable and possibility to bring important external networks outside institution into PLE

Conclusions

- The **motivational aspects of learners and learning communities using PLEs need to be understood** more comprehensively and supported accordingly if the PLEs are to cater for different learning orientations, methods and -needs
- The social software tools' inherent support of learning communities can be fruitful, but **if not carefully implemented in a formal learning context the individual aspect of learning is lost**
- It must be understood that choosing a distributed or an integrated PLE solution has different implications for the educational organization and the student. If we want to truly change the ways we help students to learn, **we should shift the control from the institution to the student**
- Even though the importance of informal learning is underlined beside formal learning, do we allow the students to combine them e.g. use their own tools? **It is impossible to change the long criticized old ways to teach if we are not changing the ways of action; need for a learning culture reform?**
- Issues of application integration, services and solutions must be overcome. Too strict demands about the standardization may cause problems, but **it would be reasonable to develop solutions according to the open and widely used standards**

Conclusions

- Unresolved issues in individual-collective, formal-informal and distributed-integrated continua
- Need for well structured **research**-based design development of future PLE products; let us not duplicate the inflated promises of turn-of-the-century eLearning

