Rich and personal revisited: translating ambitions for an institutional personal learning environment into a reality

Su White, Learning Societies Lab, ECS, University of Southampton, UK
Hugh Davis, Learning Societies Lab, ECS, University of Southampton, UK

Abstract

Is it possible to create an institutional personal learning environment? This question has recently triggered considerable debate amongst those concerned with implementing learning and teaching technologies within higher education,

For some the argument lies in the fundamental (linguistic) paradox of claiming that the institutional can be personal. Others would derive from this a pedagogic perspective and argue that reliance and use of any institutional initiative and infrastructure would necessarily sabotage and undermine personal autonomy. Reliance on an institutional infrastructure would therefore detract from the inherent levers for independent learning which are cultivated by individually assembling and thus creating a personal learning environment. However, there is clear evidence of institutions attempting to build environments which will provide their students with some of the benefits of Personal Learning Environments e.g. see Casquero et al., (2010), Santos & Pedro (2009) and White et al. (2010)

From a technological viewpoint one can argue that a technology provided for the individual by an institutional could never be personal. The institution has already decided upon the technical framework and thus may have removed or severely constrained the learner's choice – for example in platform, software and mode of interaction.

The underlying assumption of the work described in this paper is that the university's virtual infrastructure must offer variety and support opportunity in the same manner as the traditional physical infrastructure. The loose association and co-location of resources, available to all but used selectively by each individual, should exist in the virtual as well as the physical.

We are not attempting to provide an environment that will last for the next ten years; rather we are building a technological framework (learning environment) which can evolve with emerging technologies through its lifetime. This framework is designed to guide learners towards acquiring the set of personal digital literacies, demonstrated by 'super-users' (Fournier & Kop, 2010), that are most relevant to their personal, educational and career choices. Learners do not spend a lifetime using our environment, but we aspire to offer them educational opportunities which result in a transformative educational experience and which will sustain them through their future learning in whatever form it takes emerging as confident and competent participants in a digital future.

In the initial scoping stages of the environment explanations of the proposed system were accompanied by the qualifier "its more than a system, it's a mindset". The suggestion is that the power and value of the institutional personal learning environment resides in the affordances of the technology to enable users to customise and personalise technologies in an educationally constructive way (White

& Davis, 2011). There are many different ways in which one can remove the barriers to learning, some of which are not necessarily directly 'educational' or 'instructional'.

This paper presents a case study account of the initial stages of implementing an institutional personal learning environment. It describes the structure and nature of the emerging environment. It analyses the architecture of the system to explain how it provides an institutional environment. It presents and reviews the first cycle implementation (due to go live in August 2011) from a pedagogic perspective evaluating the technology affordances of the system. Finally it re-evaluates the evidence to consider whether it has indeed been possible to create an institutional learning environment that is also a personal learning environment.

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