An Academic Student–Centered Portal

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INTRODUCTION

The Università Politecnica delle Marche (UNIVPM) aims to acquire a recognizable "look" of the university to live on the Web. One way to reach this goal is to create a site, "e-Univpm" (Ramazzotti, De Giovanni, L., Battistini, G., & Leo et al., 2005), linked to the institutional university Web portal. The principal feature of this new site is to be a convivial site offering the services online that the students usually look for in everyday life. It is a place where students would meet other students for a personal social growth. It would be a rich environment with spaces for curricula and extra-curricula activities such as concerts, lectures, exhibitions, meetings, sports, and student association activities, opportunities of lodging and trading. It is a place for expressing ideas and emotions, where students can open blog and discussion forum, and have access to Web sites of interest for an active citizenship. For these reasons, the portal "e-Univpm" is named "convivial site."

All information, in particular about events, is not a simple calendar, but as soon as the events happen, it is published in a a section of news.

In this context, the students find a small but high quality institutional space: all degree courses, specialisations, masters, and PhDs are described by learning objectives and perspectives of job employment. Each course is presented by a metacognitive framework that collects evaluation criteria and assessment methods linking to learning resources, libraries, laboratories, and directions for participating to research projects.

The convivial site is the access point to the syllabus of UNIVPM coursers and links to teachers' personal pages including research interest descriptions.

There could be partial overlapping of information with the student guide or the institutional faculty site. However, this information is organised according to different aims in order to stimulate the interest of portal users and to make the most of the "medium."

BACKGROUND

According to Deans and von Allmen (2002), "portals are still very much a *hot* topic in industry and academic institutions." A definition of Web portal (Thompson, 2001) extends the concept in the virtual world as a doorway to information and processes. Thompson suggests "when designing a virtual portal for a university at the enterprise-level, one needs to identify the target portal users; decide how many portals are needed; have a clear vision of what it is that the portals give access to and what levels of security are required." Miller (2001) analyses the concept of portals, in particular referring to Internet service providers. Butters (2003) analyses the features found in various types of portals and groups portals in four categories (search engine-based, Internet service provider-based specialist, vertical, and academic). He constructs an indicative features list collected in the following macrocategories: utilities, user profiling/content filtering, resource discovery, news/news feeds, community communication, subject-specific (portal's specialisation), advertising, education-based, leisure, miscellaneous services, and assistance with site use. According to him, no single portal is likely to serve all purposes; different portals will require suitable sets of features as appropriate to the job at hand. Particularly for the academic portals, not all the features are present.

In thinking about the functionality of the portal (Dolphin, Miller, & Sherratt, 2002), there has been a marked tendency to aggregate functionality within the institutional portal itself. Some institutions are effectively replacing departmental or section Web sites by a series of nested portal implementations, in addition to providing an interface to back-end systems. These "heavy" portals, which incorporate applications within themselves, may be contrasted with the "light" portal, which attempts to aggregate and integrate access to a range of services and functions, which remain independent of the portal itself. An example of a portal with more "convivial" features and a lighter look is "MyUCLA" (2006). Swisher (1998) describes MyUCLA as an innovative, personalized Web site that greets the students by name, reminds them of class times and counselor meetings, lets them chat with other undergraduates, and dynamically changes to meet their changing needs.

The Italian Education Department puts (Cineca, 2006) the formative offer online with links to the institutional sites of Italian universities. In the national context, generally, the academic sites do not have convivial features, rather there are sites such as www.studenti.it and www.studiando.it that don't belong to a specific university but have a transversal convivial feature.

Moreover, it would be right to devise the convivial site following the main goals of usability and accessibility. For Looney and Lyman (2000), "... portals gather a variety of useful information resources into a single 'one-stop' Web page, helping the user to avoid being overwhelmed by 'in-foglut' or feeling lost on the Web."

According to Nielsen (2000, 2003), usability is a quality attribute that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use. The word "usability" also refers to methods for improving ease-of-use during the design process. Usability is defined by five quality components: learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors, and satisfaction. There are many other important quality attributes. A key one is utility, which refers to the design's functionality. Usability and utility are equally important: it matters little that something is easy if it's not what you want.

The accessibility denotes strategies, guidelines, and resources to help make the Web accessible to people with disabilities (WAI, 2006). During 2003, "European Year of people with disabilities," Italian Parliament approved "Stanca Law." This law requires accessibility for all public administrations sites, therefore also for universities' ones; the convivial site is going to be designed following such guidelines.

Therefore, the Università Politecnica delle Marche is developing a convivial site (besides the institutional portal) that is able, at the same time, to observe the goals of usability and accessibility. For this reason it is used as a compliant commercial platform, E-NTRA (E-NTRA, 2006)

(PHP-MYSQL). Moreover, this platform provides some communication tools such as forum, calendar, newsletter, polls, RSS, SMS, and in the future chat and blogs).

THE CONVIVIAL SITE

The "convivial site" is conceived to give to the "Università Politecnica delle Marche" the image of an institution that is close to students, cares about their needs, and wants to take care and stimulate the cultural growth of its users.

For these reasons, the site is not only a place where you can find information and take advantage of services, but it is also a meeting and communication place.
In particular, the convivial Web site has the following main aims:

- to describe the university and its courses,
- to offer students useful information to help them organize and plan their studies,
- to offer up-to-date information about the courses that students are attending or plan to attend,
- to give students who come from other towns information on the cities where the university is located and help them to organise their staying in Ancona,
- to welcome freshmen and help them get to grips with the university and its environment,
- to offer students virtual places where they can meet and exchange,
- to offer students information on activities for their leisure time,
- to keep students informed about academic events,
- to list job and internship opportunities,
- to offer information about student exchange programmes with other countries,
- to help students to get access to libraries, giving information on timetables, locations, etc.,
- to publish graduate students' CVs online, and
- to give information to anyone who, for any reason, may need to reach the university and stay in town for a few days.

Before planning the convivial site, we analysed the university institutional site and the faculty sites of Università Politecnica delle Marche (Ramazzotti et al., 2005) in order to find which contents and services were present and which were not, and how information was communicated. We realized that some important information was not included, dispersed, or difficult to find and that the general style of the site was quite formal.

This is the reason we decided to design a Web site based on a new philosophy with a younger, friendlier style where students could easily perceive the information they need; a

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