Chapter 3.9
Learning Portals as
New Academic Spaces

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INTRODUCTION

Many functional definitions emphasize a portal as an integrated system providing a gateway to organized data (c.f., Batson, 2000; Copeland, 2001; Eisler, 2001; Looney & Lyman, 2000). However, a learning portal may go beyond the information management function to provide important mechanisms for reaching out to new populations of learners and engaging them in new ways to facilitate learning and development. Beyond serving as a gateway and an organizer, a portal can provide access to a broader range of contemporary information and learning resources (experts, teachers, researchers, mentors), encourage enriched interaction with those resources and with other learners anywhere in the world, and support new models of teaching, learning and research. Ultimately, a collaborative, community-based process of designing and implementing a portal may support institutions in reorienting towards a user-centered learning community.

BACKGROUND

Portals and a Transformed Learning Environment

Universities are seeking ways to manage emerging areas of research and discipline specialization, learner profiles, and partnerships with learning providers that challenge the autonomy of the single-source institution. The public has expressed strong interest in alternative methods for delivering, supporting, and facilitating learning — any time, any place, any pace — required in new knowledge-intensive environments and enabled by converging information and communication technologies. Therefore, the decision to implement a campus portal for enhanced learning opportunities must address issues of equity and access, flexibility, innovation, personalization, credibility, quality, transparency, and transferability within the framework of evolving institutional goals and strategies.

Both Campbell (2001) and Batson (2000) contend that commercial portals are built on different values and assumptions than those of the academic community, and pursue different goals and purposes. Erhmann (2000) identifies service provision, flexibility and responsiveness of instruction, the enrichment and extension of academic communities, attracting and retaining students and staff, fostering universal, frequent use of computing communications, and sustainability.

A learning portal expands on traditional academic space, which has traditionally been defined as physical infrastructure with related resource structures that shapes the nature of the interactions that occur within it (Batson, 2000). This space has an important socialization function: Members of the community know how to speak and act within these spaces, understand power relationships by the way these spaces organize interactions (e.g., rows of desks with a lectern at the front of the room) and, once acculturated, can subvert the purposes of these spaces. The nature of teaching and learning has been entirely defined by a familiar landscape, the physical classroom, where learning events were structured by place and time and format.

This landscape has fundamentally changed. Faculty have old maps and must redefine their relationships with learners, with new ways of representing knowledge, with research colleagues, and with external communities such as the corporate world. Learners demand customized learning experiences that are flexible, authentic, and relevant, have no brand-loyalty and expect program mobility. This is a challenge to administrators whose management strategy focuses on internal factors like time-definite program completion (e.g., the 4-year undergraduate degree).

FUTURE TRENDS

Although institutions have ranged themselves along an academic space continuum from primarily face-to-face to primarily virtual, most have settled on a technology-enhanced, or blended approach to learning and access. Employing alternative forms of instructional and delivery models, this approach includes: synchronous tools and environments such as classroom lectures, audio and videoconferencing, and data conferencing; and asynchronous tools such as computer-mediated conferencing and other communications systems, learning management systems, and print and digital media. Much of the learning content and interactions can be stored as learning objects and extended and reused in digital repositories. This approach fundamentally realigns and redefines institutional infrastructure to be more learner-centric and open in design and support and include extended information services. It also has a significant social effect on the academic community, raising questions about academic freedom, intellectual property rights management, and the nature of knowledge discovery, representation, and stewardship.

Learning portals can provide the functionality of consumer systems, and at the same time, support the social, cultural, and political goals of HE. While more or less resisting the culture of the corporation, universities nevertheless have begun to adopt the concept of portals as learning storefronts (Galant, 2000). Yet, in order to respect HE values of knowledge creation and dissemination for the greater social good, these portals must go beyond the functional requirements and gateway view of commercial portals.

Gilbert (2000) and Eisler (2000) identify major categories into which a variety of portal features and functions can be organized: gateways to infor-

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