Chapter 4

Choosing the Appropriate E–Learning System for a University

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author discuss the introduction of an e-learning system to enhance teaching and learning at a university. The focus is on the decision process choosing a system. Abstract criteria and feature lists are not sufficient for choosing the right e-learning software, even if all stakeholders and their respective requirements are heard. The author argues that "soft" factors should be considered when evaluating e-learning software: (1) The age of the students and their level of education, (2) the pedagogical guidelines and the culture of teaching and learning of the university, and (3) the educational scenarios in lectures and seminars. These factors seem to be only small details and are typically neither mentioned in the requirements nor in the feature lists of e-learning software. Therefore the author proposes that institutions should evaluate prospective systems in real-world scenarios. As a case in point, the author will outline a number of significant differences between two e-learning systems with a focus on pedagogical aspects. The systems can be seen as representative for a certain class of systems; both offer all features that are commonly seen as the most relevant when making a decision for a university e-learning system.

INTRODUCTION

Most educational institutions today use e-learning systems to some extent.[1] "Education" and "e-learning" are two generic terms: "Education" on the one hand may refer to primary schools, to universities, or to life-long learning. "E-learning" on the other hand can be simple file upload and download, or the use of elaborate simulations of complex procedures, or full-fledged distance learning courses.

In this chapter, we focus on a university located in Europe and being part of the European tradition

of educational ideals, where it is assumed that learning and teaching benefit from face-to-face interaction of instructors and students. When talking about studying it usually means face-to-face instruction and discussion. E-learning is seen as an additional didactical instrument to enhance teaching and learning and to bring so-called "new media" into the university. Usually an educational institution makes a strategic decision to implement e-learning and then buys a license for a certain software product or someone is tasked with installing and maintaining open source software. From that moment on, the institution claims to "do e-learning."[2]

Depending on the institution, different stakeholders and policies may influence the decision about the software. In this chapter, we will outline the relevant stakeholders and user groups who should be involved in the decision process at a university when the software to use for e-learning is selected. We will assume that implementing an e-learning system from scratch is no option. We will show that today, most e-learning systems offer very similar facilities and features. Thus, decision makers often assume that it doesn't really matter which specific system from a certain class they choose. We will show that this attitude will cause serious problems and we will propose a solution for a more suitable decision process.

This chapter is organized as follows: In section "Background" we give some definitions and elaborate on the general aspects mentioned in this introduction. In section "Stakeholders involved and their requirements for choosing an e-learning system" we briefly describe the stakeholders involved in the decision process for choosing an e-learning system and outline criteria usually considered in this process. The main aspects of this chapter are in section "Don't buy a pig in a poke," where we argue to take into account more fine-grained and less obvious requirements.

BACKGROUND

In this section, we will define a framework of reference to locate this chapter and give practical definitions of the terms used in this chapter.

E-Learning

We have already used the term "e-learning" a few times in the introduction of this chapter, but we have not yet given a definition for it. There are thousands of publications in the field (see Conole & Oliver (2007) for a good overview) published in journals[3], at conferences like IADIS International Conference E-Learning (http://www.elearning-conf.org) or in books like this one. However, we have to state that there is no single definition universally accepted by the community.[4] We find definitions emphasizing the learning *process*, defining e-learning as the "process of learning which is supported by the use of ICT (e.g., the Internet, network, standalone computer, interactive whiteboard or portable device)" (JISC, 2006), as well as definitions focusing on the *techniques* used for learning, defining e-learning as the "use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration."[5] For this chapter we will rely on the definition given by Piotrowski, who defines e-learning as "a general term describing all kinds of computer-mediated and computer-supported learning and teaching" (Piotrowski, 2009, p. 35).

The software used for this support has to offer functionalities for creation, organization, delivery, communication, collaboration, and assessment (Piotrowski, 2009). There are dozens of systems suitable or even explicitly designed for very specific purposes. Here we will use the terms "e-learning software" or "e-learning system" to

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