



Chapter 11

A Framework for the Implementation of a Collaborative Flexible Learning Environment for Academic Institutions

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years the enormous advances in multimedia and Internet technology have started to affect how we live, play, enjoy and conduct our businesses. At the same time, these technologies have begun to creep into our learning and training environments.

Many educational institutions are experimenting with the use of the new technology to enhance existing teaching methods. The traditional instructor-centric method of teaching is giving way to the learner-centric model of learning in which information is interpreted rather than merely received by the students and new knowledge is created (Lotus Corporation, 1997).

In the learner-centric model, students learn through discovery. The traditional textual and verbal-based learning method is becoming less acceptable. The new learning model is often driven by interactive multimedia which gives the learner full control over the learning process and hence, the focus is on what the learner does not already know. Interactiveness increases the student's motivation and rate of retention (Bielenberg & Carpenter-Smith, 1997). The term *flexible learning*, a contemporary buzzword, is often used to describe the above-mentioned model.

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Flexibility can be introduced in different forms, which include:

- *Time:*
The course materials and resources are kept up-to-date and are available on demand at any time that is convenient to the learner (just-in-time).
- *Place:*
Students can access the materials from any place in the world where the course can be delivered. Consistent materials are delivered regardless of the access point.
- *Delivery mode:*
The delivery modes include On-line, Off-line (including VCD/DVD) or the hybrid approach with push technology (Louey, 1997).
- *Curriculum:*
Students are given the opportunity to take greater responsibility for their learning and to be engaged in learning activities and opportunities that meet their individual needs. The courses are flexible in terms of entry and exit points.
- *Pace:*
Learners decide how fast or how slowly they should learn. Students proceed through the course at their own pace, respond actively to each step in the sequence, and receive immediate feedback before proceeding to the next step.
- *Payment:*
Charges are related to the resources that a learner uses and the syllabus he/she chooses to cover.

In the student-centric model, teachers are facilitators who help the students with self-teaching (Reid, 2000). The model provides a rich learning environment in which the student can receive new experiences, promote knowledge acquisition activities, and develop and share knowledge and responsibility (Guillermo, 1996).

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING APPROACH

Active learning is not a new concept in learning.

If you tell me, I'll listen.

If you show me, I'll see.

If I experience it, I'll learn

Lao Tse, 420BC

Human beings learn better by doing but best in a collaborative environment. Tracey (1992) found that group collaborative learning (peer-to-peer interactions in conjunction with the teacher) can result in higher level reasoning strategies,

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