

Learning Portals as New Academic Spaces¹

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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 information, points of access for constituent groups, and community/learning hubs. A synthesis of public reports identifies the range of stakeholders that should be involved in this task, and their values and functional requirements. Principles for the new portal-as-learning-environment include:

- **Inclusiveness:** the portal design must support diverse communities including learners who are: older professionals, at a distance, challenged, at different life cycles, learning outside of formal structures, and those with alternative languages, cultural, and perceptual needs; both present and virtual faculty; multidisciplinary teams of researchers; local and international academic, business, and political partners, and others.
- **Integration:** learning management systems such as Blackboard[®] and WebCT[®] have begun to develop and refine enterprise systems that integrate instructional, delivery, and administrative systems. These portals have evolved from a teaching/learning orientation and reflect institutional movement towards a seamless, multi-purpose, integrated learning environment.
- **Learner-centeredness:** portal design is based on the interrelated concepts of customization and personalization, reflecting learning environments in which learners can build learning portfolios based on their circumstances, experiences, and current needs. Traditionally, institutional Web sites have been owner-centric.
- **Accessibility:** the new economy implies that the intellectual resources of the university should be packaged and made available to a global community. Portals identify, organize, and represent these resources in ways that make them easy to retrieve, use, and reuse (see, for example, MIT's Open Knowledge Initiative, or OKI).
- **Flexibility:** for many reasons, including changes in professional accreditation, a globally mobile workforce, new and emerging professions, and life events, individuals will search for opportunities to time-shift, place-shift, and construct individual programs from many providers. A well-designed learning portal will be scalable and act as a gateway to these opportunities.
- **Transparency:** a learning portal makes the institution's strategic directions visible to the community. Learners, external research communities, the private sector, and others construct their own "footprint". They can search for all of the services they need, and deal directly with the systems that facilitate their interactions with the environment. Portals can help the community discover and promulgate best practices.
- **Accountability:** as the learning and support environment becomes more transparent, and as learning opportunities become more available and flexible, community members will expect to be able to evaluate the services and resources to which they have access. As rich information hubs, learning portals can make the institution's quality framework apparent and available for querying.
- **Expanded and blended learning communities:** a learning portal manages transparent and reliable communication tools, which increase access to resources and social learning communities. These tools are easily accessible from the portal and can therefore include and support group members from different institutions, organizations, regions, and cultures. These communities broaden and enrich the learning environment and enhance inclusiveness. Looney and Lyman (2000) believe that the value of a learning portal is that "it can be used to engage constituent groups, *empower* them with access to information resources and communication tools, and ultimately *retain* them by providing a more encompassing sense of membership in an academic community" (p.33).
- **Flattened structures:** virtual academic spaces do not support status clues to the same extent as traditional spaces. For example, a physical campus contains buildings with classrooms, labs, information resources, and administrative offices. Very of-

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