

An E-Portfolio Scheme of Flexible Online Learning

Kam Hou Vat

University of Macau, Macau

INTRODUCTION

The potentialities of the information (or Internet) age have somehow exceeded many of our current calculations in education (Brown, 2000; Cornford & Pollock, 2003; Duke, 2002). Imagine a student attending a class waiting to be taught mostly in lectures or direct training from the instructor. The same student as a learner has at hand many an on-demand (or just-in-time) ubiquitous high-quality learning environments with learner-friendly support, such as the Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). Today's numerous virtual communities, including the WELL project (<http://www.well.com>) or the Blacksburg community networks (<http://www.bev.net>), have demonstrated to our inquiring students the possibility of fostering their own learning initiatives, with the comfort of an electronic personalized space in the form of customizable information system (IS) support (Vat, 2005) guarded by privately assigned identifier and password, to experience and make sense of their worlds of learning. The message to the education community is clear: we need to inject more flexibility (Khan, 2007a) in support of learning; namely, learners now must be empowered with more say in what they learn, when they learn, and where and how they learn. This position of providing educational services might sound a bit bizarre, but it is actually entering the mainstream (Herrington, Oliver, & Herrington, 2007) be it concerned with undergraduate or postgraduate education today. An example is the electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) model of learning (Jafari & Kaufman, 2006) over the Internet, which has now been receiving attention from many universities around the globe (Aalderink & Veugelers, 2006; Dalziel, Challen & Sutherland, 2006; Henry, 2006; O'Brien, 2006; Paoletti, 2006). Simply put, a portfolio is a running record demonstrating the performance of an entity, such as a company or a person in a specific field of work. An electronic version of such a portfolio carries with it the element of being reliably and swiftly updated, as well as easily accessible in terms of the data being tracked. Thereby,

an e-portfolio model of education (Herbert, 2001; Vat, 2008) implies a system of empowering the individual to learn and to demonstrate his or her learning acquired over a period of time through an electronic medium of ongoing services, preferably recognized by a chain of accredited institutions. This article serves to explore some of the issues underlying the e-portfolio scheme of providing flexible online learning to individuals who are interested in pursuing his or her learning desires at a recognized institute well prepared to fulfill such learning needs.

BACKGROUND

The issue of flexibility in education was brought up by Moore (1972) in his paper "Learner autonomy: The second dimension of independent learning." Moore wrote (Moore, 1972, p. 81): "for every program, we seek to identify the relationship between learners and teachers, and where control of each instructional process lies, by asking: Is learning self-initiated and self-motivated? Who identifies goals and objectives, and selects programs for study? Who determines the pace, the sequence, and the methods of information gathering? What provision is there for the development of learners' ideas and for creative solutions to problems? Is emphasis on gathering information external to the learner? How flexible is each instructional process to the requirements of the learner? How is the usefulness and quality of learning judged?" The search for answers to these questions deserves our thinking both at the course design and instruction level and at the institutional organization and policy level, if the issue of flexibility should be well elucidated.

The Renewed Mindset for Flexible Learning

In contrast to the traditional "direct transfer" model in which the instructor is assumed to be the sole

source of knowledge and skills, the flexible learning model (Khan, 2007b) comes mostly in the form of an interactive, collaborative knowledge building process (Harasim, 1990, 1999). In the linear model of education, learning design proceeded in a linear fashion from defining objectives to lesson planning to course delivery. Associated with this linear approach was a set of teaching strategies, which are characterized by being predominantly one-way, centralized, and broadcast-oriented. When students appeared bored and unengaged in this type of program, the solution was to find ways to use new media to make the one-way broadcast more entertaining. Today, we need a renewed mindset for education. Teaching and learning must be seen as an ongoing process rather than a program with a fixed starting and ending point and the importance of widespread participation by learners in the design of their own learning must also be properly recognized (Kimball, 1995). ICT (information and communications technologies) are particularly well suited to this dynamic approach to managing education. The adoption of online learning tools in higher education must be designed to demonstrate evidence of more authentic student work, show student progress over time, and represent collections of best work (Herrington, Oliver, & Herrington, 2007). In order to support integration, synthesis, and re-use of formal and informal learning experiences, the challenge for educators is to develop new pedagogical approaches (Vat, 2000, 2002) to encourage students to recognize and extend the value of online learning support beyond simple course applications. Good teachers have always been open to changing their lesson plans based on student input. New media makes it easier and online environments can provide space (Vat, 2001) for continuing conversation among students and teachers about what is working and what is not working in the course. The idea of participatory course design is also an important element in flexible learning. The online environment should provide an opportunity to support this type of collaborative learning in ways we have not been able to do before.

The New Roles for Teachers and Students

Instead of performing as the sage on the stage transmitting knowledge to a class of innocent students, in the flexible learning environment, teachers' roles (Vat, 2004) are often defined in terms of mediating learning

through dialogue and collaboration where knowledge is created in the community of students rather than being transferred from the individual. More specifically, the idea of mediating could include such aspects of facilitating, modeling, and coaching (Chung, 1991). Facilitating involves creating rich activities for linking new information to prior knowledge, providing opportunities for cooperative work and collective problem solving, and offering students a multiplicity of authentic learning tasks. Modeling serves to share with students not only the perceived content to be learned, but also the important meta-cognitive skills of higher-order thinking, in the process of communication and collaboration. Coaching involves giving hints or cues, providing feedback, redirecting students' efforts, and helping them use a strategy. A major principle of coaching is to provide help only when students need it so that students retain as much responsibility as possible for their own learning. In fact, we need to teach students to rely less on teachers as the source of knowledge. We need to help them learn to learn as self-directed groups of active, autonomous, and responsible individuals. In the flexible learning settings, students are expected to assume their new roles as collaborators and active participants. It may be useful to think how these new roles influence processes and activities before, during, and after each episode of learning. For example, before learning, students set goals and plan learning tasks. During learning, they work to accomplish tasks and monitor their progress. After learning, they assess their performance and plan for future learning. In practice, students constantly need help from the teachers to help them fulfill such new roles. Students must learn to become teachers of their own. Indeed, a frequent formula (Dilworth, 1998) that action learning proposes to constantly remind students of their new role in the flexible learning scenario is this: $L = P + Q + R$, where L (learning) equals P (programmed instruction) plus Q (questioning) plus R (reflection). Here P represents the knowledge coming through textbooks, lectures, case studies, computer-based instructions, and many others. This is an important source of learning but carries with it an embedded caution flag. That is, P is all based in the past. Q means continuously seeking fresh insight into what is not yet known. This Q helps avoid the pitfall of imperfectly constructed past knowledge. By going through the Q step first, we are able to determine whether the information available is relevant and adequate to our needs. It will point to areas that will require the creation

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