

Bridging the Gap with Intranets: Linking Connected Learning in an Open World to University League Tables

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Abstract

Linking Connected Learning in an Open World to University League Tables

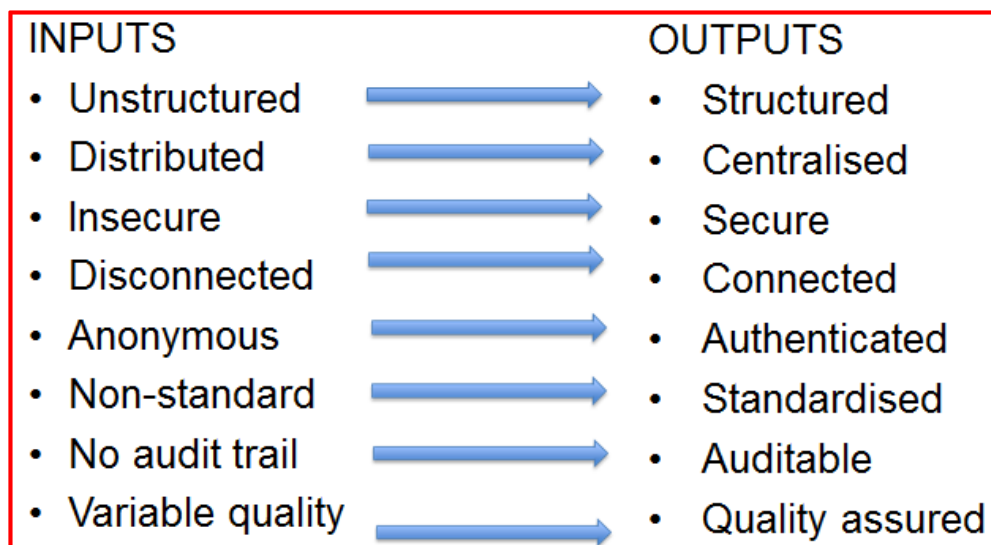
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The internet offers great flexibility to tutors for interacting with their students. Open Educational Resources provide a myriad of ways in which learning can take place outside the classroom (Jisc, 2014), social media and cloud storage have introduced new methods of interaction (Moran *et al*, 2011) and innovative peer and group assessment give evidence of skills needed by business and academia (British Chambers of Commerce, 2014). These are just some of the components of connected learning in an open world, which was the subject of a recent conference at which this paper was presented (University of Greenwich, 2014).

Sophisticated corporate Management Information Systems (often more than one in the same university), on the other hand, store student progress, match it to student data and implement complex algorithms approved by academic councils to provide aggregated grades, which themselves become statistics to funding agencies and to a variety of university league tables. These league tables, which also incorporate National Student Survey data based on the student experience of learning in the university, then affect the university's reputation and future student recruitment.

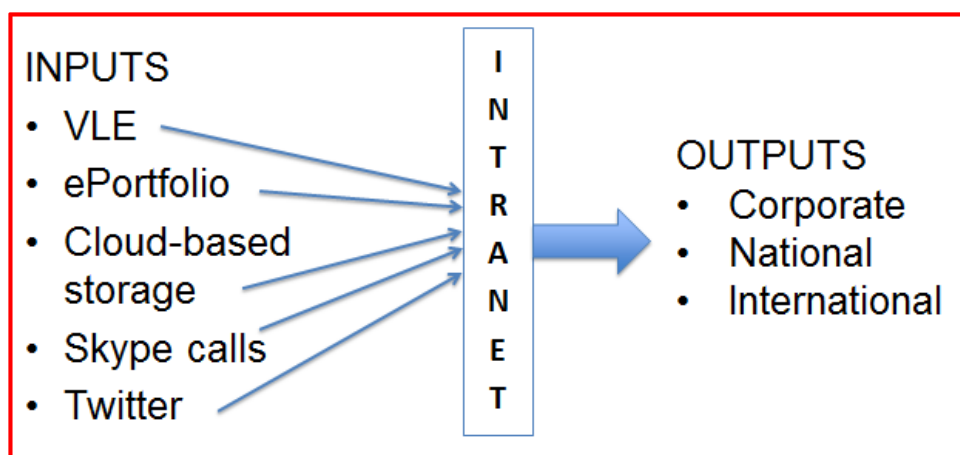
This gap between learning (an input) and information (an output) is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Nature of the gap



To bridge the gap, universities face the dual challenge of converting all this innovation in learning and assessment into a single, achievement-reflective grade for each student at the end of her/his programme of study and justifying this to external examiners, auditors, regulatory bodies and, increasingly, appeal committees and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (Behrens, 2013). A further challenge is to ensure that a university's commitment to connected learning in an open world has a positive impact on its position in league tables. Intranets, as illustrated in Figure 2, can help a university meet these challenges, but only if they are fit for purpose, properly resourced and effectively managed.

Figure 2: Bridging the gap



Different ways of bridging the gap have evolved in different universities, but many of these are labour-intensive and paper-based. Off-the-shelf Managed Learning Environments are not available (Stoneham, 2012); Virtual Learning Environments, such as Moodle, are good at individual course/module level, but lack appropriate high-level reporting tools (Elearnity, 2012); ePortfolios provide the facility for students to curate their own work, but do not authenticate it (Smith and Kajita, 2014); custom-built intranets provide some good functionality for data-gathering/aggregation, but many are poorly supported and are often seen by central IT services as 'feral systems' or 'Shadow IT Systems' (Vizard, 2013). Portals are designed to link these disparate systems together, but many are also hybrid intranets that are difficult to navigate (Caya and Pernice, 2014).

Intranets are crucial to organisations needing efficient business processes. Many major companies and organisations have invested heavily in intranets, and the benefits are clear (Nielsen, 2014). In universities, however, intranets are often poorly resourced. They are often a neglected part of a university's website, having little functionality and a poorly-structured mixture of content for both internal and external audiences (Robertson, 2013), and consequently leave a significant gap between the evidence of learning and the recording of it in the university's MIS.

In an attempt to bridge this gap, the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences (CMS) at the University of Greenwich has spent the past twelve years developing an intranet. Top Task Analysis, an effective management technique introduced by McGovern (2010), was used as part of a continuous, improvement-iterative process to prioritise development, thereby ensuring the system met user requirements. Moderation of coursework and

examinations, handling of plagiarism and extenuating circumstances, feedback to students, personal tutoring and supervision of projects are just some of the top tasks that are supported for over 2,000 students and 100 academic and administrative staff. Significant progress was made during this period towards the development of a Managed Learning Environment in CMS (Stoneham, 2012).

Unlike many university websites and intranets, the CMS Intranet was not a static structure, but a dynamic, data-driven, role-based site with clear workflows, relevant information architecture and a wide range of management reports. Exception reports were widely used to identify what needed to be addressed in order to simplify quality assurance tasks. Integration with the University's MIS systems meant that common data about students was used, whilst integration with the university's external-examiner online reporting site enabled external examiners to view with ease samples of student work and relevant management reports. The CMS intranet played a key role in several successful accreditation events by the British Computer Society and the QAA.

The CMS School has now been disbanded as part of the restructuring of the University of Greenwich, but lessons learnt from the development of the CMS Intranet are now being used in the Faculty of Architecture, Computing and Humanities, whilst the University itself is working to develop systems and to extend them to a wider audience. There is also, now, the even bigger challenge of bridging the gap between the University's MIS systems and Connected Learning in the Faculty's Collaboration Centres and Partner Colleges around the world. Progress on this, which involves over 30 centres and 3,000 students, as well as progress within the Faculty and at University level, will be reported at a later date.

There are many reasons why intranets do not already bridge the gap identified here in universities. One possible reason is that there are many examples of poorly-governed intranets that are not aligned to business processes, with a consequent lack of 'buy-in' from the users, and these have given intranets a bad reputation (Vizard, 2013). As intranets are generally not seen as strategically important by university management and their potential is not appreciated, they are therefore not properly resourced. In addition, the benefits of a workflow-based intranet are not immediately apparent. In fact, when they are first introduced, workflow-based intranets are often seen as an imposition on academic staff as they force them to follow clear procedures, thereby losing some academic freedom and flexibility. Administrative staff and managers, however, immediately perceive the benefits and, in time, so do most academics. In fact, an anonymous online survey completed by sixty-four CMS staff just before CMS was disbanded clearly showed how much all staff had come to rely on the intranet, and how concerned they were that it might no longer be available. A selection of comments follows:

View of a Lecturer

"Coursework moderation is easy due to the fact that you can see the marks and all the comments for the whole class in one place."

View of a Personal Tutor

"The eTutor system is a particular strong point of the intranet. It collects very useful information on each tutee in one place and allows one to easily keep tabs of conversations and of problems. Communication with tutees or groups of tutees is made very easy by the eTutor system. The same is true of the very similar eSupervisor system."

View of a Programme Leader

"I used to resent having to take registers and enter them online. I use the CMS intranet register system continuously for many different types of task ranging from the mechanistic record keeping through to exploring and testing thoughts about my students and student groups. I don't know how I would do my job without it.

"When considering individual students the most useful features are: the dashboards - graphically getting a picture of a student's courses and engagement across terms and weeks. I use these several times a day and it has helped highlight issues such as late starter poor performance.

"For courses, obviously having a central repository for allocating tutorial groups that the course team can see and use is essential. Again, the course dashboard view full register helps identify problem students before they are an issue and provides evidence of their engagement when needed. Before each class I check and try to put few more names to faces and check the pronunciation of the names so that even for large lectures I can address students individually. It's a cheat because I only add a handful of names and faces each week, but over the course of a term it really has paid huge dividends in the group dynamic."

View of a Manager

"A full audit trail is provided which shows to internal and external quality personnel how the assessment process functions and enables quick responses during this process. It has alleviated the issue of 'lost', coursework as it is all online, It alleviates the issue of different systems and enables Management to identify any areas where support is required."

A View of a User

"I would be lost without the CMS intranet."

To the relief of many, the CMS Intranet has continued within the departments that previously comprised the CMS School and it continues to support the current student cohort.

Acknowledgements

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