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INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

theCN.com: An Academic-cum-Social Networking Online Platform

CourseNetworking (theCN.com or CN)
URL: http://www.thecn.com
Developed by Prof. Ali Jafari, IUPUI: Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (USA) in 2011

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Introduction

In July 2011, Professor Ali Jafari launched Course Networking, LLC (CN) with the objective of changing the way world learns. CN is more than a learning management system, as it not only focuses on course content delivery and management, but takes it a step further by introducing the networking of courses and their content. It has been funded and developed by educators, for educators. CN offers cloud based learning tools and services for online courses. CN mobile applications are available for android and iOS platforms. It is a social networking environment for academic services, which leads to an interesting and encouraging feeling for learners. There is a paradigm shift in the way people across the globe communicate or interact socially using networking media like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Google Plus, etc. The current generation of learners who include these inseparable components in their daily routines are more comfortable in this environment than they are in the conventional learning environments. CN allows the linking of similar courses offered by different schools/institutions, which create an open, free and collaborative learning environment. Membership and course creation in the CN site is free for all. Prominent educational institutions like Indiana University, Virginia Tech and others are funding this project.

Structure

The current CN version 3 (known as *Rumi* v3) is fully functional and includes MOOC program on it. The CN offers its services free of cost, but it plans to generate revenue through customized services for schools/institutions. These include services such as creating mass numbers of user accounts and courses, providing MOOC access, administrative privileges, data analytics on participant activity, learning management and learner information integrations and more. Currently, CN is being used in 65 countries across the globe.

Features

The various features available on CN for instructors and learners are described below:

- **Anar:** This is the most motivating feature for learners on CN. Anar is the Persian name for the pomegranate fruit. It is used as a rewarding tool, much like points/badges. The learner is expected to accumulate a fixed number of Anar seeds every week by participating in various social learning activities in their CN course. This tool helps to monitor the level of learners' activity on a weekly basis thereby facilitating continuous assessment of the learners.

Image 1: Screenshot of a post from the instructor perspective

- **Post:** This feature is available to both, instructors and learners. Post allows users to share their thoughts through simple text, through images, videos, or by attaching files in various formats. There are options to "Like," "Reflect" (comment), and/or "Remember it" for every post and every reflection can again be liked and/or reflected upon by classmates (image 1). This method of threaded discussion leads to the unfolding of a topic to all learners involved in the discussion.

- **Polls and Quizzes:** The Instructor and learners may use the "Poll" feature to conduct surveys with one or more questions. The users can ask classmates' opinions with Yes/No, multiple choice, or scale-based questions. In addition to creating and submitting polls, members can "Like" and "Reflect" on Polls, too. Quizzes can be created by instructors, and learners can attempt to complete the quiz within a specified period of availability. Quiz results can be shared with learners with feedback. The Quiz feature has the functionality to provide a time limit, attempt limit, shuffling of questions, viewing the submissions and grading the submissions. Both Poll and Quizzes can have text/multimedia files, or images as attachments.

- **Task:** Instructors can use the Task tool to structure the entire flow of a course on a weekly or modular basis (image 2). Tasks can be organised to define a sequence of course-based
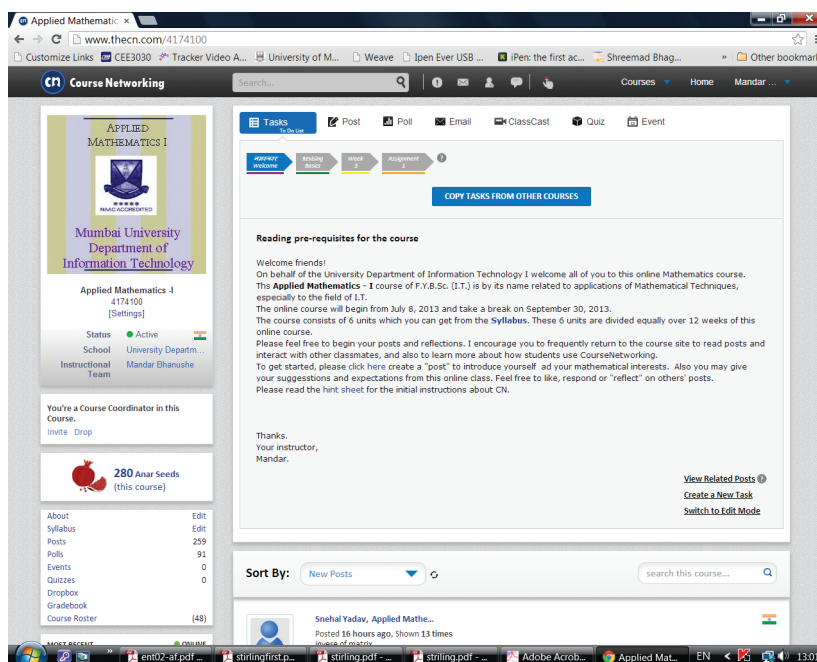
Image 2: Screenshot of *Applied Mathematics I* course welcome page from the instructor perspective

learning activities the learners are expected to compete within that particular week/module. Tasks can be rearranged on the tool bar or copied from an existing course. A highlighting tool is available for instructors to prompt learners to complete specific activities like creating a post or uploading an assignment, which can be graded and added to the grade book on CN.

- **Grade book, Dropbox and Course Roster:** The submissions of gradable tasks by learners can be seen in the "Dropbox" on the course page. Submissions can be graded by instructors in this area and viewed by learners in their grade books later. The course roster contains the data regarding the participation of learners in Posts, Likes and Reflections along with the number of Anar Seeds a learner has accumulated within a course. Instructors can view the activities of each learner individually in the Course Roster (image 3).
- **Chat and Email:** Users can interact with each other one-to-one or in groups through the chat option in CN. Using the Email feature, users can send emails by either using email addresses or the unique CN number (which every CN user gets at the time of registration).
- **Networking features:** Users can create followers and Colleagues to strengthen their academic network. A discussion group called Conexus -which has tools that support communication, collaboration, exchange of ideas and sharing of resources- is available for users.
- **Classcast:** In addition to all these asynchronous networking features, CN also has Classcast (i.e. live video streaming for use by the instructor) feature.

Relevance to the field of distance education and e-learning and overall impact

The R&D team of CN continues to develop and work new features. There is some room for change. For example the home page currently includes all posts from all users a member is connected with, just like the Facebook homepage. The homepage needs to be based on posts related to the course(s) for which a user is enrolled. One more important suggestion is to organize the posts

Image 3: Screenshot of Course Roster

in a course chronologically or on the basis of tasks or weeks, so as to assist the users for quick revision or reference.

That said, in comparison with existing LMS's, -which are housed in closed walls with limited access to learners and instructors within institutions- used to merely manage courses online, CN is an open, free, academic and social networking framework scalable to massive numbers of learners from any place in the world within a single environment. CN does not operate within walls. Learning here becomes extremely entertaining and engaging activity. Amongst the learning theories, Constructivism has been identified as the most suitable one for online learning environments. CN has all the tools that carry learners from a Behaviorist learning environment to a Constructivist one. Engaging learners, exploring the ideas, sharing, peer learning, problem solving, self-assessment, continuous evaluation/feedback, periodic Anar Seeds, and a very robust environment to learn, has made CN stand unique amongst its competitors. Distance education institutes (DEI) and its learners will be the largest beneficiaries of this environment. DEI's can encourage collaboration within and connect their courses to give learners a rich experience to gain knowledge from instructors, and also from their classmates across the world.

CN, as an LMS, is surely one of very useful and helpful virtual learning technology tool available to distance learners and institutions to make learning entertaining and fruitful in achieving its learning objectives.