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Summer 2005

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Hejazi, Alireza and Dilmaghani, Mitra, "Aligning Campus Portals with Learners' Needs: A Preliminary Study on the Implementation of Campus Portals in Iranian Higher Education Communities" (2005). *E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10)*. 51.

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**Aligning Campus Portals with Learners' Needs:
A Preliminary Study on the Implementation of Campus Portals in
Iranian Higher Education Communities**

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Abstract

Effectively developing and deploying campus portals can dramatically increase productivity and profitability of research and education. The cutting edge of this initiative lies in aligning portals with students' current needs. Our study aims at identifying these needs and provides a preliminary theoretical framework for portal developers to benchmark their objectives according to educational requirements. The study is mostly done based on local observations and experience of its conductors within higher education communities in Iran. The result of this primary study paves the way of implementing campus portals in the Iranian higher education communities which will be paced by the authors of the article in the near future.

1. Introduction

E-Learning usually refers to “learning that is delivered or enabled via electronic technology” (Sun Microsystems, 2002). It encompasses learning delivered via a range of technologies such as the internet, television, videotape, intelligent tutoring systems, and computer-based training.

E-Learning is a subset of the larger worlds of both “information technology” and “education and training.” It can be valuable when used as a part of a well-planned and

properly supported education and training environment, but e-learning is not a magic bullet that replaces or renders obsolete existing pedagogical theories and approaches.

Many learning and technology professionals believe that e-learning will have “arrived” when we stop referring to it by a separate name and begin considering it as an integral part of a complete learning environment.

Recent advances in the availability and speed of Internet access and in the power and availability of personal computing platforms have dramatically increased the opportunities for the use of collaborative environments and other distributed learning technologies. As a result, a wide range of new products are being developed and many new companies have entered the learning technology market.

New categories of products continue to emerge, some providing new capabilities and others combining existing functionality into new product configurations. It can be a challenge to determine how these systems relate to each other and how they fit into a complete e-learning environment. The emergence of e-learning does not mean that existing software applications are obsolete. Systems such as Student Administration, Human Resources, and Library Management provide critical components of e-learning environments. The challenge is to integrate these systems effectively with e-learning application services.

This has been done today in what is being called as “Campus Portal.” Campus portals merge a wide range of educational applications into an integrated web-based system. These portals are designed and developed at many modern colleges and universities within recent years and are becoming more popular as useful tools in offering academic services. They are being used by both the current and distant students. Some colleges even offer their portals to their staff as official media for internal communication. These capabilities have proved portals as effective systems of e-learning.

The remaining question is: “How can we align portals with students’ current needs?” Sometimes, adding new contents or services to a portal may answer this question; but, changing needs of students makes the job harder and requires enough flexibility of portals both in nature and usage.

We have made an effort in this study to identify those needs of Iranian students which may be satisfied through implementing portals and to provide a theoretical framework for portal developers to align their objectives according to educational requirements.

2. E-learning Needs in Iran

In 1992, Peter Drucker predicted that in the next 50 years, “schools and universities will change more drastically than they have since they assumed their present form 300 years ago when they organized themselves around the printed book” (Drucker, 1992, p. 97), but what about developing countries? Can be it true again for such states?

The history of e-learning in Iran at present time does not exceed 5 years, yet from a realistic point of view we might say that e-based learning in Iran has had a 3-year experience and even younger.

A successful campus portal should be designed and implemented so that real needs of learners might be satisfied. These needs can be summarized as following according to recent studies (Dilmaghani, Noori and et al 2003):

- Realistic comprehension concerning the process of learning [1]
- Proper implementation of computer hardware and software [1]
- Strong IT education [1]
- New IT infrastructure [2, 3]
- Enough experienced IT professionals [1]
- Realistic point of view or strategic program for higher education [3]
- Sufficient budget and equipment [3]
- Real learning stimulus [1]
- Preparedness for an active information society and new technology [4]
- Stable political, social and economic situations [3]
- Compatible educational resources for e-learning [3]
- Information literacy [3]

We may categorize basic needs for e-learning in Iran in four main classes including: Social & Cultural, Economic, Technological and finally, Academic. All of these categories have their own characteristics which should be addressed in a realistic manner.

3. What are Portals?

At the most basic level, portals gather a variety of useful information resources into a single, “one-stop” Web page, helping the user to avoid being overwhelmed by “info glut” or feeling lost on the Web. But since no two people have the same interests, portals allow users to customize their information sources by selecting and viewing only the information they find personally useful. Some portals also let you personalize your portal by including private information (such as your stock portfolio or checking-account balance).

Put simply, an institution's portal is designed to make an individual's Web experience more efficient and thereby make the institution as a whole more productive and responsive. But portals have an economic and social impact that extends far beyond any basic functional definition. Eighty-nine percent of the estimated fifty-eight million people using the Web in the United States use some type of portal.

It is estimated that over 20 percent of the Internet's retail e-commerce is portal-based. And though portals have historically been developed from search-engine-based sites (e.g., Yahoo, Excite, Lycos, Alta Vista) or ISP-based sites (e.g., AOL, Earthlink, Prodigy), their value goes far beyond a Web page containing a directory of URLs. One author described a portal as a place to start your day and get a little news. It is an epicenter of the Web experience, a "home base," a place to return to when you get lost, a place to keep your information, a place from which to communicate with others, and a trusty guide to all things 'Web.' [7]

4. The Potential Value of a Portal for Higher Education

Portals are also used to support learning communities, which are groups of people with interest in a particular topic or subject area. The portal provides a way to identify people with similar interests and provides collaboration tools and content sharing to members of these communities.

Portals bring together the e-learning tools, content and delivery environment and organize them into logical groupings based on the role of the individual accessing the portal. Each organization using a portal will define and organize detailed roles based on their needs, but some common overall roles are content developer, instructor, advisor, administrator, and learner.

In the higher education space, schools implement these portals as an integral part of the school community and learning environment. Portal technology and services are available from a range of vendors including specialized vendors like Campus Pipeline, course management system vendors like Blackboard, and Student Administration products such as PeopleSoft.

Many students are adults in the real world-they are employees and parents-and certainly elements of a community portal will be critical to building lifelong loyalty and retention. Portals should serve as an important publishing medium for the campus, sending some information to everyone but customizing other information to meet the needs of different segments of the community and allowing individuals to personalize their own portals. Using polling technologies, portals can serve as a valuable tool for real-time institutional research and strategic planning.

Portals look both inward and outward and can provide a powerful medium for campuses to communicate with off-campus constituencies: prospective students; parents; students who work or commute; alumni; business and government partners.

Existing budgets may already support these information management and communication functions, although organizational responsibilities may be diffuse. If a campus is prepared to reorganize around a knowledge management strategy, it is possible to achieve large returns on investment by redefining information resources as a service.

The return on investment should be measured both in terms of cost savings and in qualitative terms, measured by extending and revitalizing the sense of participating in a campus community.

So should a campus develop a portal? Increased efficiency alone suggests yes, but there are other benefits that make a personalized campus portal not only desirable but imperative. We believe that the value of a portal to a campus 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.

In the academic space, particularly in higher education, publishers are making content available in most subject areas. They are repurposing their existing content for web delivery as “course packs” or “cartridges” that run on widely used course management systems such as WebCT and Blackboard. [7]

5. Conclusion

It is obvious that deploying advanced higher education institutes and colleges equipped with modern e-learning facilities is one of today’s urgent needs in developing countries like Iran. But the sustainability of such learning systems depends on making sound and realistic pedagogical strategies. New learning technologies need to be targeted so that they may develop applied learning skills in the students. Today the success of an educational program is highly tied to those web-based applications it may provide for its clients.

There has been a great deal of studies on the methods of developing e-learning in Iran and many challenges or problems have been determined upon the results of such studies. As the writers of this article have proposed, developing e-learning portals could be considered as a solution for the hazed situation of online higher education in Iran. E-learning portals are developed based on students’ real needs in an online environment. Using advanced countries’ experience in the field of implementing e-learning portals

may bring fruitful results for the Iranian higher education community such as: content management, developing IT-based skills, university-industry cooperation, educational competition, self-confidence, creativity and many other useful outcomes. The remaining point is the policy of Iranian higher education authorities toward the implementation of new learning technologies including e-learning portals.

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