
“MEANINGFUL LEARNING” SORTING THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF

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Abstract: Learners engaged in lifelong learning are typically engaged in a variety of formal and informal learning activities and hence are faced with a learner-centric model wherein they are responsible for their own learning processes. Learners become involved for pleasure, leisure, economic or societal reasons. Learner involvement requires effective strategies, for the management and their thematic knowledge domains. However it is difficult to impose such strategies in an environment where learners are seen to act as individuals, rather than as part of a social world. (Crowther 2000). The task of supporting lifelong learning cannot be deferred to a single organisation, but has instead to be supported by different providers, using different technologies and within an environment where the learner’s peer-group is varied in competence, interest and commitment and where the entry requirements are ambiguous. In effect it becomes the responsibility of the individual learner. Can we look to e-portfolios with integrated concept maps to assist the learner in the management, classification and organisation of content within their domain specific e-portfolios?

Keywords: Thematic Portfolios, Personalisation, Meaningful Learning,

Background

E-learning has in the past become synonymous with on-line learning, distance education and other broad-brush terms. However as many students are faced with the prospect of learning “offline” whilst undertaking e-learning courses, we need to look at sustainable strategies to assist them in collecting, organising and managing their personal knowledge repositories. Further as many users of digital material in the form of journal articles, book chapters, presentations etc. are ultimately interested in only a small part of the material provided, we need look at supporting strategies for personalised publishing, whereby a user can find, select, extract and manage pertinent information at the desired granularity, be it chapter, section or page. Finally as “new” users of knowledge repositories often do not know what they are looking for, and if they did they do not know how to find it, we need to look at integrated support for navigation, context searching, multilingual taxonomies, citation management and other knowledge enhancement and learning aids.

Whether online or offline, there is little doubt that as learners with an online presence we are overloaded with information, yet one does question if we are getting any wiser. Much of the available material is uni-functional, impersonal and isolated in that it is delivered in a non-questioning, unlinked environment with little regard to one’s previous knowledge. However this is not solely the fault of the information providers who are not required to qualify their information and ensure that any metadata is relevant and based on well formed taxonomies, folksonomies or even personomies. Often the information overload is due to the limitations of the information seeker, in that they often lack an understanding of information context, coherent search strategies and the relevance of the output of their information harvesting strategies. We can be assured as learners, we will always get a response to queries and will forever be immersed in material that purports to be relevant but often is mediocre to say the least. Further much of the information that might be of use to the learner, is not found by the search engines or not available due to restrictions of copyright on the material, lack of understanding about the technology used in delivery of the material or due to lack of equitable telecommunications access to the material.

Even with the quite visible move to “open courseware” or “open education” where qualified dedicated material on specific subjects is made available by well recognised educational institutions, or with different moves to aid the authentication of material on the web through the use of web portals like Health On the Net (HON), the individual learner is still faced with a myriad of complexities prior to being able to engage in lifelong learning. Even this material needs massaging prior to it being useful

in support of “meaningful learning” in a student centred learning space, which is necessary to support lifelong learning and where the learner moves from institution to institution through informal and formal mechanisms.

Concept mapping based on Ausubel’s (Ausubel, Novak and Hanesian 1986) learning theory, emphasizes the assimilation of new information into the students’ prior knowledge for subsequent meaningful learning. Although concept maps were not originally designed to define learning sequences, the technique was applied to the present knowledge structure of learners to guide them with learning planning and learning object integration.

In a learner –centric domain, facilitating a students acquisition of valid conceptual frameworks in support of their subject specific learning spaces is difficult and often learners will develop immature, incomplete or incorrect models. To assist in correcting these models we need to understand that learning is not an event of mere replacement of old ideas with new ones, the organisation, refinement and differentiation among contexts is also important. (Caravita and Hallden 1994)

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Objectives

Global Library Services Network (GLSN) is actively involved in the creation, deployment and management of “digital collections” to remote communities in support of meaningful and life-long learning. We define remote in terms of geography, culture, language and telecommunications. We have developed a technology platform using open source components that can be deployed to the individual’s desktop. It is referred to as a Personal Learning Centre (PLC) and offers a range of functionality including support for offline and online learning with:

- a good search engine to find things within the individuals knowledge base,
- a capability to manage citations ensuring learners actively manage context,
- support for multilingual thesaurus in support of learners who speak several languages,
- support for copyright management ensuring,
- **integration of concept mapping** as a means of managing and navigating knowledge domains,
- **thematic portfolios** as the overarching envelope with which learners can group learning assets.

The overall aim was to investigate if an e-portfolio desktop framework, managed by concept maps could support meaningful learning in the context of lifelong learning, where learners need to embrace learner-centric models developed in a dynamic framework. Further as the PLC allowed the individual learner to build on and create their own concept maps to look at the capability of using these maps to assist in the identification of knowledge misconceptions at an early stage.

Findings

There is no one fits all solution for the effective management of information with regard to individuals engaged in lifelong learning. A complex mix of issues related to learning style, purpose, content, connectivity, cost, culture, copyright etc. have to be considered, and the most appropriate option found for each individual. The use of e-portfolios with integrated concept maps as an aid to knowledge integration or knowledge enhancement within a learner-centric domain has merit in that it allows for instructor / learner, learner / learner dialogue within a contextual framework, incorporating prior knowledge as a bases for knowledge extension.

The paper will provide more in-depth information on the results of our trials undertaken at The University of Sydney, Australia with particular emphasis on the issue of concept mapping as a means of knowledge management within an integrated e-portfolio environment.

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