
POLE: PERSONAL & ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: Whilst there is an extensive reflection on the role of ePortfolios in the field of education, and to a lesser extent in the world of work, the general focus has been on the *learning individual*. What about *learning organisations*, learning communities or even learning regions or cities)? Does it make sense to discuss an organisational or community portfolio? If yes, what would it look like? What is the relation between individual and organisational portfolios? This work in progress is the result of a conversation between the authors on the link between individual and organisational learning and the need to define a common framework to design a continuous learning space or *learning landscape*, hence the acronym of POLE (Personal *and* Organisational Learning Environment) and the idea that the ePortfolio might be the DNA of this living and developing organism.

Keywords: personal learning environment, PLE, organisational learning

Introduction

While the ideas leading to personal learning environments (PLE) emerged in 2000¹ the term was first coined by Scott Wilson in 2005. The concept was further explored through a series of projects, some of them funded by JISC, and a number of tools were developed as the result of the reflection on the type of services one would expect from such environment.

The concept of PLE is often presented as the mirror of learning management systems centred on organisations. As the article on Wikipedia states: "*This alternative approach developed in parallel to that of Learning Management Systems, which unlike the PLE take an institution-centric (or course-centric) view of learning.*" However, this statement can be misleading. While the PLE shifts the locale of control from the institution to the individual there is not an ontological opposition between 'individual centric' and 'organisation centric' learning.

What we want to explore in this paper is a learning landscape where individual centric (PLE) and organisational centric (OLE) environments, coexist and are mutually nurtured by each other in what we will call a *conversational framework*. In this context, an OLE (Organisational Learning Environment) is radically different from a LMS (Learning Management System) or a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment): it refers to a system supporting the organisation *as a learning entity*, a point of reference for constant transformation; it is about capturing, selecting and connecting knowledge and creating new knowledge through reflection, as support for further organisational transformation.

A PLE is not a complement to a VLE, nor the opposite of a LMS. Both are two concepts belonging to a completely different plane² — the later are primarily *teaching* and *training* aids, supporting the *extrinsic* motivation to learn, whereas PLEs are about scaffolding learning and nurturing the intrinsic natural desire to learn.

The concept of PLE was needed in order to solve a problem: how to move the individual away from the periphery of automated learning management systems towards determining own learning path, resources and context. We believe that the concept of POLE is just as necessary in order to develop a holistic approach to learning and to recognise that individual *and* organisational learning, while of different nature, develop in close interaction providing each a certain degree of autonomy.

¹ History of Personal Learning Environments. In: Wikipedia. [Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_personal_learning_environments].

² According to Wikipedia: "A virtual learning environment (VLE) is a software system designed to facilitate teachers in the management of educational courses for their students, especially by helping teachers and learners with course administration. The system can often track the learners' progress, which can be monitored by both teachers and learners."

What is an OLE?

Like individuals, organisations have an identity – legal, physical and, increasingly digital – constructed through an interaction with a series of networks within a sector, a branch, a supply chain, a group of clients, or an innovation and knowledge network or a geographical space. The ability to achieve internal transformation whilst preserving identity and culture is one of the main aims of organisational learning. And organisations, like individuals, learn through reflection on their own practice, collaborative research and knowledge networks.

Organisational learning needs support. Of course it often already happens without the support of a system that could be defined as an OLE, just as people have been able to learn without, and too often despite, dedicated technologies. Learning organisations can live using paperboards and email, just like students could learn with paper portfolios and books.

How could this concept of an OLE be *reified*³ into a piece of software? What existing systems could be considered as the components of an OLE? We will start with the easiest part: elimination. The vast majority⁴ of learning management systems – open source or proprietary – have nothing to do with OLEs. They are about distributing contents designed for memorisation and multiple choice testing. Most LMS do not encourage, nor enable the creation of new knowledge. Nevertheless, they have their usefulness, just like the reptilian brain does for the human. And OLEs aim to be to LMS what the neo-cortex is to the reptilian brain, what high order thinking is to reflexes. (NOT SURE ABOUT THESE LAST TWO SENTENCES)

After eliminating LMSs – and VLEs – what are we left with? There are knowledge management systems (KM), enterprise resource planning systems (ERP), customer relationship management systems (CRM), HR information systems (HRIS), and supply chain management systems. Are they part of the solution or the source of a new problem that need to be solved?

While it is not within the scope of this paper to enter into a detailed analysis of these different potential contributors to an OLE, we can say at this stage that an OLE will be at the same time similar and completely different from some of the tools that already exist – just like ePortfolios are similar to paper-based portfolios, while being radically different (they are not simply *paperless portfolios*!).

The main difference between OLEs and existing systems will be their relationship: while old organisational information systems were based on the idea of *integration*, OLEs are based on *aggregation* of loosely coupled parts. And this is this idea of *aggregation* that renders now possible a new type of relationship between PLEs and OLEs: in the old systems, individuals were known under their employee number by the HR system, and their telephone number in the company directory; in the new system, people will be known by their portfolios (by their ideas, by what they do) and directories will be the aggregation of the relevant information extracted from individual ePortfolios – a company directory can be created through the aggregation of RSS information coming from the employee's personally managed data.

This approach could greatly improve organisations' efficiency. For example, many knowledge management initiatives failed because employees were being asked to disown their knowledge, by placing it in an organisational repository, while through aggregation, it would be possible to build a system of recognition, relying more on the intrinsic motivation to learn and share than the extrinsic motivation of command and control.

So, an OLE could be described as a system that values all its assets at organisational level, including the identity of individuals, while preserving its own identity. And just like PLEs, OLEs "*can cross institutional boundaries*"⁵.

³ There is nothing wrong with the idea reifying a concept into a piece of software. This is precisely what computers are good at. What is more of a problem is when technology is being used to reify individuals, transforming individuals as some kind of terminals of a software chain, a dis-ease easily spread through LMS and a certain vision of learning/instructional design, systems where learners are not valued as knowledge producers, but mere consumers of pre-digested contents.

⁴ There are few LMS that are not only designed for distributing contents and collecting test results, but to create a conversation with users in order to invite them to produce new knowledge that is collected and shared within an organisation.

⁵ "PLEs include the integration of both formal and informal learning episodes into a single experience, the use of social networks that can cross institutional boundaries, and the use of networking protocols (Peer-to-Peer, web services,

It is time now to attempt a first definition of an Organisational Learning Environments (OLE). Starting from that of a PLE, one could say that:

An Organisational Learning Environment (OLE) is a space where individual personal learning environments are connected and aggregated with other organisational information systems into a single space, contributing to the identity of the organisation and its ability to work across institutional boundaries through the use of networking protocols to connect a range of resources and systems within an organisationally managed space.

In fact, an OLE cannot exist independently from PLEs, while the reverse is not necessarily true: PLEs can live on their own, without the need for any kind of OLE. This is why we feel that in order to reflect the relationship between OLEs and PLEs, an OLE is in reality a POLE: no real organisation learning is possible without individual learning.

ePortfolios, PLEs, OLEs and POLEs

So far we have discussed PLEs, OLEs and POLEs and the ePortfolio was mentioned several times. What is the relation between individual ePortfolios and PLEs and that of organisational ePortfolios and POLES?

PLEs and POLEs are about learning and learning itself is about constructing meaning and identity through interactions – with other individuals, networks and organisations. ePortfolios have also been described as supporting the construction of identity [Grant 2006]. Are they different names to describe the same objects?

First of all, ePortfolios are not just objects – they are also processes, but that is not the point. They are part of a learning ecology where individuals *organise*⁶ their ePortfolio while organisations *manage* a series of ePortfolios. In a recent paper [Ravet 2007] an ePortfolio system was described with 3 different entities:

- **The ePortfolio** – a document constructed for a specific purpose / audience,
- **The ePortfolio Management System** (organisational) – consuming and producing ePortfolio parts to support / as result of different processes – planning learning, managing competencies, accreditation of prior learning, etc. It is an aggregation of individual ePortfolios,
- **The ePortfolio Organiser** (individual) – also consuming and producing ePortfolio parts to support / as result of different processes – planning learning, managing competencies, accreditation of prior learning, etc. It is an aggregation of distributed heterogeneous data.

While the definitions of an ePortfolio Management System and that of an ePortfolio Organiser look remarkably similar, they are two completely different (assembly of) tools. For example, both need identity management, but the solutions, although complimentary, are not the same⁷:

- **OpenID** is well suited for individuals who want to federate different accounts and identities as well as controlling the sharing of personal attributes with others. This might be well suited for *ePortfolio organisers*.
- **Liberty Alliance** is well suited for organisations that want to create circle of trusts across organisations, so a person can federate several identities/accounts and federate services to control the sharing of personal attributes with other members of a *circle of trust*. This might be well suited for *ePortfolio management systems*.

And PLEs like POLEs also require identity management to allow a person to move seamlessly across their various components. Like ePortfolios they also need to provide facilities to collect, select, reflect, connect, share, get and provide feedback. So what is the difference? Why do we feel the need to use different concepts?

syndication) to connect a range of resources and systems within a personally-managed space." (ibid note).

⁶ collect, select, connect, reflect, get feedback, publish, plan future learning, etc.

⁷ NB: both approaches offer the same type of services (or will soon do so), and have libraries which make the implementation of digital identity management an easy task; the major difference is policies: any organisation can decide to implement OpenID, and in doing so will allow a person to federate his/her identities, while the implementation of Liberty Alliance requires policy agreement with the organisations that are member of a circle of trust.

To use a biological metaphor, one could say that the ePortfolio is the DNA of the PLE: it is what makes the PLE what it is. Without an ePortfolio a PLE is nothing more than a glorified LMS or VLE. The *raison d'être* of a PLE (POLE) is to create the learning space/landscape where the person (organisation) will construct his/her (its) identity, the ePortfolio being the synthesised representation of this identity leading to further learning and transformation. The ePortfolio is a DNA in constant mutation, reflecting the constant transformation that learning carries.

Conclusion

ePortfolios and PLEs are two different but complementary things. POLEs are the enablers of the expression / construction / transformation of one's ePortfolio and identity. ePortfolios are the mirror that helps individuals and organisations to reflect on their learning, which has been enabled by POLEs.

Notes

Introduce EPSS as organisational learning: first order: online help; second order: capture experience to transform it into knowledge.

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