Building Communities via a Learning Landscape

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Summary

This is a work in progress:

- Learning Landscape
- Elgg
- RedGloo
- Where next?

Learning Landscape

- A Learning Landscape brings together the strengths of:
  - Electronic Portfolios
  - Social Networking
- A Learning Landscape is usually based on an individual's interests, skills, reflection and competencies
- By sharing these aspirations and thoughts other members can offer support and encouragement

Elgg

"Elgg is an open source software platform designed to allow people to easily connect and share resources…

Users establish personal digital identities and connect with other people, collaborate with them and discover new resources through their connections."

http://eduforge.org/projects/elgg

"This is Elgg.net, a learning landscape. Why not check out what people are saying right now. Find others with similar interests and goals."

http://elgg.net

RedGloo

- A Learning Landscape based on Elgg for first year students at the University of Reading in the School of Systems Engineering.
- Set up in 2006 with a fellowship from the Centre for Career Management Skills, a national centre of excellence
  - enhancing the development of student career management skills across the Higher Education sector.

http://www.rdg.ac.uk/ccms

RedGloo Objectives

Currently aimed at new students (Freshers), with the following objectives (among others):

- To actively engage them in the important activity of self reflection early on in their time at university;
- To encourage them to make friends and interact with their peers and to try to facilitate mutually beneficial eRelationships;
- To participate in an online learning community in which they can proactively share enthusiasm for academic, social and career related interests;

Preparation

Over the summer of 2006

- Elgg was adapted to work within our university system
- Existing students were recruited to test
  - Various bugs and problems were identified and removed
- The testers then start to populate the Learning Landscape
- Exercises were developed to introduce Freshers to the Learning Landscape

Freshers Week

Freshers Week

- Lots of communities created
  - But many not used subsequently
  - A few were very active:
    - Cake lovers
    - Chocolate
    - Coffee
  - Others were more sources of information or links to other sites:
    - Robot wars
    - Reading LAN
- Tagging didn't work well
  - The students did not understand tags
  - Searching on tags was laborious

Term 1

- During the term some other communities were formed and became active:
  - Games developer
  - .NET
  - Web Comics
- Regular posters reported they had difficulty deciding when to post to a community and when to post to their personal blogs

Students Reflecting

One of the aims was to encourage the students to reflect

- Initially the students were asked to reflect on how they were developing their programming skills
  - Only a small number did when there were no marks for doing it
  - When a very small mark was offered over 60% of the class did
    - These reflections provided the teaching team with much more information than evaluation forms

Reflections

As I reread these old blogs writing about the silly things I didn't know, like format specifiers, I realize how much I have learned. I started out having never programmed before, and today I was impressing my physics lab partner by showing him all the cool programs that I have written this term …

…I think the best way to develop programming skills is to actually do exercises, programming is more a way of thinking, breaking things down than it is just learning syntax.

…The progress of the course was a bit relentless, a practical and tutorial submission every week certainly kept my focus on programming, to an extent that I sometimes resented since I wanted to be able to focus in a different area…

I'd never imagined that I'd be studying programming when I went to university, nor did I imagine that I would become addicted to the subject …

... i found all of the course a great building block for what's going to come in the future. Some of the basics i thought could have been explained better, or have had more time to have gone through, like pointers, char manipulations and structs…

…Seriously though, the course has been quite cool, being a first time programmer (unless you count visual basic in excel in AS) I've learnt a lot, and sometimes even had fun, most difficult I think was structs, and pointers were a bit funky at first too. …

Learning Community

A number of students have started posting learning material.

- Based on taught courses
  - Re-presenting the material covered in classes;
  - Adding explanation to how particular concepts work;
  - Tutorials on a variety of topics
- Non-course material
  - New programming languages;
  - Games development;
  - Cakes;
  - Compilers

Programming

Found this weeks practical challenging, but not beyond my capabilities, didn't do the Alpha Sting, which I'm a little annoyed at myself about, but need to do a bit more reading

Some people have commented here that they didn't quite understand some of the more complicated features.
So here we go - I'm going to try explaining each feature mentioned in the lecture in a little more detail:
…**Function overloading**: Overloading a function means making more than one function with the same name ...

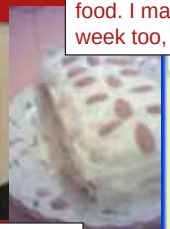
Seems the learning curve has gone somewhat terribly steep. Went over vectors somewhat quickly ...

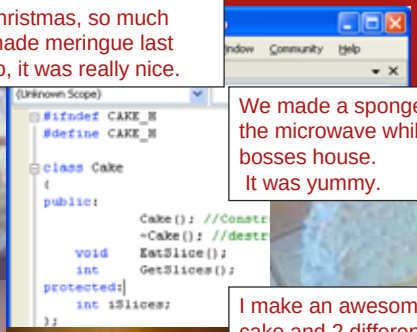
Ok, Quite a few people are managing to create the vectors by blindly following the lecture notes rather than understanding why what their writing works. This is bad!! for that purpose, hopefully the following should be useful for those who want to know why whats happening is happening.

***Vectors**...*
Think of them as self-aware arrays in a very basic sense. both have start and end points, both have elements starting at index 0, and both are LIFO structures. The

Cake lovers …

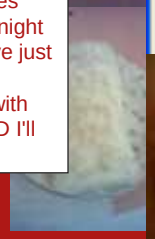
Mmm Christmas, so much food. I made meringue last week too, it was really nice.





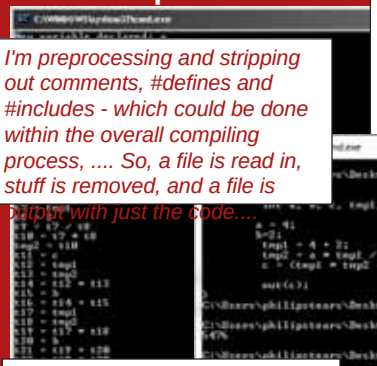
We made a sponge cake in the microwave whilst at my bosses house.
It was yummy.

Me and fellow housemates decided to do some late night cake making today. We've just recently made a good ol' fashioned sponge cake with icing sugar...and Twirls :D I'll post the recipe later :)



I make an awesome carrot cake and 2 different styles of chocolate cake, which also, ain't half bad. ;) I'm hoping to attempt a Chocolate Carrot Cake in the coming weeks…

Compilers



I'm preprocessing and stripping out comments, #defines and #includes - which could be done within the overall compiling process, ... So, a file is read in, stuff is removed, and a file is output with just the code....

I've just spent somewhere in the region of 9 hours with Rob coding a parser for a subset of the C language which mostly came about because quite a few second years are doing this at the moment, Rob had never written one himself, and I am fascinated by compiler design…

…the mighty compiler compiler… I'll generate some optimal code…

…A lot of the night/morning was actually spent writing grammars on the whiteboard as Philip needed to first teach me compiler theory so I could write the code that actually did the work - and in the end we ended up doing a pretty good job of pair programming, swapping when coffee was needed and watching over each others shoulders as the code mounted up….

Communities of Practice

- Some of the participants are starting to act like members of Communities of Practice (CoPs)
- Wenger identifies a CoP of consisting of:
  - "The domain …
  - The community…
  - The practice …
    - Developing a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring …
  - It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community."

http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm

But…

- The facilities we have taken from Elgg into RedGloo are not sufficient to support CoPs
- There is no standard list of technologies that are needed to support CoPs, but we find ourselves wanting:
  - An index to resources (such as student produced tutorials)
  - FAQs
  - More detailed profile
  - Forums/discussion boards
  - Peer review tools
  - Wiki style collaboration

Influencing factors

- The University
  - Committed to Blackboard
  - Acceptance of other tools
  - Budget
- Competition
  - Face Book
  - Live Spaces/Myspace
  - Bebo
  - Live Journal
  - The real world

Options

- Moodle
  - Possibly with Elgg integrated
- Blackboard
  - With Building Blocks
- Competitor
  - Facebook, Live Spaces,…
-
-
- Build our own

How to decide

- This is work in progress.
- What would you advise?

Thank you for listening

Visit RedGloo at:

http://redgloo.sse.rdg.ac.uk/