

THE REALITY OF VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

*In the last 10 years, education has benefited from a real e-revolution most schools and universities now have a functioning **Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)**, at the heart of their teaching and e-learning programmes a virtual 'shadow', if you will. A VLE, or learning platform, is an online system that allows teachers to share educational materials with their pupils via the web. Examples include Moodle, Web CT and Blackboard. For a student to be able to access a 'Virtual' room as either a duplicate or extension of their physical classroom is a clear advantage for learners and teachers alike. Every educational establishment ought to integrate a VLE into their lessons and allow it to become second nature to learners and educators outside of the classroom. A virtual classroom is a learning environment created in the virtual space. As virtual classroom offers a flexible self-paced, self-centered learning is very help for the students. Students come to a place nearer, use the technology and even know how the technologies are very important in the daily life and also the computer simulation used in wide variety in almost all fields. There by educational goals and objectives can be achieved.*

Introduction

The proliferation of personal computer combined with the internet has precipitated far reaching changes in the society. Electronic communications and digital networks are transforming the way work and reshaping personal communication and entertainment. This transformation has a tremendous effect on the need opportunity to learn. Unfortunately the transmission model still dominates higher education has changed little, E-learning as the gradual development phase of this transformative medium and is yet to experience its explosive effects in higher education. We are experiencing e-learning in its early forms and have much to learn of inherent capabilities and the creation of a new learning ecology'. E-learning transforms education in ways that extend beyond the efficient delivery or entertainment value of traditional approaches.

E-learning cannot be ignored by those who are seriously committed to enhancing teaching - learning in higher education. The web as a communications tool has been developed and refined to stimulate all of the formats undertaken using earlier technologies - including the face-to-face classroom.

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

A virtual learning environment is a term that refers to technology which supports teaching and learning; it involves collaboration, communication and content tools, as well as providing students with an online personal learning space. It enables teaching and learning to take place any place at any time - a college / university with no physical boundaries.

According to Dillenbourg *et al.* (2002) Virtual Learning Environment

1. It is a designed information space;
2. It is a social space: educational interaction occurs in the environment, turning spaces into places;
3. It is a virtual space that is explicitly represented; the representation of this information/ social space can vary from text to 3D immersive words; where students are not only active but also actors; they co-construct the virtual space;
4. It is not restricted to distance education; they also enrich classroom activities;
5. It integrates multiple tools, hetero-generous technologies and multiple pedagogical approaches;
6. It overlaps with the physical learning environment.

Content Management System (CMS)

It performance the functions of a Content Management System (CMS) but also keeps track of students' progress as they work through the learning resources it stores. A VLE can be considered part of a managed learning environment MLE if the data it records on students' progress are passed to the college or school management information system (MIS). **Components and Features of VLE**

- The different components of the VLE are as follows:
- Notice -board / bulletin board;
- Course outline (course structure, assignments, assessment dates);
- E-mail facility;
- Conferencing tools (asynchronous conferencing discussing);
- Student home pages;
- Metadata (ability to add metadata to resources);
- Assignments (ability for tutor to create assignments);
- Assessments;
- Synchronous collaboration tools (such as whiteboards, chat and video conferencing);
- Multimedia resources (accessing, storing and creation);
- File upload area (ability for students to upload their resources to a shared area)

- Calendar.

The features VLE 2.0 are as follows (Weller, 2007)

- Personalized;
- Continual updating;
- Students as co-creators;
- Based around services;
- Reusable content and components;
- Lightweight programming;
- Social software;
- Harnessing collective intelligence;
- Open architecture.

Functions of VLE

- ✓ Providing Controlled access to curriculum that has been mapped to elements that can be separately assessed and recorded.
- ✓ Tracking student activity and achievement against these elements using simple processes for course administration and student tracking that make it possible for tutors to define and set up a course with accompanying materials and activities to direct, guide, and monitor learner progress.
- ✓ Providing support to online learning, including access to learning resources, assessment, and guidance, the learning resources may vary from self - developed to professionally authored and purchased materials that can be imported and made available for use by learners.
- ✓ Facilitating communication between the learner, the tutor, and other learning support specialists to provide direct support and feedback for learners, as well as peer-ground communications that build a sense of group identity and community of interest.
- ✓ Providing links to other administrative systems, both in - house and externally.

The typical learning that any VLE system facilitates are (Weller 2007):

- ✓ Community of practice / socio-cultural learning;
- ✓ Resource - based learning;
- ✓ Peer learning;
- ✓ Content - led / instructive learning;
- ✓ Collaborative learning;
- ✓ Instructor - led leaning;

VLE: Analysis, Perspectives

- ✓ A 'Herran (2000) suggests that there are four perspectives from which a VLE system should be analyzed:
- ✓ Administrators - scalability, value for money and integration with existing systems are important for the users.
- ✓ Technician - robustness, user base, technical support and ease of maintenance will be significant.
- ✓ Course developers or Teachers - customizability, flexibility, and the integration of legacy materials will be paramount.
- ✓ Learners - consistency, accessibility and quality of design will be main concerns.

Advantages and Disadvantages of VLE

As with any technology used in teaching and learning, VLEs have no intrinsic educational value in themselves. The way in which online activities are designed and delivered can add value and increase effectiveness. O'Leary has been given some commonly perceived advantages and disadvantages of using VLEs.

VLE can help teaching and support staff's management and deliver a variety of daily tasks, including:

- General class administration and organization.
- The creation of lesson plans using existing resources.
- Assessment and monitoring of students.
- Allocation and marking of on-line assignments.
- Discussion and support with students online.
- Submit and track their assignments on line via a personal home page.
- Contribute to and participate in discussions with classmates and other schools via the various conferencing tools.
- Work at their own pace within and out of school this is particularly beneficial to learners with special educational needs, such students in hospital or children unable to attend regular classes for health reasons.
- Facilities self-learning at the learner's convenient time and place.
- Electronic publication is cheaper and faster.
- Facilities faster and cheaper and cheaper delivery of material.
- Promotes better teacher student interactivity.
- Easy online delivery of materials.
- Easy to use for both students and teachers Widen students access on and off campus to learning materials and resources.

- Offers flexible support for educators who do not communicate with the students.
- Has the potential for new ways of learning and teaching such as active and independent learning which make use of online communication, online assessment and collaborative learning.

The following are the disadvantages of VLE:

- ❖ The student and tutor need reliable access to a computer and internet.
- ❖ The student and tutor need basic information technology skills.
- ❖ Training is required for both tutor and student.
- ❖ The development of high quality learning materials is time consuming and expensive. Online tutoring can be more time consuming than face to face tutoring.
- ❖ Learning is a social process and many people enjoy face interaction.
- ❖ The use of the large virtual learning environments is expensive and may demand additional equipment and specialized staff.
- ❖ Some learning environments require state of the art computers and the most up to date browser.
- ❖ Blended solutions can be expensive as they may involve the development of expensive online learning resources and providing technology based support as well as face to face support
- ❖ Can become a dumping ground for materials not designed to be delivered online.
- ❖ Copyright and IPR of materials need to be considered.
- ❖ Off campus access to hardware and networks can be problematic for both students and educators and raises issues of equality. Stability legislation and accessibility to online materials also need to be considered.
- ❖ Need to plan online support carefully to avoid.
- ❖ Such independent learning still needs to be guided and supported. Appropriate training and ongoing support is still needed for both students and educators.
- ❖ Lack of student motivation.
- ❖ Many people find it daunting, especially at first.

Conclusion

Virtual Learning Environment as a range of systems that comprise features like a designed information space, a social space being a place, participants that are active and present actors. Using a virtual learning environment does not guarantee effectiveness per use. It must integrate with rich pedagogical scenarios and these scenarios must profit from its various facilitating features. Applying the virtual learning environment concept any sort of internet technology (classic web sites, learning management systems, 3d environments, etc.) entails the danger of ignoring interesting avenues of research and development that could and should enrich education (Dillenbourg et al., 2002) there have been many advances in the world of education and the VLE is

by far the most exciting and provocative evaluation to happen yet. The VLE, if used effectively, changes the entire support is dedicated to improving and enhancing the teaching and learning experience not only for the student but for the teacher as well.

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