Toward a learner-centered system for adult learning

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present an e-learning system that integrates the use of concepts of virtual learning environments, personal learning environments, and social network sites. The system is based on a learning model which comprises and integrates three learning contexts for the adult learner: the formal, instructional context, the personal context for learning management, and the social peer context. The paper outlines how the Open University of the Netherlands (OUN) implemented this model in the OpenU system and has piloted this system within the field of a MSc Program in the learning sciences.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper describes the design and development of an integrated e-learning system following an ADDIE-based strategy and shows how the resulting system has been piloted.

Findings – The result of the design and development process is an integrated e-learning system that was piloted with the OUN.

Research limitations/implications – The limitations of the paper are that the paper reports only on the learner perspective. The paper does not report on the implication for faculty and staff. Additionally, a key question that needs further research is how the integrated approach will affect learner dropout rates.

Originality/value – The value of the paper is that it provides an integrated e-learning approach, bringing together the personal, formal as well as informal context into one system.

Keywords Social networks, E-learning, Integration, Adult learning, PLE, VLE, Learning networks

Paper type Case study

Introduction
In 1984 the Open University of the Netherlands (OUN) was established as an institute for open higher distance education for adult learners. Its major goals were to offer adult learners a second chance to higher education and to provide an alternative route to higher education in order to reduce the load on costly traditional, face-to-face education. To meet these requirements OUN adopted a typical distance-teaching model with a high degree of freedom for its students. The dominant pedagogical model was that of guided self-study: steering and guidance were embedded within the study materials delivered to students, so that very limited interaction between teachers and learner was required. This model contrasts with modern social constructivism approaches emphasizing the importance of social interaction for the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Schunk, 2012).

The OUN model has been stable over the years, although the internet revolution completely changed the technological instrumentation. As it is the case within most distance teaching universities as well as regular universities the e-learning