E-Learning Frameworks & Tools:
Is it too late? ... the Director's
Cut

ALT-C

University of Exeter
15 September 2004

Derek Morrison, Director
Centre for the Development of New Technologies in
Learning
University of Bath

AURICLE www.bath.ac.uk/e-learning/auricle.htm

"An invitation to tender for work under a new JISC 'e-learning Frameworks' programme will see the emergence of a technical framework to support the development of flexible learning systems for UK HE and FE."

Source JISC Invitation to Tender document for a E-learning Models Deak Study (para 7) in making reference to the skilling JISC programme E-Learning Technical Framework and Tools.

"This strand of the e-Learning Programme aims to produce a technical framework designed to support e-Learning, and in particular to provide a basis for pedagogic diversity."

"... the Information
Environment as it is proposed here aims to offer the user a more seamless and less complex journey to relevant information and learning resources."

Source: JISC Information Environment Development Strategy 2001-2005 http://www.jsc.ac.uk/index.clm?name=strat_leds0105_draft2

"... the view that digital resources are inherently distributed and will never be delivered by a single service provider."

Source: JISC Information Environment Development. Strategy 2001-2005 http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=strat_leds0105_draft2



Institutional teaching and learning strategies have been written, MLE/VLE investments have already been made, integration with information and records systems has occurred, contracts have been signed, training programmes are designed, faculty and students have already been 'trained', content is already being 'locked-in', reputations are at stake; and everyone has got used to one system.

" We've built a good relationship with our vendor over a number of years and don't want to disturb that ..."

"... the application of the new technologies is generating a myriad of demands for reinstitutionalisation of the university as a far more 'corporate', one might even say concrete, kind of organization ..."

We need e-learning environments which don't assume learning material, content, resources, objects and services have, of necessity, to be embedded within a single monolithic system. Resources & services should be separate from the vehicle(s) which mediate their delivery.

But ... for many at the coalface elearning has become their VLE vendor's product ... and from a central support services perspective the less diversity to support the better. So how are the vendors responding to this vision of uncoupled, decentralized, or distributed resources and service provision?

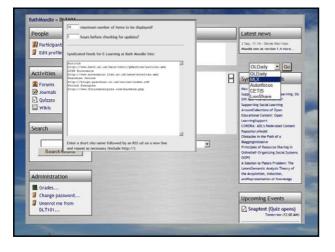
"Under the partnership, unique among course management vendors, WebCT users will be able to perform targeted searches across the 10,000 learning objects indexed on MERLOT to create their customized online courses in a timely manner. They will pinpoint WebCT-ready content produced by faculty, institutions and publishers, including IMS standards-based learning modules, question databases and quizzes. WebCT users will also be able to easily identify training content designed to help faculty more effectively use WebCT e-learning systems."

"The first Blackboard Building Block to be released will be a portal module that uses RSS content syndication to aggregate news about and links to the learning resources most recently added to MERLOT. Additionally, a Blackboard Building Block is planned that will enable instructors using the Blackboard Learning System(TM) to search the MERLOT repository directly from the Blackboard interface. From the search results, they can select specific learning resources and embed links to them within their Blackboard course."

Source: Blackboard Press Release (1 Sep 2004) http://www.blackboard.com/about/press/prview.htm?id=608612







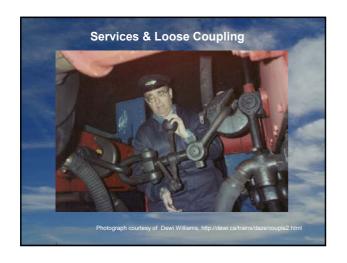
"As part of Release 2.0 of the Blackboard Content System, institutions can now store and describe learning objects in a central open repository. Through the Blackboard Learning Object Catalog, faculty will be able to locate and import high quality education content for use across course sections, departments and even institutions ... The Learning Object Catalog is intended to facilitate the sharing of learning resources among members of the Blackboard community, making it a logical tie-in to the MERLOT initiative."

Sources: Blackboard Press Releases (17 August 2004)
http://investor.blackboard.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=177018&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=604710
and (1 Sep 2004) http://www.blackboard.com/about/press/prview.htm?id=608612



"Loosely coupled services, even if they use incompatible system technologies, can be joined together on demand to create composite services, or disassembled just as easily into their functional components. Participants must establish a shared semantic framework to ensure messages retain a consistent meaning across participating services."

Source: http://looselycoupled.com/glossary/loose%20coupling



What's a Web service?

"A Web service is any piece of software that makes itself available over the Internet and uses a standardized XML messaging system ... For example, a client invokes a Web service by sending an XML message, then waits for a corresponding XML response. Because all communication is in XML, Web services are not tied to any one operating system or programming language - Java can talk with Perl; Windows applications can talk with Unix applications."

Source:http://webservices.xml.com/pub/a/ws/2002/02/12/webservicefaqs.html





Portal/Services v VLEs?

"In theory, a portal should sum up all on-line resources of an institution, including the Virtual Learning Environment(s) (VLE) ... Trouble is, many VLEs already have functions that are quite similar to what a portal would provide - usually just not as powerful and as flexible as those of, for example, uPortal ... VLE functions like calendaring, chat, authentication or group management can not easily be taken out of VLE software... Ultimately, the channel idea at the heart of portals ought to be flexible enough to push content in and out of VLEs. Who then gets to publish the user's favourite page that displays all that content is perhaps not so important ..."

Kraan W (2002), CETIS, http://www.cetis.ac.uk/content/20021126163827

So how are the vendors going to survive, or flourish, in a monolith breaking services model?

"... leverage Web services to embed e-learning functionality into business applications"

"The .NET certification lets our clients know that Isoph Blue functionalities can be easily integrated into existing Web sites, intranets, and Web-enabled applications ..."

"Web services made it easy for us to use Isoph Blue as a core component of the portal learning center. Isoph Blue provides the functionalities, and we control how they are presented to our users..."

So far so good ... but ...

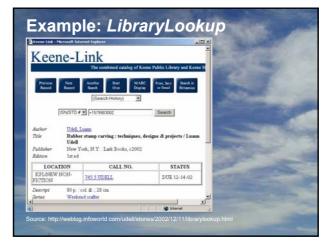
"Isoph Blue is generally provided on an application service provider (ASP) basis, meaning that hosting, technology management, upgrades, and support are included in the pricing"















... key decision makers within institutions may not be receiving the message and may be placing greater emphasis on bringing themselves into line with the enterprise decisions already made by other institutions in their regional or profile groupings.



