

RE-TOOLING ONLINE

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INTENTION

This paper begins to explore the practical and pedagogical challenges faced by Institutions seeking to deliver online learning solutions. Most organisations, notably those in the public sector, cannot provide the financial and human resources to support an unlimited number of technological platforms for developers to use. Consequently most are limited to one or two carefully chosen, or randomly selected, licensed products and a collection of freeware. Academic staff, themselves just learning the new language of online instruction negotiate, or battle, with IT support staff over the choices made and frequently it appears that individual champions dictate policy. In this paper we examine the experiences of one institutional programme under way that is consciously offering technological solutions with reference to cost, supportability and pedagogical flexibility.

CONTEXT

The Academic and Professional Development Programme (APDP) is a new project within the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University (UK). Still in its first year it aims to disseminate best practice in the use of ICT for education to an internal Open University audience. Its primary focus is on the development of writing skills for active learning, assessment in open educational systems and quality assurance. Its remit is limited to pedagogical practice, rather than procedural training. However the APDP is in the unique position of being able to create content for an internal audience whilst also developing different delivery mechanisms and styles in a way that Faculties cannot with fee-paying enrolled students. The lessons learnt from the experiences of delivering APDP courses can then be fed into 'student' programmes where appropriate.

PROGRAMME

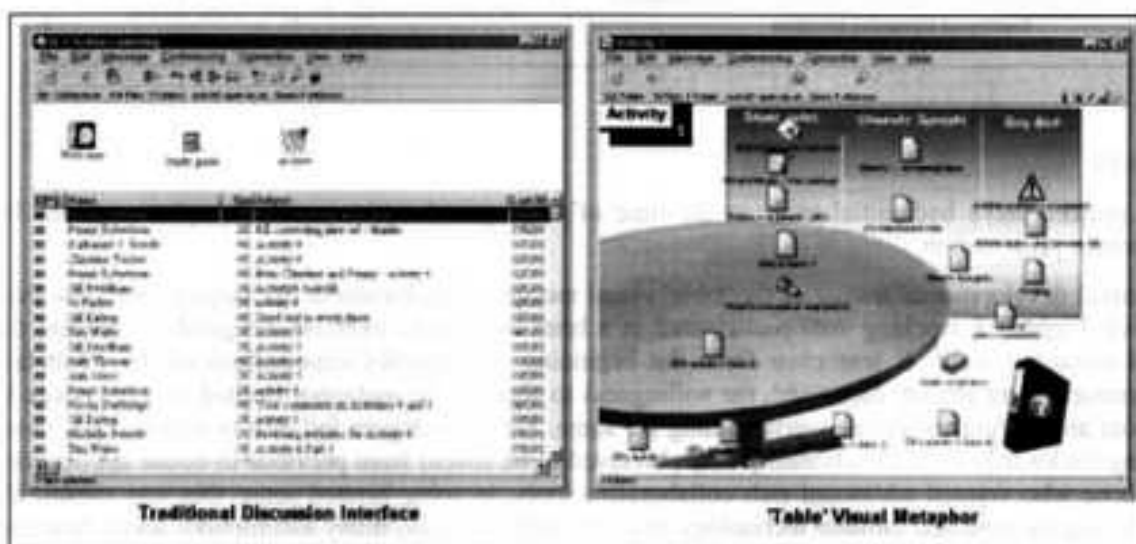
The APDP is designing its delivery of programmes to ensure the constant development of new teaching resources but also, importantly, to assess the current use and full potential of currently adopted technologies by exploring the potential for customisation at a user interface level rather than at the code or programming level. Behind this pragmatic approach, limiting developments to available technologies, is the desire to embed the re-use of course content. Programmes on Course Use and Re-Versioning (CURVE) and another on knowledge management and exchange (Knowledge Network) already exist within the Open University. The APDP is seeking to incorporate the philosophies of both these project into its development, ensuring that information delivered as Courses in staff development is both 're-usable' and available in a multitude of formats for later delivery.

EXPERIMENT

One example of this has been the APDP's exploration of the messaging system used to support many OU courses. The university has adopted Centricity's 'FirstClass' conferencing system to support its discussions, or 'conferences'. The reasons for choosing FirstClass are beyond the scope of this presentation, suffice it to say that scalability, security and cost all play a part. Whilst the University continuously evaluates the appropriateness of this software against other possibilities, and individual departments and course teams explore alternative threaded discussion applications, FirstClass is the current institutional choice.

The Institute of Educational Technology had operated an in-house threaded discussion application prior to the institutional adoption of FirstClass and as such has many institutional memories of its advantages and disadvantages. It is in this atmosphere that new ways of using FirstClass are being explored.

The first of these projects uses FirstClass as a document-centred exchange environment, rather than as a discussion forum. The ability to upload documents exists as part of the basic programme, including the facility to drag-and-drop files directly into the FirstClass desktop client. The usefulness of this functionality is often overlooked. In association with a colleague, Nicola Durbridge, we developed a visual metaphor to explore this document centred environment. Rather than using the flat discussion structure of FirstClass we established a shared desktop and notice board within a 'conference' window. This visual metaphor was designed to involve participants in an active exchange centred around documents on the 'table'.



The second project also seeks to draw the discussion and course materials more closely together. This involves embedding FirstClass inside a web browser environment alongside course content. One of the criticisms of the existing FirstClass client environment is that it separates the discussion and learning materials, producing some redundancy in postings. By bringing together the course content in one frame and associated discussions in another it is envisaged that one might overcome learners perception of passive or disconnected discussion. One disadvantage of this approach is that the web based version of the OU's FirstClass is visually unattractive, occasionally displays spurious code, and does not provide the facility for offline reading of postings. The perceived advantage is the close relationship that tutors can draw between the course discussion and the course material itself.



RESULTS

Both projects have had initial trials at the time of writing and some practical implementations by conference presentation.

The initial developmental testing of the 'table' visual metaphor for document exchange proved less than positive. Eight IET teaching staff participated in a brief two weeks exercise designed to evaluate the visual metaphor itself. It was clear from the beginning that peoples expectations of the FirstClass environment were already engrained, the willingness to share in the metaphor limited, and the desire to seek out absent functionalities overwhelming for some. Staff developers fell into two categories, those looking backwards to the functionality they perceived to be absent from previous in-house applications and those who wanted additional rich collaborative tools. In some limited sense this was useful. By introducing existing and familiar technology in a very different way, many assumptions about how and what it could be used for were made apparent.

The dual screen approach to embedding discussions has its first implementation in a live course programme in October/November 2001.

The intention over the medium term is to experiment with ways of delivering course material using a variety of established technologies. The use of Microsoft office products, existing Cold Fusion server provision and supported software like FirstClass are all being explored. This pragmatic approach seeks to derive the maximum pedagogical benefit with the minimum investment in resources. The project is developing models for the evaluation of delivery modes against which future projects can be measured.

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