Re-learning how to help professionals share their practice

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Online tools developed in Europe have created completely new approaches in pedagogy -- the science of education.

A student taking an oral examination can be filmed and their performance ‘marked’ with written, sound or visual comments using a multimedia tool called LimSee3. The resulting multimedia document can be shared so that other teachers and examiners can develop consistent approaches to marking.

This innovative tool is just one of a series developed during the Europe-wide Palette project to help ‘communities of practice’, such as teachers. Communities of practice are disparate groups of people - usually professionals - who strive to define, shape, share and manage a body of

knowledge.

“There are many online collaboration tools, but most of them are oriented towards enterprises, not communities,” explains Christine Vanoirbeek who coordinated the researchers in Palette.

The semantic web plays an important role here. It is about more intelligent web-searching. It enables web searches based on interlinked concepts rather than simply searching for strings of letters.

Behind the semantic web are ‘ontologies’, databases of linked and searchable concepts. These webs of linked concepts rapidly become complex and are difficult to maintain and develop. One of the objectives of Palette was to get communities of practice to build up their own ontologies as part of the development of their subject area.

Many of the Palette tools exploit the advantages of Web 2.0 social networking technologies or the powerful document-searching capabilities of the semantic web. For instance, Vanoirbeek and her colleagues on the EU-funded project worked on ways to ease document-sharing across the internet by eliminating the need to exchange emails or open a series of applications during a collaboration.

New tools

The eLogbook Web 2.0 social software is a tool for collaboration and learning in communities of practice. eLogbook offers community members a networking and communication platform, a repository for sharing and managing resources, a task and activity management system, as well as a community structuring tool allowing the definition of roles and distribution of tasks. eLogbook also provides different types of notifications (via email, or RSS feeds) in order to motivate contribution and sustain collaboration.

Palette's CoPe_it! tool creates online personal or collaborative workspaces. Users can share ideas and comments or add multimedia documents. The created content can be shifted about and reorganised by the users - even users with little experience. The idea is to enable discussion and collaboration, creating something new from collaboration within the workspace.

Another tool, Sweet-Wiki combines the easy interaction of a wiki with the power of the semantic web. A wiki is a website which makes creating and editing any number of interlinked web pages via a web browser much easier.

Working together - people and technology

"The big challenge in the Palette project was to make these tools interoperable, so that the tools could be combined and information reused," explains Vanoirbeek. "In fact, the goal of Palette was twofold, to imagine and develop new tools, and then to observe the manner in which provision of those new tools affected the way communities of practice worked." That required the adoption of standards to which all tools would conform in order to achieve full interoperability.

Palette also developed a Service Portal, distributed under the name myWiWall. The portal comprises multiple widgets giving access to different Palette services available to a community of practice from a web-browser window.

The content of a Palette widget is a 'summarised' version of a Palette service. Widgets permit some functions of services to be fully or partially executed by the end-users. When they wish to use more sophisticated features, they can launch the full version of the services in a totally transparent manner.

A wide collection of widgets is already available, ranging from simple clocks and notepads, to more complex services such as RSS feed readers, shared schedules or semantic Wiki search engines.

The power of the Palette project, and its success, came through the cross-disciplinary nature of the groups working on it, from IT researchers to education specialists.

“Beyond the technical and IT developments that the Palette services represent, there was substantial work performed by the pedagogical researchers in terms of learning approaches for a community of practice,” points out Vanoirbeek.

More information: Palette project - palette.ercim.org/

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