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mySchool!: School's out for portals

Jason Schofield talks to Daniel Weiler about mySchool!, Luxembourg's new education portal that is currently being used by 10,000 teachers with a target of 40,000 registered users by the end of 2002

What is the history behind mySchool!?

MySchool! is part of the wider European Schoolnet initiative that is trying to federate all educational content throughout Europe using educational web portals. Our idea was to build a national web portal to be compliant with the European Treasury Browser initiative. In 1995, when the internet was accessible in schools in Luxembourg, we had a virtual learning environment. But our main concern was that when students and teachers were at home they could no longer access educational resources. MySchool! allows both students and teachers

to access educational information, anywhere and anytime, through a browser environment, without having to install any client software on their PCs.

How does mySchool! work in practice?

The portal tries to cover three main issues:

- Information and knowledge distribution;
- Communication and collaboration, for both students and teachers;
- Application sharing.

Who manages the content?

We have about 30 content maintainers on the teaching side.

Each content maintainer is responsible for an individual teaching subject, and is governed by the curriculum committee of the ministry of education. We are in the process of preparing a similar scenario for students (this will be available in November 2002) so that they can actively participate in the content management process and identify sources that reflect their cultural perspective. There are also plans to roll this out to parents and involve them in construction of the portal environment.

How interactive is MySchool!?

There is quite a bit of interactivity. Students will be able to participate in discussion forums, share documents and send SMS messages.

Who will police the portal?

Every student will have an individual account, issued by the ministry, so that they cannot access the portal anonymously.

One part of the responsibility lies on the content maintainers side – the content maintainers are co-ordinated by a general content manager who approves all published information.

If you go up the hierarchy of the mySchool! portal there is an executive office that has overall responsibility for the portal environment.

Is e-learning a substitute for classroom based teaching?

No. It can only be complimentary to traditional classroom scenarios. We try and promote the portal as a complimentary methodology and plan to offer office courses that are not on the curriculum, such as Access or Excel. If a student wants to sign up to a course that is not on the curriculum, they can do so free of charge.

E-Learning is often considered to be a cheaper method of teaching – is this the case with mySchool!?

While cost cutting is not the primary motive, we used to invest quite a lot of money in cd-rom servers that were only accessible on school premises. Replacing this with XML-based content has opened up access and saved money.

Will mySchool! change the face of teaching?

We have been online now since October 2001 and our experience shows us that we need another two years before all teachers in Luxembourg understand that there is a portal called mySchool!. It is a very slow process. Most of our users are not used to the high levels of

personalisation that a corporate portal offers – they just compare a corporate portal to a traditional web site. So we have to spend a lot of time training teachers to use system.

What are the barriers to implementing a successful e-learning programme?

One of the main issues we faced was securing end user buy in. Some would not log in. Others complained that it was too complicated. Some said it was too simple. So we had to find the right balance.

We have about 6,000 referenced sources in the portal but some people say that they can't find useful information in the portal – so we need to better understand the end user and categorise resources so that users can find information within two clicks.

To do this, we have created themed entry points so we can target well-defined groups with well-defined interests.

MySchool! is also considered to be a competitor to other ministry initiatives.

How did you overcome log-in problems?

We put teasers on the homepage that, when clicked on, directed the user towards their relevant community area (there are different portal entries for each subject taught). Teachers quickly realised the benefits of having a personalised workspace.

What feedback have you had from teachers?

MySchool! was actually born out of feedback from teachers, which showed us that both teachers and pupils are more receptive to web content than to documents or PDF files. They like to consume information so prefer to access information online.

Does Luxembourg's Ministry of Education have its own portal?

No, they have a website with all the problems that a website can bring. There is no content management system behind the site, which is managed by just one person. Because of this it is never up to date.

We have many e-government sites and the people administering them realise that they don't have the time to populate them all. This in itself has been a learning curve that has influenced the mySchool! project.

In terms of technology and e-learning in general, what do you believe will be major changes over the next year?

With the increase in bandwidth I think online media will soon be available to everyone. This will also impact the mobile sector that is becoming much more active - PDAs, laptops, etc.

How will mySchool! develop?

Put simply, our main objective is to become a service provider, at the content level, for education in Luxembourg.

Going forward, there are also plans for an e-government zone for teachers, where they can access material such as formulas, laws and texts.