

Title: Fronter open learning platform.

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1. Abstract:

This is a presentation of a concept more than a product. Obviously it comes across as a product with 90 various interacting tools but a presentation of the product – Fronter Open Learning platform – is just a snapshot. The real value lies in how we develop from day to day. In this presentation we will present the concept and visualize with product examples.

Fronter has a vision on which we will do another presentation on this conference. And on this vision we develop a VLE with our customers more than for our customers. Fronter reference groups come together and decide, prioritize and in some cases design new functionality. Fronter development team will then develop the desired functionality with full support of relevant international technical standards. This concept will ensure the customer that the VLE will comply with the fast changing challenges on the Universities.

One very relevant issue is how we embed and/or integrate so called web 2.0 web tools in the VLE. How can the student drag his/her work into the University scenario and how can the University assess and evaluate the external developed material.

2. Background

In developing learning platform the last 10 years we have discovered the IT barriers and challenges the Universities have been facing in relation to the Learning Management Systems. 5 – 10 years ago it was very much integration of administrative data i.e. student data, e-mail, calendar issues, etc, but in recent years it has been more integration of applications either direct integrated or indirect integration of output.

In these years students are more and more IT active (study active) in web solutions outside the control of the University. Tools like Blog, Wiki, social networks, etc. have a huge influence on the usage of IT in a personal and social relation as well as in a professional relation. There is a tendency that the lines between these various aspects of IT use and learning is getting more and more erased. But if the use and importance of these so called web 2.0 solution is acknowledged, it calls for an interaction of these tools – or more precisely the students work – into the University learning platform.

The typical LMS or VLE is in basic structure closed hierarchic systems and the web solutions are typical open and democratic structured. How can the VLE compete with these web 2.0 solutions? How can the Universities embed the social web tools in the Learning platforms and at the same time document and evaluate the students work in order to meet the formal demands of assessment and evaluation.

3. Alternatives

Fronter Open Learning platform is continuously developing in the hands of our customers. It is the best from both worlds – the traditional licensed software with

stability and Service Level Agreements on one side and the user driven development and the open standards from the open source environment.

Fronter is based on LAMP / open source (Linux, Apache, MySql and PHP) which is a cornerstone in a low cost business model. But Fronter is typically hosted by a hosting partner providing a wide range of hosting facilities and solutions with a guarantee on an agreed service level.

Fronter offers a direct customer involved product development. It is a concept where the customers interact with Fronter product staff in order to prioritize and design new functionality. There are two new Fronter releases every year – June and December – and in relation to those releases there are national reference group meetings.

But **open** is also referring to the open international standards which are a key value in the Fronter strategy. Fronter will always support the relevant open international standards within the learning platform sphere. It affects the systems ability to integrate as a whole and it applies to detailed functionality i.e. the well known standard SCORM.

A typical criticism of the VLE is closed and hierarchic structure and lack of ability to embed the web tools and that this fact is a limitation to the implementation and the consolidation of the VLE. Fronter disagrees. The open source, open development and the open standards can and will meet the challenges of embedding the external functionality. The student's work is his or her portfolio and it is critical data and needs to be handled as such. It needs to be stored and secured with a Service Level Agreement and follow some line of standards to meet the demand sharing portfolios.

Fronter is doing this continuously and to give an example: Fronter included a Blog tool in the VLE last year. But instead of developing an internal blog with limited accessibility, Fronter developed a Blog client which can be used with all Weblog sites on the web if it is supported by the standard *Metablogger*. This provides the student with the option to publish in Fronter, on the web or both. The blog can be assessed and be a part of the students portfolio.

Fronter is not just selling a product but instead Fronter is looking for partners who can interact and co-develop a VLE to meet the future challenges. Another lesson learned is the democratic inclusion. This is not only in the developing process but also the set-up and structure of the VLE. Make sure the VLE structure is flexible enough to support a widely democratic use of the VLE and embedded / integrated applications. If it is kept too hierarchic, the system lacks flexibility and will most likely not meet the users demands and therefore the University learning platform risks to loose out to informal alternatives.

4. Conclusion

This is a presentation of a concept more than a product. Obviously it comes across as a product with 90 various interacting tools but the product presentation is just a snapshot. The real value lies in how we develop from day to day.

The key words are:

Open development

Open standards

Democratic inclusion