Implementation of Course Management System in an Institute of Higher Learning: A Case study

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Abstract

Learning Management Systems are becoming more popular among all institutions of higher learning. One problem all institutions face is the selection of appropriate solution fit in to organization's requirement. While selecting a system the organisations have to focus on all stakeholders rather than focusing just on the features of the system. Many at times the institutions focus on various utilities available in these systems than the user aspects of the system. This lead to non-usability of such system. Many systems fail irrespective of possessing advanced features due to the non acceptance among the users. Many at times they are not because of the poor design but the failure of team spirit in some organisations. The present case is a study on the experience of implementation of such system in an institute of higher learning. There is a mismatch between the motivation behind introduction of Learning Management System and the motivation of the users to use it for manifesting their power over the supportive staffs ie. the system administrators.

Introduction

The ICT capacity of educational and learning institutions is the focus in the recent years. Even the projects working with local communities are also showing interest in experimenting with new technologies. Using Information Communication systems for higher education are becoming more and more important. Use of Learning Management systems in higher education is becoming more important in recent years. The kind of time required for the classroom teaching along with the continuous monitoring is becoming more and more difficult with the non availability of trained personnel for such activities. This necessitated the use of online tools to assist the faculty members teaching higher education. The paper is discussing about one such initiative of implementing Learning Management System in an institute of higher learning in Engineering in India. The Organisation selected for the study is a post graduate engineering institution in south India. The institute was established in 2000. The sanctioned strength of the students is 60 per year. In total there were 10 faculty members. The number varied from the 4 to 10 during 2000 to 2007. All faculty members are either with a Diploma in Engineering, or Bachelors Degree in Engineering or Masters in Computer Application or Sciences or with PhD in Engineering, Sciences, and Social Sciences. The experience of the faculty members varied from 0 to 15 years.

The institute is setup in a campus with a builtup area of 10,000 Square feet located about 23 kilometers from the main city in South India. The institute was surrounded by Software and

HardwareIndustries. The students who were admitted for the course are either having a bachelor degree in engineering or a masters in sciences. Age of the students ranged from 21 to 40 years. All student had nasic knowledge of computers. The total experience of students varied from 0 to 12 years. The classrooms were equipped with a complete audio visual facility along with online support.

The Learning Management System implementation

The Learning Management System or Course Management systems were tried from the beginning of the institute 7 years ago. First a Content management system which was free was tried for teaching. Later it has become a legacy software with big price tag attached to it. The experience was not encouraging. There was a gap between the understanding of the tool by the students and the faculty. Then an attempt to develop a tool in house was emphasized. A team was formed for development of such a tool. The team had lost focus from Course Management and ended developing a Library or content management tool. The features it had were mainly to upload files, message boards and group kind of content management system. This later been tried as a tool for work flow. Then the organisation has tried another learning management system developed by the same team. When the new system was received the faculty felt the online test, assignment submission and online evaluation were missing in the new revised version compared to the earlier one. This lead to resistence among the faculty members. Later the new tool was used for group communication or repository for archiving the organisation's documents. There were also faculty members trying out tools such as Yahoo Groups and Google groups for teaching. This lead to failure of any single tool for teaching or course management. Later a free software for learning been installed and tried. The tool called moodle which was popular among various institutions tried. This had some acceptance among the students and faculty members. Meanwhile, a set of faculty members who were promoting their own tools such as CVS and SVN. These were generally used for programming and then tried as a Content Management System. This actually demotivated the system administrator who were losing their focus. Then the organisation has jumped to Web 2.0 tools. This is now a way of trying out wiki as a tool to teach the Graduate students. Parallelly there were also ERP installations done in the organisation.

On all the above the database used were different. None of them were talking to each other. Once a faculty member creates a question bank, it died with the system in which it was created. If some files were uploaded they had to be downloaded locally and later to new system using a desktop. The only homogeniety found in all the above tools was all were using server client architecture and web browser based interface. This was not sufficient to sustain any system.

The outcome:

Even though the students were exposed to different technologies, there were problems when same set of students have to work in different tools at a point of time. This lead to conflict of interest. The faculty were identified based on the tools he or she uses. The faculty members were trying to show their power by using more sophisticated coding tools for teaching. There were faculty members who were slow to adopt were discouraged. Even though it was a learning for the system administrators, not one technology followed led them to confusion. This actually lead to rise in turnover rate among the system staffs.

Lessons learnt:

When a system like the one mentioned is used or even developed, one has to be careful in involving all the stakeholders. It is not just informing the stake holders, but they have to understand the problems in detail. The technologies may lead to power polarisation in an organisation. One such case is the out come of the introduction of a number of technologies. The ultimate goal of teaching has to be emphasized and not the technology going to be used. Even it is an engineering education, it does not mean one has to redefine the process again and again as per the whims and fancies of some individuals. This may also lead to corruption as it is a way to introduce new suppliers time to time. The culture of every new faculty coming in suggesting new technology will not be a good thing and will not be sustainable in an organisation. In spite years of teaching in standalone applications, lack of integration and compatibility none of the new generation organisations seems to have learnt anything out of it. It is ultimately the persons who makes the decision matters than the strength and weaknesses of the system.

Conclusion

From the above it is clear that the success of implementation of Learning Management System is not just dependent on the sophisticated features but other behavioural factors in the work environment. It is also important to note that the politico-social determenants play a vital role in the success of such implementations.

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