

Sabbatical Report

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Title: “What strategies can be used to successfully implement a parent portal and introduce student e-portfolios through a LMS”

Acknowledgments

My special thanks to all the ICT and e-learning Lead Teachers and Principals who talked with me, and responded so helpfully and openly to my questions.

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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways school leaders can improve the introduction and implementation of a parent portal and e-portfolios into their schools through the schools Learning Management System (LMS). Many schools have taken the bold steps in introducing managed learning environments in their schools through the use of ICT tools and applications. The targets and goals associated with these initiatives in schools are fairly much the same. By gathering information from those who have already introduced parent portals and e-portfolios in their schools I seek to gain enough knowledge to avoid unexpected problems and pitfalls when I set about completing similar initiatives myself.

Rationale & Background

Our school has recently completed a three year Regional ICT Cluster contract. The contract was awarded to 32 primary, intermediate and secondary schools in Marlborough, which was nearly 100% of schools in our area. Being a member of the clusters management team I have been involved with the planning and implementation of the clusters goals. We named our cluster CyberSavvy which aptly suggests a delicate blend of forward thinking Marlborough schools joining together to infuse the essence of effective e-learning!

The CyberSavvy Cluster had three main programme outcomes. One goal was ‘to boost learning through the adoption of common Learning Management Systems’. The Primary schools in the cluster were focused on implementing into their schools the Learning Management System called ‘KnowledgeNet’. The three secondary schools were focused on implementing ‘Moodle’ as their LMS. Within our cluster a handful of schools were designated ‘lead schools’ and had what equated to about a one year headstart on implementing an LMS in their schools compared to the remaining schools in the cluster. I am a principal of a school that has started off implementing our LMS as an ‘adopting school’.

A key feature of the LMS we were using was the option of setting up a parent portal as a means of sharing student learning to a wider audience as well as a method of giving feedback or comment by parents and fellow students back to the learner. The parent portal was also a way of recording

ongoing learning and reflection by the student as well as being a way of increasing the engagement of both the student and their wider family in the students learning.

Methodology

Before looking further afield at other schools, I wanted to take a better look at my own school community and obtain reliable data from our parents and families regarding internet and computer access in homes. Being a decile 5 school I anticipated that accessibility to the internet in homes would be quite high and that nearly all homes would be on high speed internet access. To gather this information a survey was constructed and distributed to all our school families - 155 in total. Over a period of three weeks we received 111 completed responses which was 71% of our families and below expectations. The survey was a 'pen and paper' survey that required very minimal writing and was brought back to school by the children with the reward of house points being offered to encourage the children to get their families survey returned back to school.

The next part of the inquiry was to talk to local principals and their e-learning lead teachers. Being the principal of an '*adopting school*' within our ICT cluster, as opposed to a '*lead school*', I wanted to inquire how local schools were making best use of their new Learning Management System (LMS) to engage their students and their parents. The primary schools in the cluster opted to buy in to KnowledgeNet as the LMS of choice and the secondary schools continued to advance their use of Moodle as an LMS.

To gather relevant information I constructed a bank of questions and arranged to meet and interview colleagues. The questions were:

- i) When did you begin to introduce your Parent Portal?
- ii) When did it 'go live'? Was it the whole school or part of the school?
- iii) What do you believe are the key actions that ICT leaders need to do to ensure a successful introduction of a LMS PP?
- iv) What are the key beliefs? Why did you choose to introduce a parent portal?
- v) What difficulties did you experience ?
- vi) How did you overcome these problems ?
- vii) What are your next steps towards improving your use of the PP?
- viii) What do you see as the benefits of your new PP?
- ix) Do you use e-portfolios within your LMS?
- x) How do you use your LMS to improve student learning and attainment? (learning journals?)
- xi) What were the challenges faced with their introduction?
- xii) How did you overcome these challenges?
- xiii) What would you do differently looking back the introduction of your LMS?

Findings & Implications

School Survey

The school survey provided our school e-learning team with some valuable information about what was happening at home in relation to access to computers and how they were being used. From the responses received we were able to identify the following key findings.

- ☼ half of our families had two or more computers at home, be it laptops or desktops., with close to 90% being connected via a broadband connection. 2% were still connected via dial-up leaving 8% who were not connected to the internet at all.
- ☼ 62% of families had internet access at their place of work.

- ☼ Less than a third of our parents viewed the schools webpage in the last month with 13% indicating they have never viewed the school website at all.
- ☼ 74% of families connected to the internet used the home computer to connect to the internet at least once a day while a further 14% accessed their home internet every second day.

The conclusions reached were that the vast majority of our families were connected to the internet and demonstrated to us their familiarity of the internet through the fact that nearly all families used the home internet daily and that they were using a more efficient and faster broadband connection. Engaging our parent community via the internet was certainly a viable idea.

Interviews with Colleagues

All of the lead school principals I talked to were 'early adopters' to the use of a LMS. Prior to committing to an LMS all schools interviewed were focusing on using ICT's more effectively as tools to enhance student learning. There was a strong financial and professional commitment from schools, Boards of Trustees and senior management teams to improve the staffs e-learning pedagogy in their schools and a commitment to financially resource the development of the skills necessary for a 21st century learner to succeed.

During the interviews a pattern of beliefs and actions soon became apparent as schools implemented a parent portal into their school community through their LMS. No schools visited had formally adopted the use of e-portfolios with their students with all their energies being centered on fully implementing their parent portal. All principals were very happy to share what they, and their ICT and management teams, had learnt as they introduced a parent portal. There were two distinct stages of implementation, one being preparation work before the portal 'going live' and the second being the work required as the community and school used the portal to improve learning.

Key Learnings - Pre Parent Portal Launch

- ☼ The most obvious was to simply have a plan and do not attempt to 'wing it' and hope for the best. Having no implementation plan would set the launch down the path of failure and it would create needless issues with staff, children and parents. Make the move to have a parent portal part of the schools strategic plan or annual plan. Ask yourself and the Board "can we justify creating the portal against our school vision? Ensure you have the Board of Trustees behind you ideologically and financially.
- ☼ Identify the key staff members who will have roles in the management and launch of the portal. The senior management team and the ICT / e-learning lead teachers will need to guide pedagogy development with the staff through professional staff development. The staff/teachers who work with the schools network and infra structure will need to ensure the school is hardware capable to meet the demands of the LMS and the children who will be using the network, ie is the schools wireless network capable, is there suitable student access to computers?
- ☼ consider having a school wide appraisal goal set around the use of the LMS to record and present children's learning. Draft some measurable targets that staff can work together to achieve.
- ☼ plan to have a parent evening to introduce the portal to the school community. At this occasion you can give out user names and temporary passwords to the parents as well as explaining the expectations the school has in terms of how parents use the feedback facility of the portal.

Key Learnings - Clarifying the Schools Beliefs

- ☼ A parent portal within an LMS motivates student learning through engaging not only the student in their own learning but also their whanau.
- ☼ A parent portal can be a great vehicle for collaboration between students and the wider community. It allows for improved 'anytime, anywhere' learning.
- ☼ A parent portal holds the potential for establishing an ongoing record of student achievement and learning that is easily accessible for parents (a form of digital portfolio). A parent portal in an LMS could potentially change the way a school reports to parents on student achievement.
- ☼ You can provide many incentives for parents to visit the portal by exclusively posting information that is only available through the portal i.e. student assessment data taken from the SMS, weekly newsletters and daily school notices.
- ☼ Children will encourage their parents to visit the portal to view their learning journal entries.

Key Learnings - Difficulties Experienced

- ☼ The LMS is as only good as the information put into it. One main difficulty many schools faced was the ability of the LMS to communicate directly with the schools current SMS. The need for a clear and efficient way of transferring data from the SMS to the LMS is very important because it keeps the LMS's database up to date and current with student names, contact and classroom/year level details. At the time of writing there were plans by the LMS owners to improve this by improving the software so the various SMS systems can seamlessly transfer data automatically over to the LMS. Schools in the meantime were getting into a good routine of updating student data and information manually into the LMS.
- ☼ The challenge of having a very wide range of individual teacher skills was always going to exist. All the schools attempted to focus on quality teacher up-skilling prior to the portal rollout as well as during the initial portal rollout period. This was primarily done using the expertise found within the school working with small groups of teachers once specific learning needs were established.
- ☼ Along with all schools spoken to having mixed levels of expertise and ability within their teaching staff, all schools also experienced the difficulty of having some teachers who were quite reluctant and opposed to the new learning needed. Principals and lead teachers spoke of having at least one or two teachers who were reluctant to use a parent portal and consequently were reluctant to learn how use the LMS to achieve a positive rollout. It required focused attention to turn this attitude around and to help reduce the underlying fears that the reluctant teachers had. Most work was centered on changing teachers personal beliefs and providing a robust support and training framework for them so resistance was reduced and cooperation was enhanced.
- ☼ Some schools experienced technical difficulties getting Parent Portal logins working prior, and in some cases, after the Portals launch. The method of distribution of parent login details varied between schools but principals did stress the need to check the parent login process worked and worked consistently before launching the portal.
- ☼ After the launch of the parent portal, and the subsequent increase in pressure on teachers to keep their students LMS pages updated and current, the need for increased computer accessibility by students quickly became apparent. The challenge of not having enough devices for the children to use while at school was a difficulty experienced by all schools interviewed.
- ☼ The speed of home networks and whether homes were connected via dial-up or broadband connections proved a problem to some families connecting to the LMS. The other difficulty

added to this was that some homes simply didn't have any internet access despite the family owning a computer.

- ☀ A number of teachers prior to the introduction of an LMS system in their schools operated a class blog site or their own class webpage. Part of the planning of the parent portal rollout was how were blogs and websites going to be used alongside or within the school LMS and parent portal.
- ☀ The difficulty of sustaining change was no different to the task of introducing a parent portal into a school community. Keeping the parents engaged in reading and responding to the student entries through the portal was a challenge to all schools.

Key Learnings - Overcoming Difficulties

Many of the difficulties or challenges outlined above were overcome or minimised through good planning and team work from the management and e-learning lead staff. Most of the difficulties and problems experienced with a parent portal roll out were foreseen so strategies were put in place to mitigate them. Actions itemised below played a big part in helping the portal launch being a positive experience for the school and parents as well as going a long way towards making the use of the portal facility sustainable over time.

- ☀ Parent evenings were organised to introduce the parent portal to the school community. Parents were given the background to the development of the LMS in the school and why a parent portal was developed and what was hoped to be achieved by using the portal. Accompanying the evenings presentation some schools produced a booklet that outlined the practical aspects of how to login and access the portal. Also in the booklet were guidelines on how to use the portal, the etiquette involved and how to write parent comments on children's work that are going to support their child's learning rather than set it back.
- ☀ Make time to share the content of the parent evenings with support staff and those teachers who regularly come into the school as relief teachers. Everyone who works with children's learning in the school needs to be 'on board' with why the school has a parent portal within its LMS.
- ☀ To maintain parent interest and use of the portal, teachers emailed individual parents when a new posting was made on their child's page. Schools also used their weekly newsletters to promote the parent portal as a way for parents to engage in their children's learning and how they can help through positive written feedback.
- ☀ Most schools made it a formal requirement for their teachers to have all their children upload a post at least twice a term.
- ☀ Within the LMS used, there was a provision for the administrators of the schools LMS to monitor and analyse parent login data. This helped school ICT lead teachers see patterns in usage across the school as well helping identify where more support is required to increase parent usage.
- ☀ To help the very few parents who didn't have access to a computer, or were still accessing the internet via dialup, one school placed a computer in the office foyer for parents to use. One school also looked at ways of getting secondhand computers into the homes that didn't have one through the use of community charity groups.
- ☀ Schools were in no rush to introduce any form of e-portfolios throughout the school after the introduction of the parent portal. There was a real desire to make sure the parent portal achieved the goals the schools had set before embarking on a new e-learning initiative. All schools were happy to use the learning journal function of the LMS to present children's work and comments about their learning.
- ☀ Solving difficulties with interoperability of the software with other SMS's and iPads was more difficult to solve. Continued communication with the LMS software developers will hopefully see developments in getting better integration with common SMS's. The inability to

edit and create on some LMS sites using the iPad (due to the LMS reliance on FlashPlayer) will hopefully be solved in future LMS updates. The use of portable devices by children to upload work is increasing and application developers will need to take this into consideration in the future.

Future Steps

- ☼ It has been recognised by schools that further work needs to be done with teachers helping them with classroom management so children do get the time they need to upload work and to critique and give feedback on fellow students work. The issue of not enough computers or devices in classrooms is pertinent when trying to get maximum use from an LMS in a cloud based environment. There is a definite desire by schools to have children and their families use the LMS outside of normal school hours and to contribute to their own, or their friends, classroom learning that way.
- ☼ Once good LMS use routines are established and entrenched school principals are keen to explore the use of e-portfolios to collate and record student learning and attainment. It is recognised that our parent community also need to get used to the idea of contributing online and being more directly involved in their children's learning through an online environment.
- ☼ Encourage the developers of the LMS applications to continue to listen and make their systems adaptable to the needs of the students and schools they provide for.

Concluding Comment

When I began this inquiry I believed that it was quite possible to introduce both a parent portal and an e-portfolio framework into a school at the same time. It did not take me long to realise that this personal expectation was not possible if both implementations were to work. Consequently my inquiry work began to look more closely at implementing a parent portal through an LMS, and less investigation was done looking at e-portfolios. To introduce a parent portal into a school is exciting as well as challenging. It requires a lot of thinking and pre planning if unnecessary and possibly divisive problems are to be avoided. All people need to be considered - staff, the children as well as their parents. All of them have a set of diverse learning needs. These needs will require attention if the portal is to be used effectively and be as successful as the goals and aims stated. I hope the results of my inquiry can help a principal and their e-learning team launch and sustain a successful parent portal which improves the learning in their school and leads their teachers into improved 21st Century teaching practices.