University College Sealand builds a personalised collaborative Web 2.0 learning environment with IBM and Opus Neo

Overview

**The Challenge**
Formed by a merger between 18 educational institutions, University College Sealand (UCSJ) needed to consolidate its legacy IT systems – and saw this as an opportunity to implement a new collaborative, Web-based learning environment that would help staff and students interact more effectively.

**The Solution**
UCSJ implemented Neo.Dashboard from IBM Business Partner Opus Neo ([www.opusneo.com](http://www.opusneo.com)) – a solution built on IBM Lotus Quickr and IBM Lotus Sametime that leverages Web 2.0 technologies to provide personalised, relevant homepages for all staff and students.

**Key Benefits**
- Neo.Dashboard encourages users to engage with each other and with UCSJ by combining personalised information about courses, deadlines and events with user-defined content (RSS feeds, Google Gadgets and so on).
- Lotus Sametime instant messaging helps students and staff communicate effectively online, and supports distance learning.
- Shared workspaces and discussion forums help students learn collaboratively – enabling them to define what is relevant to their learning experience.
“The IBM and Opus Neo technologies are enabling us to offer a new kind of learning experience which would simply not be possible with traditional educational methods.”

Michael Jungfalk
Project Manager
University College Sealand

With more than 8,000 students and 700 employees, University College Sealand (UCSJ) is one of the largest higher educational institutions in Denmark. Formed as a result of a merger between CVU South and CVU Zealand, UCSJ is consolidating its operations to four main campuses in the Sealand region and integrating staff and students from 18 different educational institutions into a single organisation.

“The creation of UCSJ has been a great success, but naturally consolidating all these institutions created some challenges,” explains Michael Jungfalk, Project Manager at UCSJ. “For example, in the IT department, we inherited six different online learning systems, all of which offered different functionalities and required different skills to maintain and support.

“To save costs and reduce workload, it was important for us to simplify the IT landscape – and we also saw this as an opportunity to rethink the situation and define what a truly 21st century online learning environment should offer.”

Rethinking the learning environment
The UCSJ team drew up a list of requirements and began searching for IT consulting companies that could help them realise their vision.

“There were two things we were absolutely convinced about,” says Michael Jungfalk: “First, the system had to be flexible and easy to develop and extend – so we were keen on open technologies and Web 2.0. Second, we were not interested in solutions that couldn’t prove that they offered the functionalities we wanted. ‘It will work in our next release’ was not what we wanted to hear.”

Finding a way forward
One of the few companies capable of meeting all the requirements was Opus Neo, an IBM Business Partner based in Sealand.

“We were keen on IBM technologies because they have been tested in enterprise conditions and are reliable and scalable,” comments Michael Jungfalk. “At the same time, by working with Opus Neo, we would get the flexible support and close working relationship that a smaller company can provide. We were also impressed with Opus Neo’s credentials in the education sector, and they had good references to prove that their Neo.Dashboard solution would offer all the functionality we required.”

Neo.Dashboard is a Web-based collaboration suite that integrates information from multiple sources and presents it to each user in a single homepage, tailored to their unique needs. For UCSJ, Opus Neo has customised the solution to combine personalised content about courses, deadlines, events and administrative information with user-defined content drawn from other places on the Web.

Combining content
“For the solution to be a success, we need to get the students to visit their dashboard page every day,” explains Michael Jungfalk. “So we wanted to make it display whatever content they want, instead of just imposing our own content

Key Components
- IBM Lotus Quickr
- IBM Lotus Sametime
- Neo.Dashboard from Opus Neo
on them – making it more relevant to our students. The open architecture of Neo.Dashboard makes this easy: students can embed RSS feeds, Google Gadgets, Facebook, Flickr – whatever they want to see. And at the same time we deliver relevant information about the College – tell them what is happening in their building that day; remind them about when they need to hand in an application form or complete an assignment; or give them access to online workspaces and discussion forums and instant messaging."

Role-based access means that all information delivered through the portal is highly targeted: for example, a student will only get news about their own department, building and course, unless they choose to subscribe to content about other parts of the College as well.

A new way of learning

“The insight that this solution has given us is that people seem to learn more effectively if you enable them to define what is relevant to them, instead of imposing a rigid structure upon them,” explains Michael Jungfalk. “For example, we regularly see the phenomenon of ‘lurking’: If I am using an online workspace to teach some of my students about something, there are often twenty or more other students ‘lurking’, following the session. I don’t necessarily know them, or even know what course they are doing or what they are gaining from my teaching – but clearly they feel that they are deriving some value from it, and it is helping them with their own studies.

“This is a really exciting development because it shows how online environments can enable a complete revolution in the way teaching is actually done. The IBM and Opus Neo technologies are enabling us to offer a new kind of learning experience which would simply not be possible with traditional educational methods.”

Moving forward by working together

Collaboration is another vital element in this new world of computer-supported collaborative learning. Instead of each student working alone on their own projects, the online environment encourages knowledge sharing. Students learn from each other as much as from their teachers, and have the ability to discuss and comment on each other’s work in numerous ways – whether using Lotus Sametime instant messaging or blogs and discussion forums.

Michael Jungfalk concludes: “On the technical side, the IBM Lotus and Opus Neo solution is a highly flexible and open solution that will enable us to respond dynamically as our online learning environment develops and matures. It is also a very reliable system that is easy to support and maintain. But the technical side is not the interesting part of the story: what is interesting is the difference it is making to the way we teach, and the way our students learn. By providing a highly personalised, highly configurable online experience with full support for collaboration, Neo.Dashboard gives our students the ability to choose what they want to learn and how they want to learn it – a new educational model with exciting possibilities for the future.”