

The Role of Portals in Higher Education

By President Michael T. Victor, Lake Erie College

Of all that has evolved within higher education over the past decade, the potential of technology is one of the most significant. We must be reminded that the cohort of students descending upon our campuses today are citizens of the information age. They are the most diverse group ever to inhabit the college campus and the most demanding in terms of technology. As educators, we must recognize that in this third decade of the technology revolution, our students demand mobility, convenience, and accessibility to media. They expect constant communication with friends, family and their learning environment.

So how do we provide that *instant access*? Not so long ago, the role of information portals on campus websites and intranets was one that provided access to operational information such as admissions forms, libraries, class registration and sports information. The focus has shifted from being organizationally centered to that of student-centered. In the age of

iTunes and Picasa, Facebook and MySpace, Webkinz and ClubPenguin, institutions must gain an understanding of this new era of social networking and its influence on how students communicate and learn. Schrand (2008) suggests the use of technologies that support social networking can facilitate more active student learning, will appeal to multiple intelligences, and will address different learning styles.

Although there are a number of ways to utilize technology on campus, the fundamentals of any technology initiative should support the academic or pedagogical framework of the organization. Chickering and Gamson (1987) remind us that good practices within higher education should:

- Encourage contact between students and faculty
- Encourage active learning
- Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

More recently, Bates (2005) tells us to identify the kinds of learning that different media facilitate best and under what circumstances, while Oblinger and Hawkins (2006) remind us the issue is not whether we use technology to do the same things but whether we take advantage of technology's unique capabilities to do things differently. In his book, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation*

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is *Changing Your World*, Tapscott (2008) states the obvious: “Focus on the change in pedagogy, not the technology. Learning 2.0 is about dramatically changing the relationship between teacher and students in the learning process. Get that right, and use technology for a student-focused, customized, collaborative learning environment” (p. 148).

In his blog entitled: “*Web 2.0 Is the Future of Education*,” Steve Hargadon outlines a number of trends within society that are germane to higher education. He speaks to the use of Web 2.0 technologies as he points out the following key components in the paradigm shift occurring in higher education, indicating that we are a society moving from:

- ❑ Consuming to producing
- ❑ Authority to transparency
- ❑ Expert to facilitator
- ❑ The lecture to the hallway
- ❑ “Access to information” to “access to people”
- ❑ “Learning about” to “learning to be”
- ❑ Passive to passionate learning
- ❑ Presentation to participation
- ❑ Publication to conversation
- ❑ Formal schooling to lifelong learning
- ❑ Supply-push to demand-pull

These key components address the mind-set of our digital students and are the foundation of the “World of Learning 2.0.”

To begin exploring the “World of Learning 2.0,” one might take a look at those areas of web development and design that facilitate interactive information sharing and collaboration. How many of us can create and post a blog, or upload class assignments to a course supported by Moodle or Twitter on a regular basis? All of these represent use of some form of social network software, a two-way platform that provides the beginnings of a virtual learning environment. The challenge is to find meaningful ways to incorporate tools students utilize in their personal lives into the classroom. Creating a collaborative environment is key to integrating social networking into curriculum. A variety of tools are available in the Web 2.0 toolbox, including blogs, wikis, podcasts, instant messaging, RSS feeds, digital storytelling, and social bookmarking (Parameswaran and Whinston, 2007).

Blogs are a method of extending the classroom experience through instructor postings that supplement curriculum by relating specific events, creating journaling opportunities for students, or even establishing an atmosphere for group projects.

Podcasts are another use of technology that are easily developed and provide students an opportunity to learn by doing rather than simply reading text or listening to a lecture.

Because collaboration is easily achieved, Wikis provide an environment that allows students to work together while also providing faculty the ability to track work in progress and determine how much each individual is contributing. Wikis also encourage students to produce work that can be placed in an electronic portfolio and utilized later in job interviews to demonstrate collaboration skills associated with teamwork and the sharing of ideas through the use of technology.

Social bookmarking is yet another way educators can collect and share resources, provide feeds to educational sites and blogs, and supplement online training. All of these are existing technologies that we are familiar with; perhaps we should take a look at how the fabric of the web environment can be intertwined with curriculum.

Which leads us to the virtual world. Second Life (SL). Do you have an Avatar? Have you given any thought to the possibilities of creating your own campus in the world of SL? Institutional leaders are facing the challenge of integrating time-honored traditional pedagogy with the current technology environment. By creating a virtual campus, students are provided the opportunity to learn and experiment in ways that simply are not possible in the traditional classroom. Studies of educational work involving SL have identified where components of the SL experience can facilitate the paradigm shift in education. These include extended interactions, exposure to authentic content and culture, individual and collective identity play, simulation and community presence (Warburton and Perez-Garcia, 2009). Kay and Fitzgerald (2008) have developed a set of categories that represent the current educational activities of SL. They include:

- Self-paced tutorials
- Displays and exhibits
- Immersive exhibits
- Role plays and simulations
- Data visualizations and simulations
- Historical recreations and re-enactments
- Living and immersive archaeology
- Treasure hunts and quests

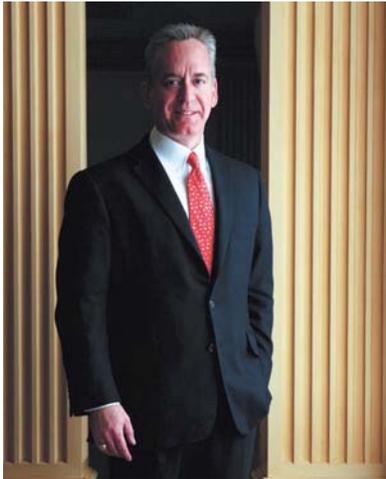
- ❑ Language and cultural immersion
- ❑ Creative writing

Our colleagues at the Kansas University Medical Center are currently utilizing a SL campus in their school of nursing and allied health programs. This environment allows students to learn, experiment, and experience in a safe environment. A virtual learning environment provides opportunity for students to feel “connected” to the learning process while gaining an understanding for situations they may never experience in real life. Institutions can establish learning kiosks to collaborate and exchange information with colleagues around the world without the hindrance of a language barrier. The development of Sloodle (which combines the learning management system of Moodle and the 3-D multi-user environment of a SL), has created endless possibilities for development of virtual learning environments.

Today’s student has been heavily influenced by technology, which presents both opportunity and challenge for institutions of higher education. We are called upon to address the paradigm shift from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side” through meaningful technological applications and tools that have broad potential regardless of the discipline. These applications can be utilized to support experiential and active learning goals while at the same time aligning pedagogic goals with student preferences. Learning can be enhanced by encouraging students to think differently about the technology skills they have developed and apply them to educational and work-related tasks. It is imperative that institutional leaders take the lead in creating and supporting an atmosphere of change. This will include providing information to faculty to assist in understanding the need for the change in pedagogy. It will not come without strong debate among the faculty ranks, nor will it be applied consistently across all disciplines. Each content area will need to determine how best to approach the paradigm shift, as well as which technologies are most applicable to their course of study.

This shift in the manner in which technology is utilized in the classroom comes with a price tag. Your CIO will be able to help identify costs associated with upgrades to technology infrastructure necessary to support the various technologies presented. You might be surprised to find it is not as costly as you might think. In the meantime, consider having a conversation with your faculty regarding the creation of your own “University Island,” where the sun is always shining, the water always calm and the learning environment always exciting.

About the Author



Michael T. Victor
President, Lake Erie College

Lake Erie College's 11th president, Michael T. Victor has brought a new and contagious excitement and level of expectancy to Lake Erie College. An action president, and an accessible president, he has a bold vision for the future of the College.

Since his appointment, President Victor has overseen record enrollment and fundraising. He launched new football, tennis and lacrosse programs and is overseeing the College's transition to NCAA Division II athletics.

Before arriving in Painesville, he served as the dean of the Walker School of Business at Mercyhurst College beginning in 2002 and previously was an assistant professor of business and executive-in-residence at Gannon University. He gained much of his experience as the CEO of Pyramid Industries and subsidiaries and as an attorney in the Corporate Law Department of MacDonald, Illig, Jones & Britton.

Graduating summa cum laude from St. Vincent College, the Ridgway, Pa., native earned his J.D. from Duquesne University School of Law. President Victor serves on the board of directors of Junior Achievement of Greater Cleveland and Energy West.

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