SUNY Multi-campus Integrated Learning Environment

Forward

This paper or document is a written thinking piece to inspire, provoke thought, encourage reflection and apply lessons learned to the application of learning environments in SUNY. Much effort and millions of dollars are spent each year by our SUNY peers on commercial learning environments. SUNY Delhi led the charge to open-source learning environments within SUNY. Now other campuses have followed suit and a critical mass has begun to develop. These campuses have adopted what we might call "best sourcing" our solutions. For some that means hosting with an online provider like Moodlerooms, for others that means in-house hosting. One campus might host their Moodle environment on Linux servers, while another might run on Windows Servers. What's different about this group is that we are moving toward a common learning environment without big budgets, mandates or months of political posturing and planning. Instead we've found common direction through quality, stability and budgetary efficiencies. We've been led here through a desire to bring sustainable and professional learning tools to our faculty and students without fear of the next corporate take over. This paper explores the unique opportunity Moodle campuses have to shatter traditional systems models within SUNY and how Moodle campuses are positioned to develop a world class state-of-the-art system to rival any commercially available product. Let's call it the SUNY Multi-campus Integrated Learning Environment (SMILE) concept.

The Power of SUNY

Chancellor Zimpher has recognized the unique opportunities SUNY presents and the combined power of a 64 campus system offers. Through her leadership she has encouraged campuses to really look at each other less as competitors in the same space and more as allies. By harnessing our uniqueness and streamlining our similarities we can remain the foremost public higher education system in the world. Online Education is critical to that mission and achievement. The explosion of online learning means we're no longer just competing for New York regional students, all campuses are competing around the world in the virtual campus experience. SUNY graduates represent the foundation of the SUNY Brand and we must not just remain followers in this market, but become leaders to sustain that Brand recognition in an increasingly crowded market space. The Power of SUNY arises from the success of the campuses through the hard work of ordinary faculty, staff, students and alumni. From within that pool of collective exchanges and collaboration have come wonderful successes and efficiencies such as SICAS customizing Banner once for all SUNY Campuses.

What is SMILE?

SMILE is a concept to encourage collaborative thinking, sharing and development amongst campuses in the open source online education space within SUNY. At it's core it is a completely different approach to achieving similar collaborative outcomes within SUNY. There are many unsung IT heroes within SUNY that have skills that are separated by Geo-political boundaries. If we can abolish those barriers for a common interest, we can bring the the full creativity and experience of these professionals into a common suite of tools for learning. The model can clearly work as Moodle has development efforts from around the world without requiring a major administrative model or any directive from above. The key to success becomes having a critical mass of interest large enough to sustain the effort.

I would envision SMILE to not need official ordainment by some higher authority. A common set of goals are all that is needed. Through a growing success the initiative either gains momentum or ceases to exist. I believe there is enough established success to continue the efforts and continue the work forward. Some might argue that we need million dollar data centers and huge staff. I instead propose we leverage our existing infrastructures using elastic models that remain flexible, reliable, secure and inexpensive. One of the things that restrains current problem solving amongst campuses is a lack of collaboration. We have some of the most wonderful tools available, like Oracle Grid. But where we fail to achieve greatness with such technologies is that SUNY concentrates the implementation into a single site or two as has been done with Banner hosting, or LMS hosting. That's one historical approach.

The strength of SMILE is it proposes to throw away the traditional thinking and start fresh. Embrace the low cost, high quality alternatives and build something different. To embrace cloud computing, distributed systems, open source solutions and create a real-time community that supports each other more than 3 times a year. It would bring a grass roots effort at solving a problem while embracing that different ideologies can compete in the same space. After all, isn't that what competitive RFPs do for us when we go externally for solutions? Why shouldn't there be competitive processes within the SUNY system that promotes excellence and efficiency through innovation. The more LMS paths we explore simultaneously the more quickly we can find the best one. Doesn't that make you smile?

SUNY - Moodle Synergy.

Moodle is currently the common thread shared by 12.5% of the SUNY campuses. Current SUNY contracts for SLN have SUNY heavily committed to BlackBoard. Through the SMILE concept, competition can be introduced into the LMS market within SUNY. All SUNY campuses benefit from a strong viable alternative even if they don't participate in it. BlackBoard is being presented at times as the Holy Grail for SUNY online learning. But when we actually examine, BlackBoard has only purchased SUNY's business. They've purchased product after product that campuses have chosen over their own products just to keep SUNY on their list of customers. marketing list. Now the commercial landscape is almost barren and the alternatives exist in the open source arena. Open Source can be scary, but why would we shun it when we know it scares our BlackBoard? . They didn't just purchase the largest Moodle hosting service, Moodlerooms so they could release BB into the open source community. Let's be honest, they are scared because they cannot own it and they want a piece of the pie as Moodle grows market share. The timing is right for courageous campuses to make a move to solidify our open source learning environments.

Campuses that might embrace this SMILE concept are those that have been down the commercial LMS road. Moodle campus tend to be tired of being kicked by BlackBoard and the constant mergers/migrations that are associated with it. Moodle offers that alternative, open development and a strong community whose primary interest is in meeting the educational needs of online instruction, not the quarterly profit margin. With some great success stories of Moodle in SUNY, wouldn't it be quite a feather in BlackBoard's cap to conquer SUNY and force us to abandon Moodle through an executive mandate?

Moodle combined with SUNY presents a special synergy and now is the right time. Right off the top saving millions of dollars in licensing costs and the more we invest into the usage of these open source learning environments, the larger the return we receive.

The Challenges

I would be remiss without sighting the challenges faced. The paradigm shift is almost impossible for some to conceive. SUNY often relies on centralization as the answers to problems. But history shows us that voluntary efforts from like minded campuses have resulted in significant successes like ITEC and SICAS. These organizations still have value at their core, but have been limited in their innovation by commitments to "system wide" solutions. Instead the better example is likely SICAS who has remained a single focused center of excellence. ITEC in some ways has grown overly large and now suffers from significant management overhead and heavy external pressures. This unfortunately made them less responsive to campus based initiatives and more committed to the centralized bureaucracy. I don't intend to disenfranchise my colleagues in those areas, just to share the observation that the real action and solutions within SUNY have been grass roots movements. The closer the problem solvers are to the problem and solution, the more quickly and efficiently they respond to the needs of a changing environment. If we are to remain competitive in the online learning space, then we need that ground up movement. If the Moodle campuses are not to take this challenge on, then we might as well start singing the praises of Blackboard now.

The Advantages, The Commitment

The strength of the SMILE concept would be an alliance of campuses that are willing to do what has been done before so successfully. The idea is to work with each other in an Agile Alliance to deliver a modular learning environment. To further nurture and assist any new campuses wishing to explore or move into this learning environment. Delhi has developed views for Banner that allow direct database connection for student enrollment within Moodle. Those were released under an Open Source GPL January 9, 2013 to demonstrate our commitment to sharing, collaboration and making Moodle and a series of open source tools into a world class Learning Management Portal. If a SUNY campus wants to get their feet wet, Delhi will everything we can to assist in hosting test instances for them and we're even open to exploring long term hosting arrangements. What you'll see in the coming days is expansion of our initiatives, where one campus may host Mahara for Delhi and Delhi hosts whiteboard tools in return. Each campus doesn't need to re-invent the wheel, each campus wishing to participate can leverage their local expertise, building a consortium of expertise in different areas. We're only limited by our imaginations, skills and our desires.

Who wants to join us?