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## PLEs as Environments for Personal and Personalised Learning

Paul Trafford  
Learning Technologies Group  
Oxford University Computing Services

### Introduction

The abbreviation 'PLE' is frequently quoted in education and ICT, but what does it mean? Among the most common denotations are 'Personal Learning Environment' and 'Personalised Learning Environment'. If we decompose these terms, we may ask of PLEs: are they *personal[ised]* learning environments or *personal[ised]* learning environments? These terms are probably best left to educationalists rather than technologists to define with the expectation that their analysis (e.g. of personal learning to support critical thinking [1]) feeds into developments in ICT that are having such major impact on education. However, for this paper we take the notion of *personalised learning* as having a tailored path charted through a changing educational landscape, in the context of which deeper *personal learning* takes place.

### RAMBLE's lightweight support for PLEs

RAMBLE was a small JISC-funded project that developed linking between the private, personal spaces of the learner and an institutional learning environment; it consisted of blogging on PDAs and subsequent integration of the content in a VLE [2]. The context of ICT was applied to personal learning and personal learning environments mainly in the sense that it concerned support for personal development and learning, in "*their own evolving, individual learning space*"[3].

What qualities might one expect of ICT to support such personal learning? We aimed for simplicity, familiarity and ease of use and accordingly this went into design, especially of the project architecture, which consisted of separate components, each dedicated to particular functions. PDA hardware and software were chosen so as to support writing at length, over time, and anywhere: thus, foldaway keyboards were provided, dedicated blog clients were chosen that were intuitive and allowed flexible blogging offline and documentation was available at every step. Very simple and lightweight instructions and guidance were given along the lines of, "We'd like you to give feedback on your lectures course, practicals etc. and post 2 or 3 times a week."

The formula seemed to set most students at ease, as one student expressed in feedback about use of PDAs and the blogging process:

*"really satisfying to use, more relaxing and easier - none of the hassle of switching on a computer.  
"It meant that I wrote down and reflected on lots of ideas that would usually not be 'relevant' - e.g.  
effectiveness of health care systems, attitudes of doctors towards patients, my feelings about activities."  
"The blog made a daily diary a useful learning tool rather than an introspective indulgence! "*

The blogs themselves were rich in nature with comments ranging from endorsements for demonstrations, criticisms of teaching styles through to a complaint about poor heating in a lab! Over time, observations become more informative about overall patterns of working, indicating, for example, how as term progressed students took on more extra-curricular activities and were finding problems in time management.

## PLEs as systems?

In most institutions, existing IT systems have been conceived on a grand scale with fixed ways of working – until a few years ago, this meant physically and temporally in terms of coming to institutional IT suites of desktop PCs to log in at certain hours of the day. VLEs were introduced in the 90s against this backdrop and have been developed in such a way that they tend to reinforce the boundaries. This doesn't negate the value of VLEs as important means for teaching and learning, but it does indicate some of their inherent constraints.

Recently laptops have become pervasive and powerful, removing the dependency on these suites, so it is tempting to try to devise other systems that serve as analogues of VLEs etc and call them 'PLEs'. However, there's still discontinuity as laptops aren't nearly as portable as PDAs, mobile phones and other pocket devices, those that really become personalised. So, depending on the way they are used, any number of technologies can be part of PLE, e.g. blogs used in RAMBLE for personal reflections *"may be referred to as a 'Personal Learning Environment' (PLE), which focuses on an individual's own educational space, which can be said to 'wrap around the learner'."* [4]

These and other tools and technologies, especially 'Web2.0', are particularly amenable to these kinds of environments but do not in themselves define them. A suite of such tools sitting on a laptop or desktop can provide facilities for online engagement, but in the light of the way ICT is becoming embedded invisibly in household life, to apply the term 'Personal Learning Environment' to such a system seems narrow; and development focusing on replicating VLE functionality on these machines seems even narrower.

The work might well be better focused on simply ensuring these tools observe interoperability standards and in developing guidelines on their educational use. The term 'Personalised Learning Environment' might be a better candidate, but there will inevitably be reservations about possible walled gardens as expressed by Graham Atwell in his podcast on PLEs [5].

## Conclusion

This paper has tried to caution against going from general notions about 'PLEs' to specific ICT connotations using that term. From the experiences of the RAMBLE project, in which rich content flowed from PDA to VLE, it argues that ICT tools are better as part of a mix that contribute to PLEs. As for the systems, the effort might best be spent on their interoperability with guidance on their educational usage.

## References

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