

The Evolution of An Analog Media Delivery Operation:

A Working Model for the Delivery of Digital Content

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Steve Kindel

The Problem

Two years ago in San Luis Obispo, the media delivery department or Educational Technology Center (ETC) found itself in a precarious situation. The ETC was on the verge of losing the last of its large contracts. In the private sector, the ETC would be Chapter 11. The time had come. Something had to be done. It didn't take a technologist to see that for an operation where technology was its middle name that the technology was conspicuously missing. The challenge of the *what* and the *how* was the daunting task. The *what* in this case is a *portal*, and it has effectively transformed a challenged media delivery department into a successful one with clear focus and purpose.

In the past, the ETC had been heavily structured around the physical delivery of resources. After several months of research inside and outside our county, we found, unsurprisingly, that the trend and desire for resources was moving firmly towards asynchronous electronic delivery methods, such as online or Web-based educational resources. Teachers expressed their desire to travel less for professional development and the need for an on-demand model for accessing their cache of classroom tools. We felt that our ETC could play a key role in filling this need.

Concurrently, we found that technology projects such as the Digital California Project and the Internet II were helping us to re-conceptualize the way we deliver educational media. These high-speed networks have enabled a wide variety of resources from both educational institutions and commercial companies. While we have an influx of high quality material accessible via the Internet, the Internet itself becomes the sticky challenge. An Internet connection and a search engine is a recipe for lost time, with the results being potentially unreliable and

inaccurate or worse. The questions before us were:

- How do we, as technology service providers, ensure the availability of quality digital content to teachers and students in the classroom?
- How will we make sure that these resources will actually save time, provide value and, most importantly, improve teaching and learning in the classroom?



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The brilliance of the Internet is clouded with a lack of clear organization. The Digital California Project delivered a magnificent pipe into the front door of every California County Office of Education, but we still have no mechanism to organize, bundle, or share knowledge with each other or our schools. In San Luis Obispo, the portal is not just a convenience tool, but is rapidly becoming an essential tool for the effective use of digital resources in the classroom.

Organization Is Key, But Why Portal?

It has become clear in San Luis Obispo County that the role of the Educational Technology Center needs to be that of a research and development firm and that of a packaging company. We need to be the filtering system for quality resources for our schools. We need to provide a secure, user-friendly environment. Simply put, we need to gather together our best stuff and find a really great box to put it in.

The portal solution has allowed us to bundle documents and applications, in our case, educational resources, in a single Web-based interface. On the surface it appears to be little more than a simple Web site. Once inside, the user will start to realize the benefits this tool provides, such as single sign-on, security, and the ability for customization from the network/portal administrator, to the classroom teacher, and their students.

Once inside, the user will start to realize the benefits this tool provides. For us, as program administrators, the portal allows us to research and prescreen useful educational resources and organize them from a single location. To teachers and students in the classroom, this translates to a simple, safe and organized environment that looks and acts the way they want it to, with the resources they choose. This saves teachers valuable time and it frees them from the burden of Internet searches with poor results.

uPortal

The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education adopted uPortal as its portal solution. UPortal is an open source Java technology developed by a non-profit university group called JASIG (Java Administrators Special Interest Group). There is a large group of universities continually using and developing uPortal, including Cal Poly San Luis

Continued on page 33



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Evolution of Analog
Continued from page 12

Obispo. As an open source code technology, the JA-SIG uPortal works well for our needs, but does come with its challenges. By the nature of open source, and the development by a non-profit, the basic software package is free. The use by institutions such as Princeton, Rutgers, Syracuse and Cal Poly ensures the continued development and support of the product.

This is not a proprietary product that can be overpowered or consumed by competition. The uPortal package, however, is essentially an empty shell that needs to be completed. There are many basic functions that one would expect from a commercial product that you do not get in uPortal. The ability to batch create accounts through a simple Web interface is a prime example. It is the responsibility of the individual entity or the users group to finish the job. This takes programming on a level that is not available to most K-12 school districts.

In San Luis Obispo, we have used a combination of our own ETC staff, information services staff, and private consulting services to adapt the uPortal tool to fit our needs in a K-12 environment. These adaptations include code and database changes to the original uPortal build to support the administrative needs of a K-12 institution, and the bundling of standards based content. The result is a system customized for K-12 institutions that is manageable and affordable.



The Big Picture

An affordable portal solution in the K-12 environment introduces some valuable and exciting opportunities for regional or even statewide collaboration. A portal at the end of every DCP node will allow media and technology organizations currently involved in group purchasing and technology development projects to share a common format in which to deliver their resources. This means shared development costs, leaving more dollars for quality standards based educational resources. It means simple, seamless integration of systems and tools from commercial, COE, or grant funded service providers. It means more market influence with commercial service providers.

It also encourages collaborative partnerships. And because it is available in the home as well as in school, it invites parent participation. At a time when budgets are more than tight, this is just the type of opportunity we need. ■

The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education uPortal solution can be found at etportal.org. Questions? Comments? Want a "test drive"? Contact Steve Kindel at (805) 782-7290 or by E-mail at skindel@slocoe.org.

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