

Apprehension Motivates Implementing a Teacher Portal

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During the past several years, we have been encouraging and training our teachers to create Web pages to support curriculum goals by improving communication within the school community and between the school community and families.

Projects motivated by demand are sometimes difficult to prioritize because of the various constituencies competing for attention and available resources that are always limited.

Projects motivated by apprehension—like fear of impending doom—tend to dramatically rise to the top and simplify the decision-making process. Although we like to think that our priorities are always driven by maximizing benefit, that's not always the case. The timeframe for Capistrano USD's implementation of VL System's TeacherPortal and its teacher Web site building tool, SiteConstructor, was motivated by such apprehension.

During the past several years, we have been encouraging and training our teachers to create Web pages to support curriculum goals by improving communication within the school community and between the school community and families. Although only about five percent of our teachers had their own Websites that they used as tools integral to their teaching style, those Web sites were scattered on commercial hosts since we had not provided a district-managed hosting location. Unfortunately, many of those free hosts also contained inappropriate material; and as we tightened up our Web-filtering policies, those hosting sites became blocked. Teachers began to complain that their hard work was being wasted because their Web sites were now inaccessible—we had become a victim of our own success. Apprehension intensified quickly as we realized we would have to host the teacher Web sites at the district. The problem now looming was how to manage a site for 2,500 teachers, provide password and user support, and for those teachers not fa-

miliar with HTML, a template for simple Web pages?

In June 2002, we began our investigation of a mechanism by which the district could host our entire existing teacher Web sites and also provide an easy-to-use, template-driven tool for the remaining 95 percent of the teachers to create their own Web sites. Teaming up with Brian Stockbrugger, director of technical services, we decided we needed a solution in place by the time school started in the fall—not much time for a project of this scale. There were a number of commercial products that addressed those needs; but, we also wanted one that would integrate with our district Web site, our domain login and, in short, our vision of fully-integrated applications that eliminate the need for manual data-handling from one application to another. We also wanted a solution that was free of uncontrolled advertising, with a predictable cost, and one onto which we could impose our needs and influence.

VLSystems had been soliciting us to purchase their ParentPortal to display grades and attendance for parents, and we did have a need for it. But, our

higher priority was for a teacher portal. Since they were so willing to modify their ParentPortal to meet our needs, we inquired about their developing a teacher portal. Although their TeacherPortal product was only in mock-up form at the time, we had the advantage that we could get our ideas incorporated so we wouldn't have to settle for less than our vision. We were intrigued by their offer to be a development partner in creating this software product that would exactly meet our requirements. Due to the size of our district (49 sites, 48,425 students, 4,667 employees) and the cost of existing products, we felt that, along with the investment that the developer was willing to make, we could get a lot more bang out of our dollars and, in the end, it was probably the only economical way we could meet our goal.

Gaining Confidence

During a series of meetings with the vendor, we gradually refined our requirements. More importantly, we gained the confidence that the vendor understood and internalized our needs and problems, and that they had the capability and motivation to produce a first-class product. We produced a simple list of required functions, knowing that we could not establish a detailed set of software specifications. We also understood that if such a specification were required of us at the outset, the project was doomed, because we couldn't define attributes such as "ease-of-use," "attractive" or "robust and flexible architecture."

A successful product depended on the vendor's willingness to modify the product through an iteration process

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Xserve



Features

Powerful server-optimized hardware

- Single and dual 1GHz PowerPC G4 processors
- Velocity Engine vector processing unit and powerful floating-point unit supporting single-cycle, double-precision calculations
- 2MB dedicated L3 cache memory per processor with throughput of up to 4GB/s
- Advanced system controller with DDR memory
- Two full-length 64-bit, 66MHz PCI slots for up to 533MB/s throughput and one half-length combination PCI/AGP slot
- Dual Gigabit Ethernet interfaces

Flexible, scalable storage

- Four independent drive bays for up to 480GB of hot-plug internal storage¹
- SMART data from hard drives for prefailure notification
- Optional PCI card for connecting SCSI storage and backup devices

High-density rackmount 1U design

- 1U enclosure, allowing up to 84 processors in a standard 42U rack
- 19-inch width to fit industry-standard four-post racks and telco racks
- Sliding system enclosure on rails for easy access and servicing without tools

Mac OS X Server with easy-to-use remote management tools

- UNIX-based operating system with powerful cross-platform services
- Server Admin for remote management of network services
- Industry-leading Server Monitor application for remote hardware monitoring of multiple systems
- Automatic notifications via email or pager
- SNMP support for third-party monitoring tools

Comprehensive service and support options

- AppleCare Premium Service and Support Plan offering expert support and four-hour response for onsite hardware repair service (terms apply)²
- AppleCare Service Parts Kits

The new Xserve offers phenomenal value, packing robust server features and exceptional storage scalability into a high-density 1U enclosure. With dual 1GHz PowerPC G4 processors³ and Double Data Rate (DDR) memory, it's equipped for the most demanding computing environments. Xserve also delivers up to 533MB/s throughput for high-performance networking and storage systems thanks to a 64-bit, 66MHz PCI bus. And dual Gigabit Ethernet ensures tremendous networking bandwidth and deployment flexibility. While the competition is still using Pentium III processors in 1U enclosures, Xserve crunches data at up to 15 billion floating-point operations per second.

When it comes to storage expansion, Xserve breaks new ground. Four drive bays offer up to 480GB of internal disk capacity using hot-plug Apple Drive Modules.¹ This makes it easy—and affordable—to expand your storage configuration as your data needs grow. Four independent ATA/100 drive channels reduce bottlenecks to ensure fast data access. In addition, high-performance PCI slots let you connect external SCSI storage and backup systems.

Xserve ships with an unlimited-client license for Mac OS X Server, offering a comprehensive suite of network services. Built-in remote management tools make it easy to configure and manage key services from any Mac OS X desktop. The all-new Server Monitor application, available only with Xserve, automatically monitors hardware subsystems and displays detailed fault and performance data. If problems are detected, it can notify you via email or email-capable pager, giving you the opportunity to resolve difficulties before they affect your services.

Critical server deployments demand quick problem resolution and maximum user availability. That's why Apple is offering a world-class lineup of support products for Xserve, including the AppleCare Premium Service and Support Plan for up to three years of 24/7 telephone and email support and onsite repairs with four-hour response (terms apply).² Also available are AppleCare Service Parts Kits to address the most common hardware failures quickly.

Xserve is tuned for server performance, featuring hot-plug drives, incredible storage flexibility, and industry-leading remote management. With an advanced system architecture, an industrial-strength operating system, and Apple's legendary ease of use, it's a complete, integrated hardware and software server solution. This uniquely Apple integration dramatically reduces the complexity of system administration and the total cost of ownership—enabling businesses and institutions to get up and running quickly, while minimizing licensing, deployment, and maintenance costs.

Teacher Portal

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as needs and deficiencies became apparent during the testing and pilot phases. We depended on them to give it those hard-to-define attributes and bet on them to produce a first-class product. As our confidence grew and we neared signing the contract for the TeacherPortal, we also decided to purchase their ParentPortal. Since the systems architecture for these products was Microsoft Windows 2000 Server, SQL 2000 and IIS 5, and was consistent with our preferred technical direction, we felt we had found the solution for which we had been looking.

TeacherPortal

At our pilot teacher training for the SiteConstructor, we had 22 teachers participate from an elementary and high school. The session was led by Michelle Wrenn Benham, with the vendor's staff present as observers. Since Michele was our project leader for development of the TeacherPortal and had a great deal of hands-on experience with the product, she wanted to personally prepare the instructional materials and perform the initial trainings. At the end of the first one-hour session, every teacher who attended had an initial, multi-page Web site, not just a "plain Jane" one-page site.

The SiteConstructor permits building complex Web sites with a selection of templates that establish the overall "look." The template mechanism and choice of "themes" received enthusiastic approval, even by the two teachers who were masters of Web site development and already had their own sites. For those teachers who wish to develop their sites independently or who already have Web sites, they can upload them onto the district's Web site server via an FTP function provided.

ParentPortal

Implementation of the ParentPortal, which displays grades, attendance and transcript information, was on a parallel track, and worked seamlessly after we defined the various codes, class scheduling arrangements, and term periods we use in our AERIES database. Our daily data uploads take about 30 minutes for all 49 of our schools and any anomalies are reported by e-mail. We expect to increase the frequency of our uploads as the attendance data-collection process is streamlined.

Security of student records is handled by the parent entering each child's Student ID and PIN, one time, to create a

family account. Then, access to each child's records is obtained from a drop-down list of the family's children. Access to the family account is by a username/password combination. Security of our Web site server was configured by the vendor's systems engineers along with our own technical services group.

Future

We foresee a district Intranet that encourages communication between teachers, between the district and the parent community, and that also provides access by our students to all of our educational tools via a student portal. For example, a child who has forgotten the finer points of adding fractions can then go back to an online instructional tool covering that topic. We have also been examining the cost-saving possibility of asking parents to accept Web-based report cards and progress reports to help reduce the production and mailing costs of these forms.

Our rollout plans for the future include expanding access to the

TeacherPortal and ParentPortal to all of our sites as soon as possible. All pilots of the system have been successful and we are moving forward with our district-wide rollout.

Conclusion

We are pleased with the development process and responsiveness of the vendor's development team. They were essential to maintaining teacher enthusiasm, and our confidence in them has been rewarded. Apprehension has turned to a general feeling of success. Teachers are pleased with the tools that they have been provided and parents are pleased with the greatly increased access to student and teacher information. ■

For more information about what the Capistrano Unified School District is doing with our portal projects, call Scott at (949) 489-7088 or take a detour onto Pacific Coast Highway and stop by for a visit.

For more information about VLSystems and its products, visit www.VLSystems.com or www.k-12connection.com.

K-12Connection™

created by VLSystems

TeacherPortal™ to easily create a multi-page, teacher website with choice of themes and graphics, to display homework assignments, resource materials and personal information.

- Teachers need NO html experience
- Hosted on district webserver to avoid "inappropriate" distractions for students
- Perpetual licensing per school to control costs

ParentPortal™ to display grades, attendance and transcripts for parents, students and counselors.

- Extend the life your existing student information system
- Works with any student information system database
- Hosted on district webserver for maximum data security and convenience

License our DataAggregator™ for individual, school-based AERIES™ SIS databases.

VLSystems, Inc., a software developer since 1978 and a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner in Enterprise Systems, has blended its expertise in the education field with its systems engineering and software development skills to create a suite of leading-edge software products for school districts.

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