

Complexity V.S. Simplicity of Courseware Components: The Experience of AUPlus & SCITPlus

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Abstract

This paper discusses two LMS systems employed in College of Internet Distance Education. One is SCITPlus system used by School of IT. This system was developed on Moodle. Another one is AUPlus system used by School of Business Administration. These two systems have different components. One system may have more functions or components over another. Once a system has many functions, students would have to learn how to use them effectively. Once a system has fewer functions, it could not do some functions that might be useful. This paper discusses the complexity and simplicity between these two systems.

Keywords: Learning Management System, courseware components

Introduction

College of Internet Distance Education (CIDE) has employed two Learning Management Systems (LMSs). There are AUPlus system and SCITPlus system. AUPlus system has been used by Master of Science in Management Program. It was developed by outsource company. SCITPlus system has been used by Master of Science in Information Communication Technology (ICT) Program. This system was based on open source, Moodle, and was developed in-house by CIDE technology team. Certainly, these systems are different

in many ways including their components. However, too many components may make the system more complex. On another hand, too few components may not be adequate for quality of online learning. Both systems have some common components, such as, online course, message board, assignments and grades. Some components or factors are different.

Many studies (Shinasharkey and Kanchanachaya, 2008; Brahmawong, 2005) concerned about courseware components, such as multimedia, communication, online class, assessment, that are used widely in many LMS. There are also many components employed in AUPlus and SCITPlus LMS, however, components and functions discussed in this paper are limited to accessibility of the LMS, virtual classroom, and communication of LMS. Further study is recommended at the end of this paper.

Accessibility

Let's start with the login page for SCITPlus system. The login page of SCITPlus system can be accessed through <http://www.cide.au.edu/moodle> and is shown in figure 1.



Figure 1: SCITPlus login page

Once students logged in, they would be led to the next page of the system. The first page includes announcements and important information. Students forum, job posting forum, events and seminars, registered courses are also presented in this page as shown in figure 2.

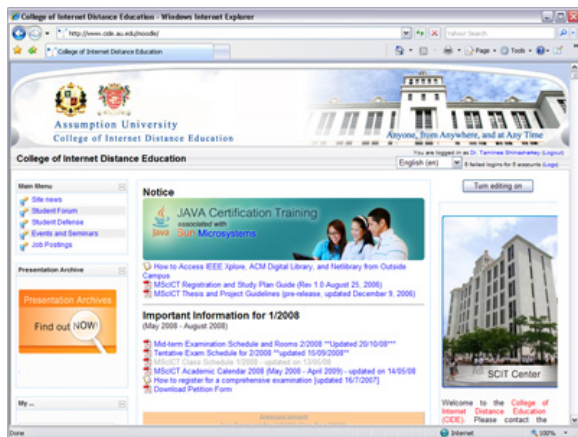


Figure 2: First page of SCITPlus

When students clicked to access the selected course, the next page of SCITPlus system consists of the links to the following main components and activities: virtual classroom or online learning, materials for student to download in the form of PowerPoint files and PDF files, audio files in the form of MP3, Message Board, Assignments, quizzes, and grades as shown in figure 3.

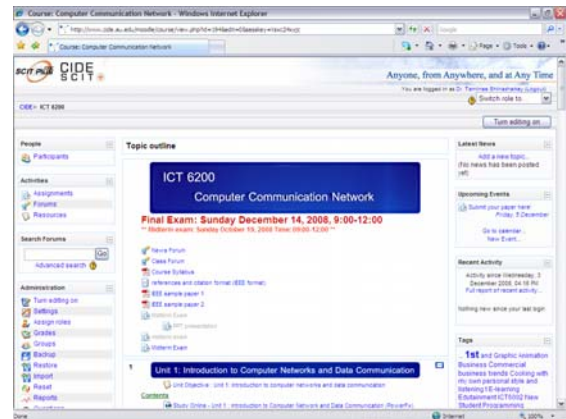


Figure 3: SCITPlus course page

For AUPlus, the login page can be accessed through <http://cide.auplus.au.edu/>. This page consists of announcement and important information for students posted by the school as shown in figure 4.



Figure 4: AUPlus login page

After students logged in, they would be led to the next page that looks similar to the previous page. However, unlike the previous, this page includes link “Go to learn” and “change password” instead of the log in space on the previous page. The page is shown in figure 5.



Figure 5: the first page of AUPlus

Students can click on “Go to learn” to go to the next page that consists of courses that they have registered as shown in figure 6.

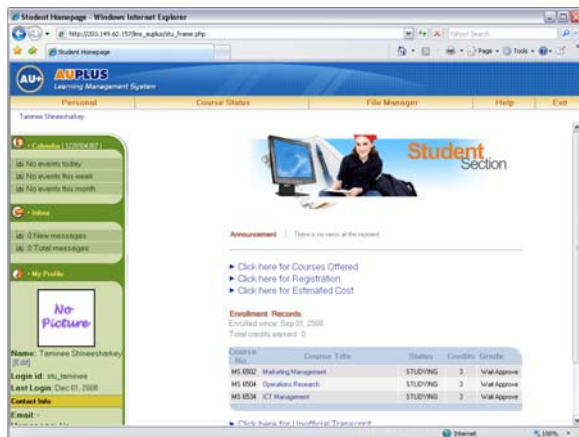


Figure 6: AUPlus courses displayed

When students click to access a course, the first page of the course consists of the links to the following main components: Course Syllabus, Virtual classroom, Assignments, Chat room, Message Board, Instructor’s profile, and grades as shown in figure 7.



Figure 7: AUPlus course page

Virtual classroom

In term of virtual classroom or online study, the interfaces of these two systems are also different. In SCITPlus, the first version of online study part, which is called Power V, consists of PowerPoint slides on the right, the instructor video on the left, and table of content at the bottom. The player control is included at the bottom of the page. Students can watch the lecture at anytime. They can also stop the lecture at any point and come back to that particular topic by using the link in the table of content. The concept behind this design was to imitate the actual classroom that consists of instructor presenting content using PowerPoint presentation. Power V was later developed into the second version, which is Power FX. Power FX was based on Flash player. In Power FX, students can customize to watch just PowerPoint slide or instructor video. The table of content still remains the same. The SCITPlus has fixed format for every course in the system. The advantages of this fix format are that students may get used to the format when they use it over and over, and it would be easier to use the same format for every course. Students do not have to learn the new functions or locate the function at some other places. The disadvantage is that students may get bored over the same interface in every course. The interface in

the SCITPlus is considered simple. However, it could mean that there is nothing fancy in term of interface. Figure 8 shows the interface of Power V, which is the original version of online study in SCITPlus.

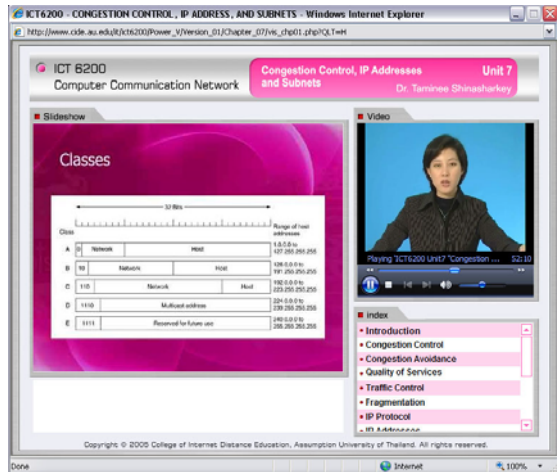


Figure 8: SCITPlus's Power V

Figure 9 below shows the interface of Power FX, which is the later version of online study in SCITPlus.



Figure 9: SCITPlus's Power FX.

For AUplus system, the virtual classroom mainly consists of Flash presentation. Instructor's face is shown at some point of time and only in some courses. Similar to SCITPlus's system, AUplus system also includes player control. The different is that each course is customized.

The interface in the Flash presentation changes over courses. The advantage is that there is something new in every course. The disadvantage is that students may need sometime to locate the player control from one course to another. Figure 10 below shows the interface of one course in the AUplus's Virtual classroom.



Figure 10: AUplus's Virtual classroom

Communication

For communication, SCITPlus provides forum. In forum, students and teacher can communicate among themselves. Whenever there is a new post, everyone subscribed to the course or to the forum will receive an email of the content of the post. The email includes the link to the content of the post. In case that students or teacher does not access the course, they will receive the email of the post anyway. Moreover, the system also has private message that one can send to another without other people knowing about it. This can be used when students want to discuss or ask a particular friend, when teacher wants to remind a particular student about something, or when a student wants to ask teacher about particular thing. However, students are encouraged to post questions regarding the course on the forum, so that other students who might have a same question will be able to read them. Teacher will not have to answer question over and over.

In AUPlus, there are many communication channels as well. There are web board, chat room, and private message. The web board is useful when students would like to ask teacher any questions. Everyone in the course would be able to see the post as well. Chat room is the real time communication, so it can be used when students and/or teacher access at the same time. Therefore, this function might be used less than other communication channels because it needs people to be present at the same time in order to make a communication. This function is useful when students and teacher can set an appointment to access at the same time. The last channel is private message. The private message in this system function the same as in SCITPlus.

Discussion and Recommendations

The accessibility, virtual classroom, and communication of SCITPlus and AUPlus systems have been discussed in this paper. For SCITPlus, the interface looks simple, clear and easy to understand. From the login page, SCITPlus takes fewer clicks to get to the actual course and the virtual classroom. In SCITPlus, the information in the course consists of the information just for that particular semester that students registered. That means it includes only relevant information of that semester for students. In AUPlus, students can see the discussion from previous semesters that they did not register. The benefit of this is that students may have the same questions as they were raised in the previous semesters and students can review these questions from the web boards. On another hand, this includes information that may not relevant or apply to student in the current semester. This would create confusion and complexity to the students.

For virtual classroom, SCITPlus has the template that can be applied to every course created by CIDE technology team.

Every course has the same template with power point on the left and instructor on the right. It would be easy for students to get used to it, but once they got used to it, they become uninterested. In AUPlus, each course is different. This could create difficulty when they want to find play button or stop button. However, it provides uniqueness for each course.

In communication channels provided by SCITPlus, the forum has been used the most. Private message has also been used for students to communicate with instructor. For AUPlus, web board has the most usage as well. This system also provides real time chat room. Many students and instructor can discuss any matters when they are online at the same time. However, in order to make chat room more effective, this function needs to be scheduled. Not many students online at the same time without prior schedule.

Further study

In general, every system needs continually development. This applies to both SCITPlus and AUPlus as well. There are many other factors that are considered necessary for the system and some of them are not. The study of students' satisfaction, usage of each function, interface, and accessibility of the LMS would be useful for the LMS developer and for the benefit of LMS users.

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