Facilitating access to e-resources with Eduserv Athens

Eduserv Athens is a comprehensive access management system which controls access to over 260 e-resources. You can integrate Athens into your Virtual Learning Environment or portal, using the usernames that your users already use. Alternatively, you can use the comprehensive account management facilities of Athens to issue usernames for members of your organization. With just one Athens username, the user can be authorized for access to all the organization's Athens resources. These usernames can be used anytime, anywhere, thus empowering the user, and maximizing the investment in e-resources. The Athens portfolio of e-resources consists of over 260 resources, from leaders in the publishing community.

LYN NORRIS
Manager
Eduserv Athens

In the age of the Internet, electronic resources have the capacity to play a large role, but are limited from realizing their potential by a number of barriers. Eduserv Athens offers the opportunity to facilitate access to e-resources from within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or portal, thus maximizing use of the organization's investment in e-resources.

Beyond e-journals

The first electronic resources were bibliographic databases, with the ISI bibliographic databases from BIDS leading the way. Then came electronic journals – a boon to academic librarians everywhere. The major academic publishers now make their new material available electronically and are driving through projects to make their back-files available electronically too.

Electronic journals release pressure on academic libraries for physical space to store books and journals. John Rylands Library in Manchester recently moved 45 kilometres of material out of the library into temporary storage. E-journals also release pressure in the libraries for reader space and even longer opening times, as the reader can access the e-journal from his own PC. Librarians can be assured that the electronic copy is complete, unvandalized and in the right place. Also, an electronic site licence generally has no concurrency limit, thus providing unlimited access at times of peak demand.

Electronic resources are not only e-journals and e-books. The range of material is getting wider and wider with resources like Anatomy TV, Kar2ouche for making cartoons, and online training resources like Hairdresser-Training.com in the JISC Collections portfolio. There is also a range of image libraries like the Education Image gallery, and moving image material from the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC).

Few of these resources are being used to their full potential because of a number of barriers to access.

Barriers to access

One barrier to the access of e-resources is the straightforward inability to use or fear of using a PC. Experience of e-resources has shown that all that is needed is for the individual to be shown the e-resource and shown how easy it is to use. Then they can fly!

Another barrier is the promotion of e-resources – all too often organizations purchase e-resources and are unable to promote the materials sufficiently. With an average library having over 300 e-resources, this is quite a problem. Use of a VLE, portal or library web site can ease this problem, by targeting resources at groups of

individuals, perhaps by way of course-specific materials.

But the greatest barrier to e-resources is the need to impose access controls. Electronic resources are not often free; it is generally necessary to pay a subscription fee, or at least agree to licence conditions. Access to the e-resource is quite properly restricted to authorized users, however quite often the need to restrict access puts barriers in the way of genuine users. More emphasis needs to be given to facilitating access for authorized users.

IP authentication

IP authentication provides a simple way of recognizing an authorized user. When the licence terms are agreed for a new resource, the organization generally registers its IP address range. Then any PC from that IP address range is deemed to be authorized. This happens seamlessly, without the user knowing or doing anything, and is very effective.

However, it does generally limit access to users on site or on campus. Even for on-site users, access is limited by the number of PCs on site, particularly public access PCs. Users who spend large periods of time off site – arguably all FE students and all distance learners – are likely to experience access difficulties. Some organizations do provide an authentication system for access to the campus network but this is not very common, and does in itself present another authorization barrier.

Eduserv Athens

Eduserv Athens is a comprehensive access management system which controls access to over 260 e-resources. With one Athens username issued by the organization, the user can be authorized for access to all the organization's Athens resources. These usernames can be used anywhere, anytime, thus empowering the user, and maximizing the investment in e-resources.

Athens provides a range of options for creating usernames for authorized users with options to:

- create users manually
- allow users to self-register from a restricted IP address range

- bulk upload usernames from another data source, e.g. student registry.

These facilities, driven simply from a web browser, have enabled librarians to provide access to e-resources, often with no input from the IT department. However, if an organization already has an established set of usernames, perhaps for network PCs or a VLE, then the Athens usernames are an additional administrative burden, and a complication for the user which can lead to many customer service calls. Athens have therefore added to their toolkit the ability to use a set of usernames nominated by the organization. As long as genuine users can be identified, under the terms of the licence for an e-resource the organization can use its own set of usernames for access to Athens-protected resources. This is called devolved or federated authentication (AthensDA).

Use your VLE

The usernames can be the ones used to access the organization's VLE, or the organization's portal – whichever is most useful for the organization, and which best facilitates access for the user. Users are authorized for access to Athens-protected resources simply by logging in to the VLE.

When the University of Ulster hooked their Athens resources into their VLE, usage of e-resources increased sharply, and calls to their helpdesks about Athens declined sharply.

Details of the University of Ulster's WebCT implementation, showing seamless access to module- or course-orientated material are available on the Athens web site (www.eduserv.org.uk/athens).

… Or your lightweight directory access protocol (LDAP)

Sussex University have recently deployed Athens DA, using network usernames, their LDAP Directory, and other databases for access to their Electronic Library. Read their case study in the May 2004 issue of *CILIP Update* at: http://www.cilip.org.uk/publications/updatemagazine/archive/archive2004/may/update0405c.htm

In fact, AthensDA can work with any authentication system. Eight institutions in UK further

and higher education have live implementations, with over 40 in the integration phase; many of these are expected to go live for the next academic year.

Shibboleth compliance

AthensDA operates within a portal environment, unlike the Shibboleth architecture, so is ideal for use within your VLE or portal environment. By the end of the year, AthensDA will be fully Shibboleth compliant, so any investment now in AthensDA will be future-proof, should a number of e-resources elect to adopt the Shibboleth architecture.

Eduserv Athens are also committed to building an Athens-Shibboleth gateway this year, which will allow organizations who act as Shibboleth origins to access Athens-protected resources; and Athens-registered organizations, whether devolved or not, to access Shibboleth targets (e-resources).

How easy is it?

To implement AthensDA is a simple task for an experienced programmer. Eduserv provides comprehensive documentation and technical support to assist in the implementation process. Reference implementations for perl, Windows and Java already exist, and case studies will be provided for all the major VLE platforms.

So go to it!

Use your own usernames – that your users already know and remember – for access to Athens-protected resources. Facilitate their access and maximize your investment in e-resources.

■ **Lyn Norris**
Manager
Eduserv Athens
Queen Anne House, 11 Charlotte Street
Bath BA1 2NE, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1225 474347
Fax: +44 (0)1225 474332
E-mail: lyn.norris@eduserv.org.uk
http://www.eduserv.org.uk/athens/