

An E-learning System Architecture based on Cloud Computing

Md. Anwar Hossain Masud, Xiaodi Huang

Abstract—The massive proliferation of affordable computers, Internet broadband connectivity and rich education content has created a global phenomenon in which information and communication technology (ICT) is being used to transform education. Therefore, there is a need to redesign the educational system to meet the needs better. The advent of computers with sophisticated software has made it possible to solve many complex problems very fast and at a lower cost. This paper introduces the characteristics of the current E-Learning and then analyses the concept of cloud computing and describes the architecture of cloud computing platform by combining the features of E-Learning. The authors have tried to introduce cloud computing to e-learning, build an e-learning cloud, and make an active research and exploration for it from the following aspects: architecture, construction method and external interface with the model.

Keywords—Architecture, Cloud Computing, E-learning, Information Technology

I. INTRODUCTION

At present, most of the conventional education forms are becoming not being suitable for requirements of social progress and educational development and not being able to catch up with the changes of learning demand in time, thus computer networks have brought opportunities for it. However, in traditional web-based e-learning mode, system construction and maintenance are located in interior of educational institutions or enterprises, which results in a lot of problems existed, such as a lot of investment needed, but without capital gains to return, without development potential and staying power. Cloud computing is becoming an attractive technology due to its dynamic scalability and effective usage of the resources; it can be utilized under circumstances where the availability of resources is limited.

As cloud computing has become a research hotspot among modern technologies, researchers pay more attentions to its applications. As concerned as cloud computing applied in the field of education, a lot of problems had been studied, such as the technology for future distance education cloud [1], teaching information system [2] [3] [4], the integration of teaching resources[5], teaching systems development[6].

In integration of e-learning and network, emphasis is placed on building of software and hardware platform of e-learning system, functional structure, network security management and training, information technology integration to teaching[7], campus network environment [8], online education[9], semantic web technologies-based multi-agent system [10] [11].

From the above we can see that until now, scholars have made a lot of researches on the following two aspects: cloud computing used in the field of education, and integration of network and e-learning. The former places the emphasis on distance education, information system application, instructional system design, information resource development, online course-building, etc. The latter's emphasis is placed on construction of campus e-learning system, e-learning model on campus network, e-learning system based on agent model and e-learning grid and so on. But until now the research applying cloud computing to e-learning is not significantly reported. In order to give a full play for the advantages of cloud computing, in this paper, we tried to attach cloud computing to e-learning, build an e-learning cloud, and made an active research and exploration for it.

II. CLOUD COMPUTING

In recent years, cloud computing as a new kind of advanced technology accelerates the innovation for the computer industry. Cloud computing is a computing model based on networks, especially based on the Internet, whose task is to ensure that users can simply use the computing resources on demand and pay money according to their usage by a metering pattern similar to water and electricity consumption. Therefore, it brings a new business model, where the services it provides are becoming computing resources [12].

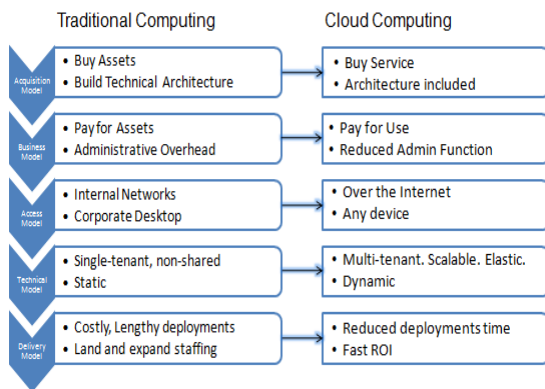
Cloud computing is highly scalable and creates virtualized resources that can be made available to users. Users do not require any special knowledge about the concept of Cloud computing to connect their computers to the server where applications have been installed and use them. Users can communicate through Internet with remote servers. These servers can exchange their computing slots themselves [13]. Cloud computing is one of the new technology trends likely to have a significant impact on the teaching and learning environment [14].

In Cloud computing, resources can be either externally owned (public Cloud – as provided by Google and Amazon) or internally owned (private Cloud). Public Clouds offer

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access to external users who are typically billed on a pay-as-you-use basis. The private Cloud is built for the access within the enterprise where the users can utilize the facility without any charge [15]. The methods of meeting challenges such as user interface; task distribution and coordination are explained and evaluated in [16]. Praveena and Betsy [17] have described the application of Cloud in universities. Delic and Riley [18] assessed the current state of enterprise knowledge management and how it would turn into a more global, dependable and efficient infrastructure with Cloud computing. They have discussed architecture as well as applications. Cloud computing attributes can be visualised from the following comparison.



III. FROM TRADITIONAL E-LEARNING NETWORK TO CLOUD E-LEARNING

E-learning is an Internet-based learning process, using Internet technology to design, implement, select, manage, support and extend learning, which will not replace traditional education methods, but will greatly improve the efficiency of education. As e-learning has a lot of advantages like flexibility, diversity, measurement, opening and so on, it will become a primary way for learning in the new century as in Fig. 1.

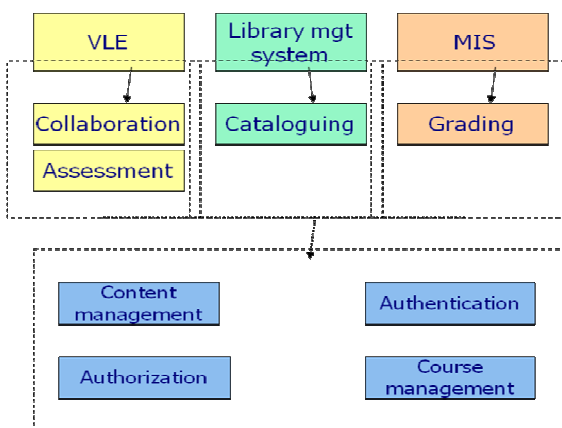


Fig. 1 Architecture of a simplified Learning System

Mendez [19] illustrates that in traditional web-based learning mode, system construction and maintenance are located inside the educational institutions or enterprises, which led to a lot of problems, such as significant investment needed but without capital gains for them, which leads to a lack of development potential. In contrast, cloud-based e-learning model introduces scale efficiency mechanism, i.e. construction of e-learning system is entrusted to cloud computing suppliers, which can make providers and users to achieve a win-win situation. The cloud-based environment supports the creation of new generation of e-learning systems, able to run on a wide range of hardware devices, while storing data inside the cloud.

Ouf [20] has presented an innovative e-learning ecosystem based on cloud computing and Web 2.0 technologies. The article analyses the most important cloud-based services provided by public cloud computing environments such as Google App Engine, Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud (EC2) or Windows Azure, and highlights the advantages of deploying E-Learning 2.0 applications for such an infrastructure. The authors also identified the benefits of cloud-based E-Learning 2.0 applications (scalability, feasibility, or availability) and underlined the enhancements regarding the cost and risk management.

Chandral [21] focused on current e-learning architecture model and on issues in current e-learning applications. The article presents the Hybrid Instructional Model as the blend of the traditional classroom and online education and its customization for e-learning applications running on the cloud computing infrastructure. The authors underline the e-learning issues, especially the openness, scalability, and development/customization costs. The existing e-learning systems are not dynamically scalable and hard to extend – integration with other e-learning systems is very expensive. The article proposed the hybrid cloud delivery model that can help in fixing the mentioned problems.

In this article a new paradigm is highlighted in educational area by introducing the cloud computing in order to increase the scalability, flexibility and availability of e-learning systems. The authors have evaluated the traditional e-learning networking model, with its advances and issues, and the possibility to move the e-learning system out of schools or enterprises, inside a cloud computing infrastructure. The separation of entity roles and cost effectiveness can be considered important advantages. The institutions will be responsible for the education process, content management and delivery, and the vendor takes care of system construction, maintenance, development and management. The e-learning system can be scaled, both horizontally and vertically, and the educational organization is charged according to the number of used servers that depends on the number of students as in Fig. 2.

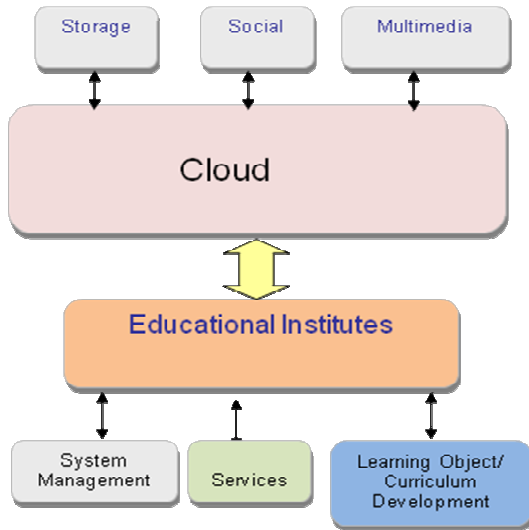


Fig. 2 Modified E-learning System Architecture.

IV. CLOUD BASED E-LEARNING ARCHITECTURE

The e-learning cannot completely replace teachers; it is only an updating for technology, concepts and tools, giving new content, concepts and methods for education, so the roles of teachers cannot be replaced. The teachers will still play leading roles and participate in developing and making use of e-learning cloud. The blended learning strategy should improve the educational act. Moreover, the interactive content and virtual collaboration guarantee a high retention factor.

On the other hand, E-learning cloud is a migration of cloud computing technology in the field of e-learning, which is a future e-learning infrastructure, including all the necessary hardware and software computing resources engaging in e-learning. After these computing resources are virtualized, they can be afforded in the form of services for educational institutions, students and businesses to rent computing resources. E-learning cloud architecture is shown in Fig. 3[22][23].

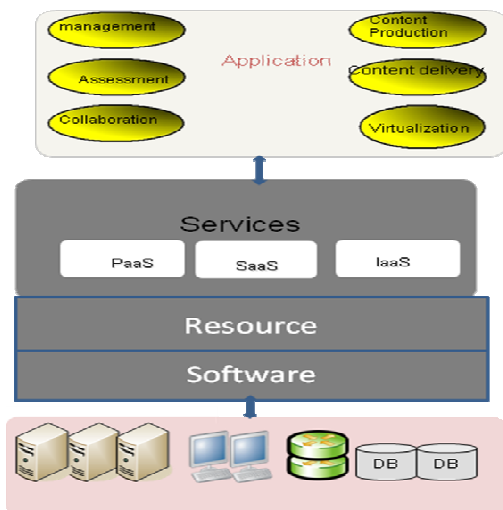


Fig. 3 E-learning Cloud Architecture.

The proposed e- learning cloud architecture can be divided into the following layers: Infrastructure layer as a dynamic and scalable physical host pool, software resource layer that offers a unified interface for e-learning developers, resource management layer that achieves loose coupling of software and hardware resources, service layer, containing three levels of services (software as a service, platform as a service and infrastructure as a service), application layer that provides with content production, content delivery, virtual laboratory, collaborative learning, assessment and management features.

A. Infrastructure layer is composed of information infrastructure and teaching resources. Information infrastructure contains Internet/Intranet, system software, information management system and some common software and hardware; teaching resources is accumulated mainly in traditional teaching model and distributed in different departments and domain. This layer is located in the lowest level of cloud service middleware, the basic computing power like physical memory, CPU, memory is provided by the layer. Through the use of virtualization technology, physical server, storage and network form virtualization group for being called by upper software platform. The physical host pool is dynamic and scalable, new physical host can be added in order to enhance physical computing power for cloud middleware services. The following Fig. 4 depicts this in a clearer view.

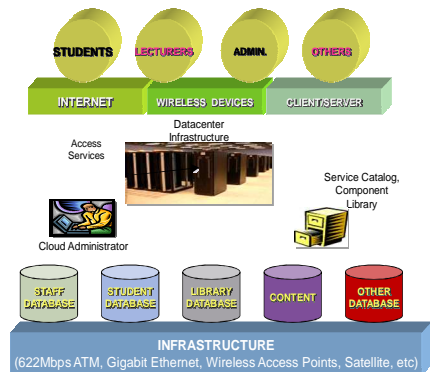


Fig. 4 Proposed Infrastructure Layer in an expandable view

B. Software resource layer mainly is composed by operating system and middleware. Through middleware technology, a variety of software resources are integrated to provide a unified interface for software developers, so they can easily develop a lot of applications based on software resources and embed them in the cloud, making them available for cloud computing users.

C. Resource management layer is the key to achieve loose coupling of software resources and hardware resources. Through integration of virtualization and cloud computing scheduling strategy, on-demand free flow and distribution of software over various hardware resources can be achieved.

D. Service layer has three levels of services namely, SaaS (Software as a service), Paas (Platform as a service), IaaS (Infrastructure as a service). In SaaS, cloud computing service is provided to customers. As is different from

traditional software, users use software via the Internet, not to need a one-time purchase for software and hardware, and not to need to maintain and upgrade, simply paying a monthly fee.

E. Application layer is the specific applications of integration the teaching resources in the cloud computing model, including interactive courses and sharing the teaching resources. The interactive programs are mainly for the teachers, according to the learners and teaching needs, taken full advantage of the underlying information resources after finishing made, and the course content as well as the progress may at any time adjust according to the feedback, and can be more effectiveness than traditional teaching. Sharing of teaching resources include teaching material resources, teaching information resources (such as digital libraries, information centers), as well as the full sharing of human resources. This layer mainly consists of content production, educational objectives, content delivery technology, assessment and management component [24].

V. EXPECTED BENEFIT FROM THE ARCHITECTURE

The intended advantages derived from the proposed architecture are as follows:

a) Powerful computing and storage capacity: Cloud based E-learning architecture locates the computing and data in a large number of distributed computers, the sea of clouds in the tens of thousands of computers to provide powerful computing power and huge data storage space, puts the "cloud" as a service available to students via the Internet.

b) High availability. Through the integration of mass storage and high-performance computing power, this system can provide a higher quality of service. Cloud computing system can automatically detect the node failure and exclude it, do not affect the normal operation of the system.

c) High security. In the cloud computing model, data is storied intensively. Relying on one or more data center, the managers manage the unified data, allocate the resources, balance load, deploy the software, control security, and do the reliable real time monitoring, thus guarantee the users' data security to the greatest possible degree.

d) Virtualization. Virtualization is the most important characteristics of this type of architecture. Each application deployment environment and physical platform is not related. It is managed, expensed, migrated, and backup through virtualization platform. It put the underlying hardware, including servers, storage and networking equipment, comprehensive virtualization, in order to build a resources pool of shared, distributed on-demand.

e) The major advantage of the proposal is that it aims at providing easy access to costly software running on high performance processors to rural students at institutions which lack considerable facilities. Considerable investment would be required to implement this architecture, but the benefits would easily justify the cost. This advantage can be visualised from the following Fig. 5 which illustrates the connectivity tier of the proposed architecture.

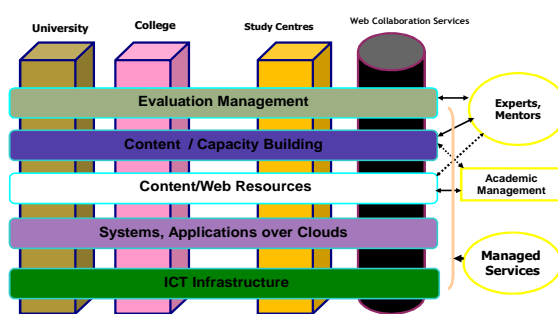


Fig. 5 Connectivity Scenario of the Institutions in the proposed architecture

f) In the classic e-learning model, teachers assign teaching tasks, conduct regular lectures, or train students' skills. The students attend the online autonomous learning act and cooperative learning sessions, or accomplish teachers' assignments. But in the proposed architecture teachers also answer students' questions and offer essential teaching to major and difficult points. In addition, teachers can also use multimedia to enhance teaching content. Students work out their own learning plans, determining learning methods autonomously. They conduct on-line autonomous learning when they study each unit, finish its test via Internet and do some statistics to the test results. Teachers also encourage students to cooperate with each other to finish simple learning tasks or complex group-based projects. Through cooperative learning, students cannot only acquire knowledge, their team spirit and coordination will also be fostered, skills in dealing with people will be improved and abilities to express themselves will be enhanced. Thus the learning and teaching will be more interactive which is the demand of the age. The interactive mode of the proposed architecture is furnished in the Fig. 6.

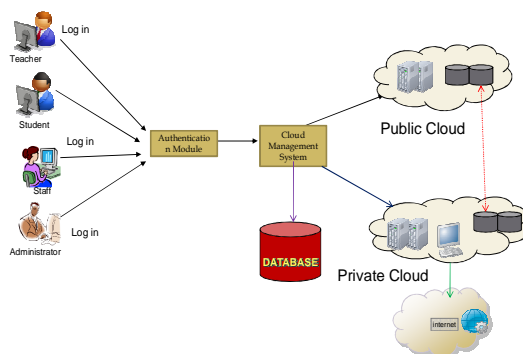


Fig. 6 Interactive mode of the proposed architecture

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Cloud computing has recently emerged as a compelling paradigm for managing and delivering services over the internet. The rise of cloud computing is rapidly changing landscape of Information technology and ultimately turning to the long-held promise of utility computing into a reality. Cloud computing can help communities and nations, can transform education. An entire world of knowledge can now be made available to teachers and students through cloud-based services that can be accessed anytime, anywhere, from any device. By helping countries worldwide, lowering the cost and simplifying the delivery of educational services, cloud computing enables students across the globe to acquire the 21st-century skills and training they need to compete and succeed in the global information society.

Present economic situation will force different educational institutions and organizations to consider adopting a cloud solution. Universities have begun to adhere to this initiative and there are proofs that indicate significant decreasing of expenses due to the implementation of cloud solutions. The aim of our work was to identify an architecture which will be using Cloud Computing within higher education. Mainly, we have considered the benefits of cloud architecture. Future research will include a study regarding the attitude and strategy for migration to the proposed architecture based on clouds.

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