Process Control Model in Web-Based e-Learning

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Abstract. Nowadays most web-based learning systems have already utilized advanced technologies like web services and etc., even grid computing to minimize the gap between traditional learning and e-Learning. Meanwhile, there is a trend towards achieving automatic and personalized learning. However, learners may find difficulty navigating through learning resources on their own; process control in e-Learning systems is still not fully considered. This paper proposes the learning path concept and its formal definition method, and then a process control model for e-learning is proposed to implement the process control from e-Learning applications to learners. This work improves the learning efficiency by providing teachers tools for designing courses with learning paths and giving students the opportunities to achieve an orderly learning experience through process control strategy. Some questions in application and future works are also discussed.

Keywords: e-learning, fuzzy Petri net, workflow, process control.

1 Introduction

E-Learning gradually becomes the focus of modern society interests as a new education style, which uses network technologies to break the temporal and spatial limit in traditional education with the hope to offer learners an individual learning experience at anywhere anytime. Web service technology is used to enhance the e-Learning systems to communicate more efficiently and share data more easily [1] [2], even grid computing begins to be considered in improving the computing capability of e-Learning system [3]. With those efforts, e-Learning systems have showed us their breaking the limit in flexibility, distributed computing and storage capabilities so as to provide an open and more efficient learning environment.

Nevertheless, learners are prone to reduce learning efficiency and even get lost during learning activities if they are lack of the strategy of searching and organizing learning resources in great amount of distributed resources. Some crucial tasks done in the traditional classroom have not been completely transferred into e-Learning systems. We believe that a teacher's preparation for lessons is of great importance for his students. In traditional teaching mode, teachers spend much time organizing the teaching contents and adjust them dynamically in the classroom so as to lead students to efficient learning. Some popular products, such as WebCT Vista [4], WBT TopClass [5], Lotus Learning Management System [6], still do not fully consider giving

instructors opportunities to define a structural course for guiding students to navigate learning resources, although some of them allow assembling several different courses to build a new one. In recent years e-Learning systems have promised to change the way people learn. However open issues still remain, in particular actual e-Learning environments do not consider learning activities as part of the process of learning [7].

Recently, workflow technology is used to design and develop process-oriented courses and trace student process, like Virtual Campus [7], Flex-eL [8]. Liu [9] and Chen [10] also provide Petri net-based formal method solutions. However, they all only integrate local learning resources; do not enable e-Learning services. Though these applications adopting workflow technology can achieve the automation of procedures according to a set of rules, they lack formal definition and analysis method.

Considering those disadvantages in process control of learning activities in e-Learning systems, we proposed a process control model in service environment which allows using extended fuzzy Petri net as formal method to define structural courses and to provide learners an adaptive learning environment for navigating learning resources one by one in sequence. By deploying the defined course in this model, different learning object of a course provided by different services can be accessed regarding to learner's study progress.

This paper is structured as follows: In Section 2 we introduce the concept of learning path, and the related technologies for describing and implementing it. Then Section 3 introduces the formal description of learning path and evaluation method. Section 4 shows the process control based e-Learning model. Section 5 we discuss the algorithm and implementation issues on this model. Section 6 illustrates how the learners can interact with our model through the learning path. Finally, Section 7 draws some conclusions and outlines directions for future work.

2   Concept of Learning Path

In an attempt to implement the process control between e-Learning applications and users, we need workflow technologies which are concerned with the automation of procedures where documents, information or tasks are passed between actors according to a defined set of rules to achieve an overall business goal [11]. Once a workflow template is defined, it can be implemented by deploying workflow management system (WFMS). Generally, in an e-Learning application where courses are defined as workflows, the participators of workflow are instructors and learners, the activities of workflow correspond to learning activities of learners such as searching learning objects, browsing learning objects, taking exams and so on.

In this paper, a learning path relates to the navigation sequence through a structured course and a learning path node is a learning object associates with a learning object service like a chapter or a section of a course. The activity of one node indicates invoking relevant LO service. There are also conditions and strategies for path choice between LOs, which can be added into operations like AND-SPLIT, AND-JOIN, OR-SPLIT, OR-JOIN, etc. Fig. 1 is an intuitionistic view of simple learning path for a certain course. LO B and C must be accomplished after A. LO D, E and F need to be finished after LO A, B and C. LO B and C are synchronous (AND-SPLIT/JOIN) which can be learnt at the same time with no requirements of sequence, while E and F could be chosen alternatively (OR-SPLIT/JOIN).
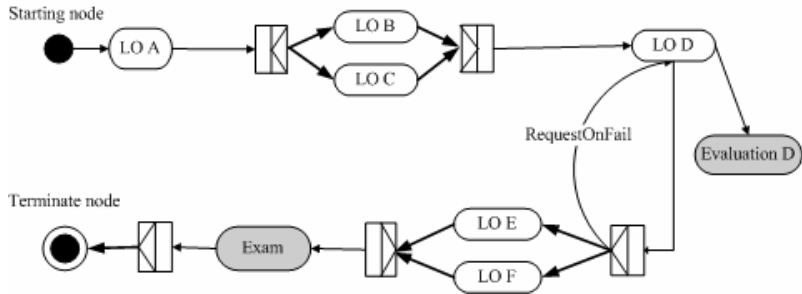
Fig. 1. Simple Sample of Learning Path

As nodes contain the important resources for learner's learning activities, the study result has tight relationship with the complete result of those nodes. In each node, recording its own status value for each learner is needed. There are six status value can be used according to SCORM data model definition[12]: "Passed", "Failed", "Completed", "Uncompleted", "Not attempted" and "Browsed". The initial status value of a node should be set to "Not attempted", then when the status value can be transited from "Not attempted" to "Uncompleted" can be decided by different strategies. For example, the system transits the status value to "Uncompleted" while it ensures that the learner has got the learning object already, etc. After the learner finishes learning a LO, the status value can be changed to "Completed". If there is a test for the learning object, the status value could be changed to "Passed" or "Failed", otherwise "Browsed".

Here we extend fuzzy Petri net for formal description of learning path. Looney [13] first modified the typical Petri nets which can represent the fuzzy production rules of a rule-based system to achieve fuzzy rule-based reasoning. In the e-Learning system, a fuzzy Petri net is associated with a course and path definition with different learning content structures and different transition conditions according to students' learning result of the previous objects.

The implementation description of learning path takes the industry standard BPEL4WS (Business Process Execution Language for Web Services, BPEL for short) [14]. BPEL provides a language for defining workflows between web services which could fulfill different activities such as web service invoking, data manipulation, faults tolerance and process termination so as to combine them all together and build a complex process. These activities could be nested into structural activities defining the running mode of activities within. For example, serial or parallel are determined by certain conditions. BPEL calls service which interacts with it as partner which has a unique name and corresponding WSDL document [15]. Developers can define the relationships between partners through a set of rules. More important, the process can interact between users and services by starting with the "receive" operation in response to the client request and ends with noticing users by "reply" operation.

The deployment and implement of learning path also require workflow management system (WFMS). In WFMS, different instances of the same workflow could run simultaneously where each one has its own status. In e-Learning environment, the same learning activities of different students can be run simultaneously and WFMS helps to maintain their own performance statuses. At present, the interaction between users and

WFMS is based on documents. However, what kind of document should be submitted to WFMS by users when they complete studying a LO and want to know the next step is the problem we must solve. We will discuss it in Section 6.

3 Learning Path Description and Evaluation

After introducing the concept of learning path, we extend the fuzzy Petri net model [16] as learning path (LP) to provide course definition with learning sequence. LP can be graphically presented by two types of nodes which are places and transitions, where each place may or may not contain a token associated with a proposition and a truth value between 0 and 1, and each transition is associated with a certainty factor value (CF) and a threshold value between 0 and 1. Thus an LP model can be defined as an 6-tuple:

LP = (FPN, M, K_p, K_t, E_p, S_p), where FPN is a basic fuzzy Petri net:
$P = \{p_1, p_2, …, p_n\}$ is a finite set of places;
$T = \{t_1, t_2, …, t_n\}$ is a finite set of transitions;
$D = \{d_1, d_2, …, d_n\}$ is a finite set of propositions;
$P \cap T \cap D = \Phi$, $|P| = |D|$;

I: $T{\rightarrow}P^{\infty}$ is the input function mapping from transitions to bags of places, a directed arc from p_j to t_i exists if $p_j \in I(t_i)$;

O: $T{\rightarrow}P^{\infty}$ is the output function mapping from transitions to bags of places, a directed arc from t_i to p_j exists if $p_j \in O(t_i)$;

f: $T{\rightarrow}[0,1]$ is an association function mapping from transitions to real values between zero and one, if $f(t_i) = \mu_i$, where $\mu_i \in [0,1]$, t_i is said to be associated with a real value μ_i;

α: $P{\rightarrow}[0,1]$ is an association function mapping from places to real values between zero and one, if $\alpha(p_i) = y_i$, where $y_i \in [0,1]$ and $\beta(p_i) = d_i$, then the degree of truth of proposition d_i is y_i;

β: $P{\rightarrow}D$ is an association function, a bijective mapping from places to propositions, if $\beta(p_i) = d_i$, where $d_i \in D$, p_i is said to be associated with the proposition d_i;

M: $T{\rightarrow}\exp r$ specifies the addition modes for firing the transition;
K_p: $P{\rightarrow}E_p$ is one to one mapping from places to evaluation learning object set E_p;
K_t: $T{\rightarrow}S_p$ is one to one mapping from transitions to learning object set S_p.
Next we give detail explanation about some elements in LP.

Place: denotes learning object service which can be accessed from service provider, and the token in it maintains the status of the service. The learning object associates with meta-data which describes the learning resources in a common way and facilities the search. There is also a kind of learning object we call it evaluation learning object which is developed according to IMS's Question & Test Interoperability Specification (QTI) [17] to help to evaluate the user's learning performance.

Transition: moves from one learning object to another. A transition t_i is enabled if for all $p_j \in I(t_i)$, $\alpha(p_i) \geq \lambda$, where λ is a threshold value and $\lambda \in [0,1]$. By setting different threshold values whether the user can pass current learning object can be decided. Firing transitions can be considered as firing fuzzy production rules. For example, 5

basic rule types according to 16 can be used to describe the learning path routing, the larger the value of μ_i, the more the rule is believed in:

Sequence R_i: IF d_j THEN d_k (CF $=\mu_i$)
AND-SPLIT R_i: IF d_j THEN d_{k1} and d_{k2} and … and d_{kn} (CF $=\mu_i$)
AND-JOIN R_i: IF d_{j1} and d_{j2} and … and d_{jn} THEN d_k (CF $=\mu_i$)
OR-SPLIT R_i: IF d_j THEN d_{k1} or d_{k2} or … or d_{kn} (CF $=\mu_i$)
OR-JOIN R_i: IF d_{j1} or d_{j2} or … or d_{jn} THEN d_k (CF $=\mu_i$)

In addition, M is a firing mode function: specifies the method how to trigger the firing of a transition. It could be:

Auto: the firing task can be triggered immediately when it is enabled without student's request.

Action: the firing task is triggered by student's actions like clicking a hyperlink on the web when it is enabled.

Delay: the firing task is triggered after a predefined period which can be used to force the student to complete his learning step within a certain time.

To see whether the firing condition is met needs tests for given LOs, because the evaluation results can be used to decide whether a student can move from one LO to the post-condition LOs. According to this consideration, we propose an evaluation learning object set E_p to which different LOs can be mapped by K_p. The evaluation LO includes reusable evaluation information and interfaces for user input and score output. In addition, each transition can be mapped to LOs set S_p by K_t to specify review LO if a student failed a test.

LOs and evaluation LOs have reusability for different courses due to their standard metadata description. Different evaluation LOs can be used for the same LO, but only one evaluation LO can be bound to a LO at the same time. Thus, by setting different threshold values of a transition, even though using the same evaluation LO, the teacher can achieve different difficulty levels for a variety of students. Then comparing the token value as evaluation grade with the threshold value as passing level can see whether a student achieved the requirement. Here we present a simple evaluation procedure for calculating the token value: let the full grade of the evaluation be 1, an evaluation LO includes n evaluation items, their difficulties are $d_1, d_2,\ldots,d_n$ ($d_n \in [0,1]$). The higher the value is, the more difficult the item is. A student's actual grade for each item is $m_1, m_2,\ldots, m_n$ ($m_n \in [0,1]$),

$$m_i = \begin{cases} d_i - \dfrac{\sum_n d_j}{n}, & \text{if wrong} \\ 1, & \text{if correct} \end{cases}$$

then the final score can be assigned to token value: $\dfrac{\sum m_i}{n} \rightarrow y_i$, y_i is the study grade, where $y_i \in [0,1]$. The higher the study grade y_i is, the more the evaluation result of certain part in a course is satisfied.

Let PR be a set of fuzzy production rules, NPR be a set of fuzzy production rules for normal navigation through the learning path, RPR be a set of fuzzy production rules for reviewing after failure on tests. The ith fuzzy production rule is formulated as follows:

IF $y_j \geq \lambda$, THEN $PR_i = NPR_i$ (threshold value = λ)
NPR_i: IF d_j THEN d_k (CF = μ_i)
ELSE $PR_i = RPR_i$
RPR_i: IF d_j THEN d_l (CF = μ_i, $d_l = R_p(t_i)$)

where y_j is the token value in d_j, its value is between zero and one and will be regarded as learning result from the student. The threshold value of t_i is λ which is used to determine the next reachable place according to using NPR_i or RPR_i. For example, d_j is "LO_j is accessed for learning", d_k is "LO_k is accessed for learning", d_l is "LO_l is accessed for reviewing", depending on the token value d_j and threshold value λ, transition t_i can decide whether fire to d_k for further learning on satisfied test result or to d_l for reviewing on test failure.

4 Proposed Process Control Model

A defined learning path itself cannot run and interact with the learners, so there is need of an open model both for teachers to define, map to composition services, deploy their courses, and for learners to be guided by that model.
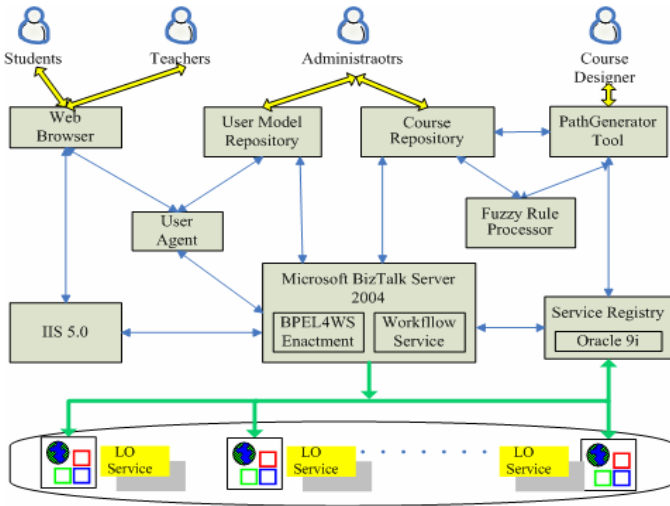
Fig. 2. Proposed Process Control Model

An open and self-centred learning environment not only shares learning objects, but also provides enactment of learning path for various roles. The emerging web service and grid service technology bring us an open environment where learning objects can be searched in registry and accessed through portTypes. Workflow technology can combine services providing different learning objects and implement orderly learning activities by invoking relevant services.

Therefore, we attempted to integrate web service and workflow technology to build a process control model PCM. PCM contains the WFMS, web server, a collection of Web Services, some repositories and other useful tools. Fig. 2 demonstrates the main model of PCM.

LO Service. There is many standards in description of learning object metadata. This model is as a test bed for CELTS (Chinese E-Learning Technology Standard, http://www.celtsc.edu.cn). CELTS standard specifies a data schema for describing the structure of a metadata instance. So we could use CELTS schema to describe the attributes of learning object and the binding language of CELTS schema is XML. The use of CELTS for description of metadata could greatly facilitate searching of learning objects.

As we can see, there are various LO services at the lowest layer of PCM, which are managed by various learning objects providers to provide different learning resources in different areas. These services could be distributed physically and run on different platforms. They also could be web services or grid services (Recent system mainly uses web service. We will offer support for grid service in later research). Each LO service has individual hardware and software environments and organization strategies.

LO services provide functions as follows:

To publish learning objects by uploading metadata XML files to LO service registry;
To manage published learning objects including update and delete operations;
To support searching of learning objects in local area based on metadata;
To support acquisition of learning objects;

LO service registry. LO services publish respective WSDL documents in LO service registry. They also publish learning objects by uploading metadata XML files of learning objects. Meantime, service registry supports searching of registered learning objects with different searching conditions/in different searching ways. Oracle 9i database which supports XML files storage and search is used in this registry.

PathGenerator Tool. PathGenerator is a tool to define courses with learning path. Course designers (When there isn't such special role, it could be competent manager or teacher.) search for the needed learning objects by PathGenerator from LO service registry, define the relationships and orders of them, add in strategy of path choice, and finally establish a course template described by BPEL which will then be transferred to course repository. Course designers can also establish different templates for a single course so as to implement different learning targets for different learners. Fig. 3 is the UI of PathGenerator tool.

Fuzzy Rule Processor. As we know a FPN is associated with a set of fuzzy rules, this rule processor can transit defined rules to learning path, then it validates the rationality of designed learning path, and reasons the learning path to avoid deadlock. We can treat the work procedure of rule processor as solving a fuzzy problem related to a certain learning path.

Course Repository. When a student starts a course, WFMS takes the course template chosen by learners or designated by instructors from course repository and generates an

instance of such template. Course repository allows course designers to view course templates available and modify on recently course templates to create a new one while it also permits administrators or instructors to view them.
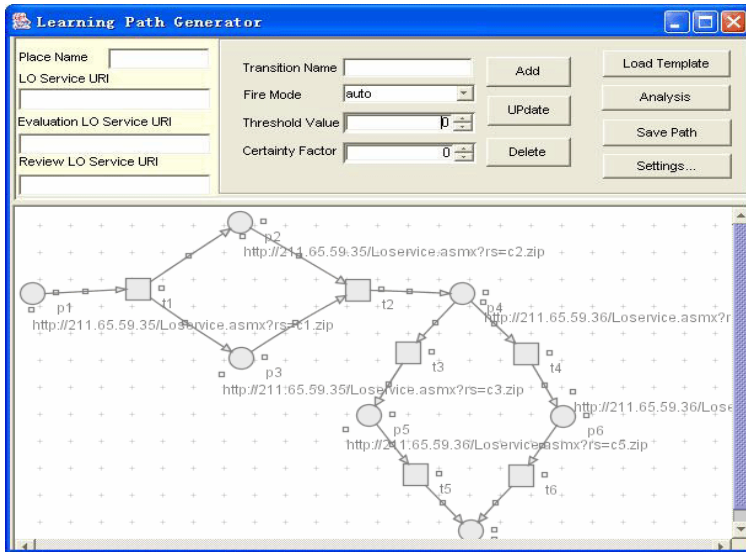

Fig. 3. PathGenerator Tool UI

User Model Repository. A well-designed user model should include a user's knowledge and past learning experiences as an important evidence for system to provide individual education, so that the system can skip the knowledge a student already mastered to help he/she finds the information actually needed quickly. In PCM, user model is designed as a copy of course instance with additional status value in each activity node to track learner's study paces. When an instance of a course restarts, WFMS bypasses completed nodes according to user model and first locates the node the learner needs currently. To users, it seems not to start from the first node. (Actually, workflow instance still begins from the first node but just jumped over some unnecessary nodes).

WFMS. We choose Microsoft Biztalk Server 2004 as the workflow engine in PCM. A course with defined learning path actually determines the process of how and when to get each learning object. WFMS has to follow the course definition to call relevant services. Course learning includes the request to LO service and the interaction with students which are implemented in BizTalk by invoking external services and local service. External services correspond to the LO services while local service interacts between learners and WFMS.

Following Fig. 4 illustrates a typical learning sequence scenario when a learner starts his own learning process according to pre-defined course learning path and his user model.
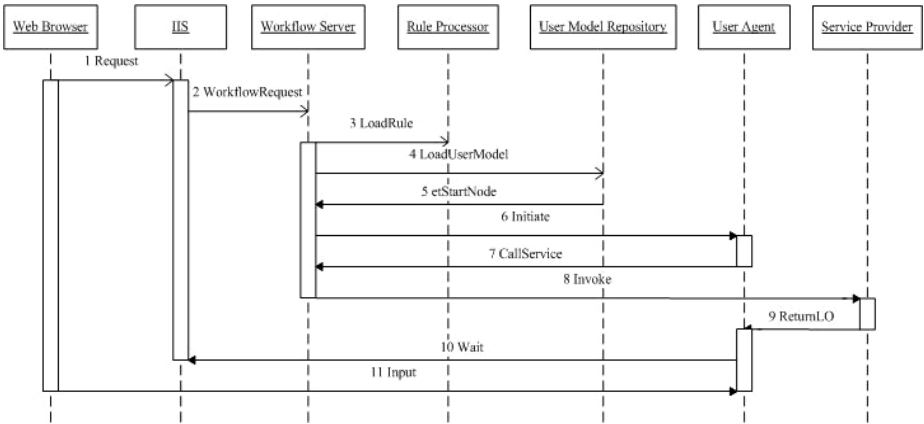
Fig. 4. Typical learning sequences in e-Learning model

5   Generation of Learning Path in PCM

Generations of learning path for a course contains two important steps which are searching for needed LOs from description of published LOs metadata, mapping the LP to combination of needed LO services and publishing them into workflow management system. Now we introduce the design and implementation issues from two aspects.

5.1   Search of Learning Objects

First, we need to find out the relevant learning objects according to description of all learning objects metadata before defining a workflow-based course. In the platform adopts PCM, we need a method to search specific information included in metadata XML in service registry. We choose XQuery [18] as the search method for learning objects because XQuery is the standard designed by W3C for searching several kinds of XML source formats. It is of great importance that it could carry out search with complex condition not only in a single XML file but also among several XML files, rational databases, objects and other non-structural documents. This property does accord with the requirements of cross-searching for relevant LOs in LO service registry.

5.2   Mapping LP to Services Composition

Next, we generate the implementation description of learning path defined by PathGenerator Tool. Considering that each learning object in a certain learning path is provided by learning object service, the idea of choosing BPEL comes from that course is an integration of several learning objects services. As a kind of standard process description language, BPEL does not rely on detail workflow management system which facilitates easy system update or replacement. Thus, BPEL is exactly the suitable standard which integrates the services on Internet in our model. PathGenerator gets the WSDL documents of services where each LO comes from, and then takes defined LP

and corresponding WSDL documents as the evidence for the BPEL code. Due to the support of structural activities by BPEL, activities which are to be run could be described as orderly structure. Therefore, fuzzy production rules could be translated into activities in BPEL. Table 1 gives the correspondence between them.

Table 1. Correspondence between fuzzy production rules and BPEL

Fuzzy production rule	BPEL description	BPEL Function
Single rule	Sequence	Including a serial of orderly run activities and a final activity to end process.
"or" rule	Switch	Choosing a branch with *true* condition.
"and" rule	Flow	Synchronization and parallel between activities.

Suppose that we have already had a course defined by LP model, the works that should be done in advance includes:

1) Define each part of a course. Normal propositions $d_1, d_2, ..., d_n$ are drawn from the main part of a course, the reviewing propositions $d_{n+1}, d_{n+2}, ..., d_{n+m}$, where $n \geq m$.

2) Define the mapping function from LOs to evaluation LOs wherever the LO needs an evaluation procedure.

3) Define the production rules. By setting the threshold value λ to each transition, the relationship between normal propositions and reviewing propositions will be established.

Fig. 5 shows a defined LP according to Fig. 1.
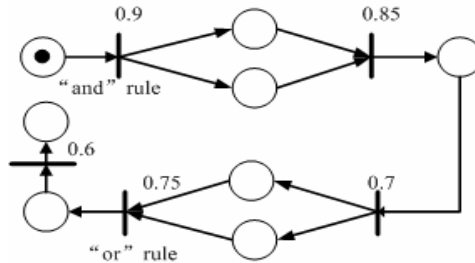
Fig. 5. Simple sample of LP

Now, we propose the brief mapping algorithm as follows, here, a concept introduced by Chen, Ke and Chang 16 can be used, allowing a set of places which is immediately reachable from a place p_i is called the immediate reachable set of p_i and is denoted by IRS(p_i).

Let PlaceActivity(p) be the function which generates codes for invoking the external LO service that provides LO according to p and the associated evaluation LO:

else if $|O(t_p)|$ =1 and $|I(t_p)| \neq 1$, t_p is either AND-JOIN or OR-JOIN transition, **then** the same procedure as above sequence operation.

Last, for each $p_i \in$ IRS(p), let $p = p_i$, if IRS(p) $\neq \Phi$, call ELN2BP(p), else p_i is either a leaf node or terminate node, return.

Step 3:

In a workflow-based course, the end of the course should be a definite terminate node. So if p is a leaf node, throw an error information to remind the teacher to redefine the LP model, and if p is the terminate node.

6   Interaction Between User Client and PCM

Workflow management system as a backbone of PCM plays an important role as a bridge between students and LO services, but BizTalk is designed for interaction with web services or code plug-ins. However, in a fruitful learning environment, WFMS needs to track students' activities [7]. So, we have built an interaction mechanism based on a designed local service we call it User Agent service. When the WFMS needs to get the user's input, it calls the User Agent service; the User Agent service waits for user's input and transfers it to WFMS. User Agent service is not only a service called by WFMS in PCM, but also responsible for maintenance of user models during the workflow run-time.

As a course template has user models according to it, which give important information for tracking study status and designing personalized course template, a mechanism for tracking user's activities in course study is needed. It is obvious that whether a user has gone through a node in learning path can be decided by checking whether he has accessed the LO related to that node. If a node in learning path doesn't bind any evaluation LO, an access to the relevant LO can be simply considered as having experienced the node. As far as considering a node binding an evaluation LO, as soon as the node status is assigned "completed", the evaluation LO will be called.

Fig. 6. GUI of Learning Path and User Agent

When a user starts a workflow course instance, a local User Agent service will be called at the same time a node active starts, User Agent service gets all node status information from the user model, bypasses all "passed" nodes and locates the node the user currently needs to learn. During the runtime of course learning, User Agent listens to user client's input, calls the corresponding next node activity, and returns the LO to the user. Fig. 6 shows the GUI presented to the user. On the right is the graphic presentation of course structure using Java Applet, and Microsoft Wizard has been chosen to present a vivid User Agent image service to the user.

7   Conclusion and Future Works

In this paper, a well-structured e-Learning model supported by the power of WFMS has been designed. A main contribution of this research is the formal description of learning path and the application of workflow technology in building and implementing workflow course in service environment. Our approach shows that students can benefit from this approach to study on their own pace, with own time arrangement by the guide of learning path.

The following research items need further discussion:

Now the resources in the learning path are related to existing learning objects, we try to design different course templates associated with abstract learning objects, then concrete learning objects are assigned to create different courses.

Design more rules for learning path choosing, support different composition ways for building larger course using existing course templates.

In a typical learning path, retrieving a learning object is achieved by calling a LO service. If the LO service becomes a grid service, a solution should be given to the grid services composition with BPEL.

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