Issues in E-Learning & Distance Education Video Series
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Reconsidering the Learning Management System

Summary

Learning management systems are a core and costly part of the IT infrastructure of just about every large educational organization today but do they provide good value? In this video, Dr. Mark Bullen questions the value of the LMS and argues there are alternatives that not only have the potential to save money but also to provide a more appropriate learning environment.

Twenty years ago the learning management system or LMS had just been invented and educators were just beginning to consider how it might be used. Today, it is a core and costly part of the IT infrastructure of just about every large educational organization.

But do learning management systems provide us with good value?

Are they really necessary or could we be using other approaches that are cheaper and more effective?

Are there unintended consequences of using a learning management system?

In the next few minutes I want to explore some of these issues.

I will argue that we need to look seriously at alternatives to the leaning management system, not only to save money but also to provide a more appropriate learning environment.

To begin with though I want explain briefly what an LMS is.

The LMS is a web-based application that is essentially a suite of tools for:

- organizing and managing course content and resources,
- communication and interaction between students and instructor and among students
- assessment,
- assignment submission
- and grade keeping.

It provides all of these capabilities and more, within one web-based environment and it can be integrated with institutional student information systems.

It sounds pretty amazing and when the first LMSs emerged in the late 1990s they were seen as a significant technological innovation. In recent years, however, there have been growing criticisms.

So what are some of the key criticisms?

First, a learning management system is very expensive to support. And this applies to both commercial and open source products. While open source products are free they often require a significant and costly investment of technical support to install and customize the application which often eats up any savings from the license fees.

It's difficult to provide an average cost because it usually depends on the size of the organization and the number of users but we are talking about tens of thousands of dollars annually at least. At one post-secondary institution I worked at we spent $200,000 per year for a commercial LMS.

So regardless of whether you choose an open source or a commercial product, an LMS will be expensive..

A second criticism is that running and using an LMS requires significant technical expertise. IT staff need to be trained to support and maintain the LMS and even faculty and students need to learn how to use the software effectively. Despite what vendors tell us, learning managements systems aren't easy to use. There is a learning curve.

A more substantial criticism of the LMS is that it tends to reinforce a teacher and content-centered approach to education and perpetuates a transmission model of teaching.

Research shows that faculty tend to make much greater use of tools that have an administrative and teaching focus: things like the gradebook, announcements, assessment and course material distribution…. and much less use of the tools with a learning focus like the discussion forums, blogs, and collaboration spaces.

Furthermore, learning is artificially situated inside a kind of walled garden. Learners are disconnected from resources of the open Internet and from the networks that the Internet supports and even from their own personal networks.

LMSs also inhibits continuous learning. The LMS already restricts the development of a learning network to the students enrolled in the course but it then disrupts the development of this limited learning network as all communication with peers and instructors is confined to the course term.

Students spend 12-15 weeks building connections with their peers and developing their networks only to have this discontinued at the end of each term as the courses and all the interactions are deleted.

A final problem with learning management systems is that, for the most part, they are not truly open. Regardless of whether you are using an open source or a commercial product and even if you have put an open licence on your courses, if it is an LMS, search engines will not find them and anybody who does manage to find your courses will need to get the appropriate permission and log in credentials to access them.

So what is the alternative to the LMS?

In the last 10 years we have seen an explosion of free, cloud-based software and services that can be assembled, to create a kind of customized, do it yourself, learning management system that doesn't have all the disadvantages of the conventional LMS.

So, there are file sharing services like Dropbox, Google Drive, Box.net, One Note and others.

There are asynchronous discussion tools like Google Groups, Yahoo Groups, Yammer, Facebook and others.

Skype and Google are just two companies that provide free tools for real-time audio and video communication.

Delicious and Diigo are two of the best known resource sharing and social bookmarking tools.

There are also many free gradebooks tools available. Learnboost and Thinkwave, for example.

And finally for blogging and building website there is WordPress, Weebly or Google Sites.

And WordPress can be turned into simple learning management system itself through the use of a number of plug ins. Learn Dash, WP Courseware and Sensei are just a few of the plug ins available for this.

There are number of compelling advantages to using do it yourself alternative to a conventional LMS

- First, it doesn't require institutional buy in and support. Assembling tools in this way is something that can be done by an individual instructor or teacher with minimal technical support.

- And this means it doesn't require support from your IT department because all of these services are hosted externally.

- But probably most important advantage is that this approach allows you to tailor the tools to meet your specific needs. If all you want to do is distribute content, you can create a website or create a shared folder on of the file sharing services. If all you want to do is hold weekly online meetings with your students, then Skype or something similar will do. The beauty of this approach is you can add the different tools as you need them. And if you want to provide your learners with a consistent online environment then use Word Press with one of the LMS plug ins is an option.

- And finally, using this approach makes the resources much more accessible and open and it doesn't cut learners off from the resources and their networks once the course is over.

And of course there are some disadvantages.

First, security and privacy may be a concern because these tools are on the Internet and not confined to the walled garden of the LMS. Almost all of these tools are provided free of charge in exchange for the right to make use of your data in some way. In some cases, it may go even further than that and you may be asked to give up copyright so it is important to read and understand the terms of service carefully because nothing is completely free.

This is a do it yourself approach and some technical skills are required to configure and use some of these tools but it is not insurmountable and anybody with basic IT skills and the motivation should be able to manage.

Because this is a do it yourself approach the student experience will not be as consistent as would be if an institutionally supported LMS were used. Your customized approach may be quite different from a colleagues. Most students are looking for the most efficient route to complete their studies.

They may not be too happy about having to learn how to use different tools every time they take a course so this is something to keep in mind.

To conclude, there is an old saying that goes, "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail". And I think that sums up the approach that has been taken to decisions around the use of learning management systems.

But we no longer only have hammers. We have a wide variety of different, free, and sophisticated tools at our disposal that can be used to support eLearning. A learning management system is one option but not the only one and we need to be much more critical in our appraisal of the tools we choose to use to support eLearning.

Learning managements systems are expensive, they tend to privilege the instructor as the centre of the learning process, they disrupt the development of learning networks and they are not open.