

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT... LMS ALTERNATIVES

Scenario

After accepting a faculty position in the biology department of a large research university, Richard decides to use a blogging tool to create his course materials on the open web. He hopes that by handling his coursework in this way his materials can be useful to other biology instructors, either at his university or at other institutions. He also plans to use this platform to test new tools for delivering content and interacting with students.

Richard's first step is to set up a blog where students can find course content. A table of contents lists each class session by title and offers a link to the materials on that topic. Individual blog pages for class modules include text, images, embedded YouTube videos, VoiceThreads, data visualizations, or Prezi presentations. They also contain links to resources for further study.

As students visit the blog before each class session, they are encouraged to use embedded Google Forms to offer feedback. Their comments let Richard know what he needs to clarify when the class meets. Periodically, students assess their knowledge of a topic with a test created in StudyMate. This helps them identify areas where their own understanding is incomplete in time for them to ask questions during the subsequent class session.

Later in the course, students work in learning teams, writing group papers using Google Docs. As each group of students completes their paper, they post it to a team blog page. They are required to read the papers of all other teams and post a paragraph in comment. Teams can then modify their papers for final presentation, which Richard can review in Google Docs. There he can check the revision history to see which team members wrote which parts. At that point, because the blog tool has no gradebook feature, Richard enters the grades for these team assignments in an open source courseware tool that is integrated with the student information system.

1 What is it?

A learning management system (LMS) is an application that provides a comprehensive set of tools for educators to manage learning resources, administrative functions, assessments, and grading. Some educators argue that because of evolving Web 2.0 applications, students can be better served by an LMS alternative, a toolbox of web resources that might include social bookmarking tools, document sharing applications, social networking sites, timeline tools, and media options available in the cloud. Underlying this approach is the belief that students should become more familiar with today's technology tools because these skills will be useful in the workplace. As a result, some institutions have begun to offer LMS alternatives, and some instructors are using these options to support their students' learning. The framework of an LMS alternative may offer the user a coordinating hub with a dashboard or other interface that gives easy access to selected web-based tools. Applications joined in this way provide a "cafeteria" approach that allows students and instructors to select tools according to course and project requirements.

2 How does it work?

LMS alternatives span a wide range of tools and functions. One option might be a complex system built in-house at a college or university, designed to perform many of the functions of a traditional LMS while giving access to outside applications. Another might be a mashup of web applications assembled by an individual instructor and hosted from a blog platform or a social networking site. The tools that faculty members select as LMS alternatives are typically free or low cost, easy to learn and use, and robust enough to support students and faculty without suffering from service outages or other glitches. Ideally, the LMS alternative might integrate with applications already in use on campus, via APIs or existing standards. In such a design, students could select from among the proffered applications to complete their assignments.

3 Who's doing it?

Institutions or individual instructors pursue LMS alternatives when a traditional LMS does not meet their teaching and learning needs. In this sense, any college or university that supports blogging or uses a collaboration tool like Google Docs might be said to be employing an LMS alternative. In fact, LMS alternatives frequently use existing applications as a hub. The GLEAN application at Pepperdine's Graziadio School of Business and Management, for example, is a secure framework that integrates the university's traditional LMS with Web 2.0 applications, allowing students and faculty to access a collection of online media and social networking tools.

A program at the University of British Columbia illustrates just how an LMS alternative can fill a gap for the standard LMS. Students in the Global Resource Systems program, who spend a term overseas

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in a developing country, often find themselves living without sufficiently sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure to accommodate UBC's standard LMS. Instead, a WordPress MultiUser (MU) blog site functions as an online learning center for these students. Instructors submit course content, and students discuss class topics and submit assignments—all within the blog structure, with all student and faculty work on the blogs open to public view. Class presentations, podcasts, and other resources are linked to and from this space, and presentations are posted to SlideShare. The site aggregates resources and serves as a directory for the student work posted in individual blogs while the blog structure allows participation and comments from registered and nonregistered contributors, including alumni and students in other countries. This setup allows the participation of those not currently enrolled, something the traditional LMS typically does not easily accommodate.

4 Why is it significant?

The tools available in the cloud may offer students advantages over those in the LMS for collaboration and content creation. For instance, applications like VoiceThread and Diigo have no corresponding functionality in a traditional LMS. Moreover, because web tools are designed for ease of use, students can learn them rapidly, leverage them for multiple assignments, and recommend the most effective to their peers. The broad selection of Web 2.0 tools makes it possible for instructors and students to choose the tool that best fits a learning exercise. Moreover, applications available in the cloud frequently offer portability, allowing students to retain and continue to build on their work after they are no longer affiliated with the institution. Finally, when student work is published on the web, it can engage individuals from outside the university, generating a kind of informal peer review. Such exchanges can provide students with experience in how to weigh the criticism of others.

5 What are the downsides?

Using alternatives to the LMS can take time—for instructors and students. Teachers must evaluate new tools and match them with suitable assignments, and students must learn new application types. Some web-based applications charge fees for use, while many that are free include advertising. In either case, the locus of control is outside the institution, raising concerns about interruptions of service, the security of data and personal information, and the effect on an institution's reputation that could result from a security breach. Institutions that adopt third-party applications for learning have little or no recourse if those products are poorly maintained, shut down for repairs, or cease to exist. While some applications include privacy settings, these are generally not subject to the institution's authentication protocols. As a result, many instructors return to the LMS for student grading to ensure compliance with applicable regulations. While some web applications use emerging web standards, they are not designed to access the student information system, course reporting, or

enrollment information. In addition, any alternative LMS could raise issues about a lack of technical support, a dearth of faculty support, an increasingly fragmented student learning environment, and the absence of a common learning platform.

6 Where is it going?

The practice of augmenting a standard, centralized LMS is a trend that can be expected to continue among faculty members. Often their individual compilations of Web 2.0 tools are highly specialized and allow them to design learning experiences that are more targeted than those they could present with the LMS alone. What may emerge from this environment is a new kind of institutional service that combines the best of both worlds, providing the integration of an enterprise application that addresses security and administrative control with a constantly renewing set of cloud-based media and collaboration tools to support academic work. The institutionally provided portal or container may become commonplace, allowing users to select and plug in the tools they desire, which might be internal or external. There is even the potential for LMS alternatives to return applications to the pool—that is, faculty and students may create new tools when the existing offerings do not meet their needs.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The use of LMS alternatives encourages faculty and students alike to see learning as an evolutionary process where effective tools are emerging constantly. Such an environment prompts learners to become familiar with a genre of tools rather than any specific one. At the same time, faculty adoption of tools outside the LMS may induce institutions to take a fresh look at the LMS service they offer. In so doing, they may discover the advantages in providing access to a wide variety of tools that enable strong support of teaching and learning. The use of LMS alternatives may hold the promise of a more student-centric approach, one that encourages students to reach across the boundaries of academic terms and learning disciplines and to see their education as a coherent whole that they can maintain using a range of applications. By going outside the LMS to use tools that allow for more student engagement, more effective collaboration, and more active learning in general, instructors could establish new expectations for the LMS. While some of the features they seek from the Web 2.0 world might never make it into the repertoire of most instructors, they may still help push the LMS to its next iteration.

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