

Thinking About Choosing a Learning Management System?

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The selection of a learning management system (LMS) by colleges and universities is a major undertaking due to the importance of the system to the institution, the degree to which it must be integrated with other systems in the institution (especially financial, registration and related administrative systems), the difficulty of switching from one system to another, the range of stakeholders involved, and the considerable financial investment at stake.

It is common for institutions to involve representatives from across the institution to participate in the decision-making process and they also often make use of independent consultants to assist. Participants in these committees typically include faculty, IT managers, specialists in technology-mediated education, and students. Other participants may be drawn from libraries, the bookstore, finance and support staff.

Some institutions use this committee or task force to reach out to an even broader set of constituents. They may, for example, seek the counsel of other institutions which have already made an LMS decision. Other institutions have facilitated focus groups with stakeholders across the institution. The value of this further outreach goes beyond gathering input for the LMS selection, and provides the institution with a broader understanding of the quality of the current operations and services related to the LMS.

There are, however, potential drawbacks to selecting the LMS in this committee fashion. These include:

- the desire of the committee to reach a consensus can lead to an overly “safe” choice that serves no group’s interests especially well;
- differences in political power of the participants allows certain participants to enjoy a disproportionate influence on the decision;
- the committee participants are selected on the basis of their capacity to represent certain departments in the institution, rather than their knowledge of the subject (e.g. educational technology);
- the unwillingness of such representative bodies to challenge the idea that the purpose of an LMS is to take “what is done in the classroom” and make it available online – few will take on the role of arguing that the decision is related to the idea of transforming learning and teaching.

Participants in committees, as well as vendors, have identified a number of common pitfalls in the selection process:

1. IT professionals within post-secondary educational institutions often have a strong (possibly disproportionate) influence on the decision process. The following are possible reasons:

- IT departments are often the hosts and organizers of the LMS selection projects and may therefore have greater control over the process than other participants.
- Vendors report that the IT units often serve as the primary point of contact for the vendor and thus have the greatest opportunity to provide ongoing feedback and direction to LMS vendors on the appropriate design of these systems.
- The institutional leadership sometimes see the choice of an LMS as primarily a technology decision with implications for teaching and learning, rather than as an educational decision with technology implications.

2. LMS systems were originally designed to serve as supplements to classroom education in what is known as blended learning, and this remains the most common context in which students will use an LMS. However, LMSs are also used to support fully online courses and hybrid courses. Because most institutions employ only one LMS, it is common for the LMS to be used for all the modes of delivery within a single institution. The implications are two-fold:

- The LMS may not suit the needs of all three modes (fully online, blended and classroom-based delivery) equally well.
- The interests of classroom education can override the interests of online instruction during the LMS selection process. As one vendor described the situation: "It's a numbers game. And classroom instruction always wins."

3. Often, the committee process can take two years or more by the time research has been done on all the possible vendors. This may have been appropriate when the LMS market was relatively stable, but we have seen that today it is undergoing a great deal of change.

4. The focus is often on making the decision to acquire one system on the grounds of efficiency and effectiveness. The idea of buying a single platform but enabling the use of other related resources is often overlooked or ruled out.

Many committees or task forces begin by developing criteria for the decision so that there can be a systematic look at the options – several examples of these criteria are available online for review and modification or to stimulate the conversation (see here for an example). Each institution needs to understand its own needs and develop its own criteria.

It is not always wise to seek a single solution for the whole institution – see our section below on decentralized decision making. It really depends on the strategic intent and size of the institution as well as the motivation for adopting an LMS.

Centralized vs Decentralized Decision-Making.

During the early days of online education, the interests and sensibilities of individual instructors heavily influenced the selection and use of learning management systems and other educational technologies. These pioneers took it upon themselves to find and test new technologies to support new ways of teaching and learning. But as digital education in all its forms became more common, the decision-making process for the selection and use of educational technologies became more formal and centralized. The decisions moved from the very local level of instructors and individual departments, to professionals with expertise in educational technology, working in centralized units. This shift parallels the movement toward the deployment of a single LMS.

There are signs, though, that the pendulum may swing back toward decision-making at the local level, and away from centralized units. One of the characteristics common to several of the new learning management systems is their capacity to be adopted on an instructor-by-instructor basis. While obviously interested in institutional sales, these new LMSs make it relatively simple for individual instructors to use their systems without requiring extensive involvement of the institution. Pearson's OpenClass or iTunes iTextbook can be seen as "self-serve" online learning systems which include gradebooks and enable each professor to create their own resources (text, audio, video and other web 2.0 resources) using simple Power Point-like templates.

On one level, this is a marketing strategy. It is potentially less expensive for new entrants to the market, at least initially, to rely on individual adoptions of the LMS, rather than building a large sales force to work through the notoriously slow sales cycle of institutional sales. Companies like Schoology, CourseKit and Instructure are relying on web-based marketing, social media and word-of-mouth among the most innovative and ambitious educators.

But this self-serve approach is also a by-product of advances in technology, and of the unique approach to LMS design taken by these companies. As cloud-based applications, individual instructors can adopt these systems without placing as much burden on the institution's technology infrastructure. The systems are often free-of-charge for individual use, which eliminates the need to secure institutional funding. The systems stress ease-of-use, thereby reducing the need for institutional training and support teams. From a technological standpoint, it is becoming increasingly easy to link web applications and services (i.e. applications can push and pull data from other systems, as in Pearson's OpenClass).

The opportunity for instructors and individual departments to act independently of the institution's central services has its implications. It can lead to the use of multiple systems which may, in turn, create inconsistency for students, forcing them to learn how to move between applications with different features and navigation. It may weaken the institution's ability to manage certain aspects of its online education, including data security, branding and compliance with regulations (e.g. privacy and Operational Data Acquisition). The risk of security and privacy breaches may be higher if such moves to decentralize decision-making are not accompanied by appropriate policies and training in those policies and how they need to be applied.

On the other hand, more local control over technology choices may increase the speed of innovation within the institution, enabling ambitious educators to explore new applications and teaching strategies. And because local control over technology choices is so fully aligned with conventional notions of academic autonomy, it may enhance the level of engagement of academics in the institution. Lastly, we shall see in a later module that new and easy to use tools that can transform the learning experience are also increasingly available outside the LMS, which will be even more difficult to control or manage centrally.

Deciding to Change Systems

The decision to switch from one system to another offers some insight into the value and use of these systems. Institutions switch LMS infrequently (Arroway and Sharma, 2009) because of the considerable disruption that it causes, including:

- the need to retrain staff and faculty on the new LMS;
- implementation costs, including downtime;
- migration of existing course content and data;
- customization of the new system;
- integration/configuration of the new system with other institutional software and systems.

In particular, a great deal of instructor and support staff time must be spent on checking that there are no 'glitches' (such as inactive links, changed formatting of content, graphics that are missing or distorted, and missing sections) following the transfer.

Michael Feldstein contends the decision to switch systems is unlikely to be motivated by the different features and functionality of major LMSs (Feldstein, 2010), despite the fact, as noted, that features have been a key means by which different providers have competed. Instead, the drive to switch systems is the result of four other factors:

1. Forced migration. Due to industry consolidation, there have been many colleges in North America that have initiated the process of selecting a new LMS because of plans by the software providers to discontinue certain systems. This was the case with WebCT and Angel, now both owned by Blackboard Inc.
2. Rising costs. In some instances, vendors raised the annual fee of the software license, which encouraged institutions to seek out less expensive alternatives.
3. Streamlining. It was not uncommon during the early part of the 20th century for colleges to use multiple LMS; typically these were deployed by and for different departments across the institution. One research university in Canada, for example, had seven different LMS in operation. The trend during the past 5-6 years has been to reduce the number of systems in operation in order to simplify and streamline operations.
4. New technology developments. Ironically, we may begin to see a return to multiple systems within a single institution. As software becomes easier to implement and support (cloud-computing, notably), simpler to use, and easier to connect to other software systems (e.g. student information systems), individual instructors and departments may see the benefits of using a separate system. This trend would be aided by increased diversification of the available systems on the market.

Such a decision to change usually requires the repeat of the process described earlier, informed by an analysis and systematic review of the experience of the legacy LMS system the institution is seeking to replace.