Learning Management Systems: a look at Blackboard, Canvas and Moodle

I was interested in evaluating learning management systems (LMSs), because I currently use Canvas extensively in my teaching. Canvas was chosen by my school district and we are in our second year of using the program district wide. Canvas is used extensively throughout the Utah Education Network, which includes K-12 and higher education institutions. Initially, I was excited to use an LMS in my 1-1 classroom and I felt that Canvas worked very well for the most part. This year, however, we have experienced many difficulties with Canvas throughout the district and I was interested in seeing what other options were available as well as learning more about LMSs in general.

Learning management systems, sometimes called Course Management Systems or virtual learning environments are used to administer and track student progress. While LMSs are usually thought of as primarily tools for distance education, they are also used to support face-to-face classrooms (Simonson, 2007). More specifically, learning management systems are “software packages that typically provide an interface for students to keep track of assignments, watch videos or read course content, and participate in discussion groups and forums” (Campbell, 2012). Students can log on and work from anywhere an Internet connection is available, at any time of the day. This allows student discussion to continue past the traditional school day, in essence extending the school day. In addition to the two ways CMSs are used (blended or purely online), there are two categories of LMSs—proprietary and open
source. Proprietary, single vendor systems (such as Blackboard) are licensed from one vendor, installed and used by the institution. Open-source course management systems are “free educational software that are maintained by users who implement, even modify, and ultimately support their system to meet local, specific needs” such as the Sakai Project and Moodle (Simonson, 2007).

The common framework for LMS courses is that of the module. A module is a “body of information that is often studied for a week in a class with about 3 hours of direct instruction and 5-6 hours of individual work” (Simonson, 2007). The module system seems to be effective in my own science classroom and is consistent with the Understanding by Design model used in most of the classrooms in my district. The LMS would be used to provide structure for and allow delivery of the contents of a course, similar to how a table of contents gives a sense of organization to the reader of a book (Simonson, 2007). There is a “general consensus that using an LMS will not enhance learning capabilities as such, but rather can provide infrastructural means and facilities to access the instructional material more efficiently” (Cavus, 2013).

There are many learning management systems on the market today, some are proprietary and others open source. Distinguishing between them can be a challenge, because they offer many of the same features. According to Black et al. (2007) “most LMSs consist of fairly generic tools such as quiz/test options, forums, a scheduling tool, collaborative work space and grading mechanisms.” Some of the minor differences between the different LMSs are the ability to “record synchronous meetings or the ability to download forum postings to read
offline” (Black, Beck, Dawson, Jinks, & DiPietro, 2007).

The LMS market is heavily dominated by Blackboard in both the academic and professional sectors. However, there are many up and coming competitors that have distinguished themselves from Blackboard (Nabi, 2012). This paper focuses on the following three LMSs: Blackboard, Moodle and Canvas. Blackboard is the most popular proprietary LMS, Moodle is the most popular open source LMS and Canvas is the current open source choice for the state of Utah, where I currently work as an educator.

I will discuss Blackboard first, because it is the most popular LMS in operation and because it is the LMS used at UAF. Blackboard is a proprietary LMS and of the three discussed in this paper, the most expensive. For the added expense, users are able to access “course wikis, blogs and journals that stimulate conversation and reflection on a course, and group tools that make group collaboration and communication easier” (Walsh, 2010). It has the polished professional look of a proprietary LMS. It also has an easy to use “Web 2.0 interface, which makes it easy for educators to navigate when adding content to an online course and for students to navigate when accessing course content” (Walsh, 2010). Blackboard has features that allow it to alert students to deadlines, due dates and academic priorities within a course (Walsh, 2010). I have only used Blackboard for my own University courses. I found the layout to be easily accessible as a student. However, I think that the layout may be too complex for a high school student or younger age class.

Moodle, which stands for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, is a
popular, open source software for online courses and websites. Moodle is a viable option for educators and schools with the ability to “host their own installation of the service” (Walsh, 2010). The main benefit to Moodle is the significant cost savings it has over the other LMSs, being both free and customizable. Users wanting to pay for additional services can utilize the industry of Moodle-based services that have grown up around this software, such as Moodlerooms and RemoteLearner. Advantages include the lower total cost, peer review and greater flexibility. Disadvantages include its inability to integrate well between student administration systems and student information, a less polished look, and unsophisticated assessment and grading capabilities (Martinez & Jagannathan, 2008).

Another benefit of Moodle is that any user can set up a public or private directory of courses (community hub) and teachers are able to search all public community hubs and download courses to use as templates for building their own courses. This allows teachers to access a wealth of resources that can be easily imported into their own courses. Blackboard content is unavailable to the public and does not facilitate the exchange of lessons as an open source LMS does (Walsh, 2010).

Canvas is the LMS that I am most familiar with as a teacher. Canvas is a learning management system that provides many services to track student progress within one interface. It is mainly for teachers and administrators, but open to students. One if its primary selling points is that it is free to teachers. Canvas provides a time saving way to keep classrooms organized (Nabi, 2012). Students find Canvas to be easy to navigate and a good way to keep track of all their assignments. Drawbacks to Canvas are that it is not as developed or polished
as Blackboard, it is prone to frequent outages, questions on tests cannot be copied and altered for different tests and broken links are a time consuming and ubiquitous problem.

LMSs can be used as true online courses or in supplemental delivery of information, as in a blended learning environment. My use of LMSs has been in a blended learning environment with Canvas and my own students. I will be using Canvas in my own course, because my district mandates it, but I would seriously consider using Moodle if I did not have Canvas available to me. I utilize the LMS to organize all of my lectures, notes, assignments and supplemental resources. I also use it to host discussions, assess students with quizzes and tests and make announcements about important class information. I feel that the strong points of an LMS are that it allows me to organize all my materials in one place and provides a structure that is standardized and easy to maneuver for students and their parents. This eliminates some of the extrinsic load of learning the material I present.

It is also very helpful when students miss school and don’t want to fall behind. I teach at an alternative high school, where we often have students who are removed from school for behavioral or safe school violations and they can lose months of time that make it difficult for them to ever recover academically. An LMS allows those students that are unable to attend a campus to follow along with the PowerPoint’s and cloze notes I embed in Canvas. This way they are able to stay on top of the information they are missing, as well as being able to turn in assignments and receive grades without losing the opportunity to gain credit. LMSs are a useful tool for structuring content delivery and improving accessibility for students.


