Learning Management Systems in Seminaries

ABSTRACT: This article provides a brief history of learning management systems, describes elements of a good learning management system, and provides examples and discusses the future of learning management systems in the seminary.

How learning management systems began in seminaries

In the early '90s some Luther Seminary (St. Paul) faculty members were struggling to retain students who didn't have the funds or, because of family obligations, couldn't relocate to attend seminary. As Tom Walker[1] describes it "[faculty members] were sort of doing correspondence courses" with these promising future ministers. Walker, director of Luther Seminary library and the IT initiative on campus, knew there had to be some kind of tool that would enable people to communicate with each other without being in the same place at the same time. He and several talented Luther students wrote some software that we would today recognize as learning management software. Concurrently at Virginia Commonwealth, others were also working on template driven learning management software that became known as Web Course in a Box, which, in July 2002, was purchased by Blackboard Inc.

Learning management systems (LMS) also sometimes known as course management systems (CMS) have come a long way since those early days. Walker went on to found The Fisher's Net that today provides many seminaries with Blackboard, one of the most popular commercial learning management systems available. Gone are Walker's early programming efforts as well as the original Web Course in a Box. In their place are several learning management systems in addition to BlackBoard, such as WebCT, eCollege, Colloquia, Jenzabar, Sakai, and Moodle. Although Walker prefers Moodle today at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, he foresees radical changes for LMS programs in the future.

Lilly instructional grants introduced learning management systems to seminary campus learning

The recent Lilly technology grants to seventy-two U.S. seminaries specifically precluded using the funds for distance learning but did make possible exploration of Blackboard-like tools to supplement classroom learning. Many of the grant-funded seminaries took the opportunity to examine such software knowing that it could also serve distance learning needs.

In August 2003, I presented an overview of LMS at the Wabash InfoTech gathering for seminaries that received Lilly technology grants.[2] Wabash Center was providing Blackboard to more than thirty seminaries but had announced it would discontinue the service in less than a year. Seminaries using Blackboard and other seminaries looking for alternatives began to look for other CMS resources. The Fisher's Net took over the service to provide inexpensive access to Blackboard capability a few months after this meeting. The presumption, barely discussed at the meeting, was that LMS had come to seminaries to stay, or, as one attendee put it, "A learning management system has become mission critical. What was once the icing on the cake has become the cake."

The cake

At first it seems unusual that the idea of a learning management system would establish such a stronghold in so many seminaries in such a short time. By no means universally embraced by all faculty members, LMS seems at odds with the pastoral and personal character of traditional seminary training. In addition, it is expensive to implement and maintain even in "open source" form,[3] and it is a formidable challenge to use by faculty members with little formal training as teachers who often teach the way they were taught.

Two primary characteristics make Blackboard-like programs popular: (1) their asynchronous discussion capability and (2) the fact that they are password-protected environments.

There are other features built into Blackboard-like LMS programs: chat (or synchronous discussion), easy creation of Web pages within a course by both teachers and students, online grading capability, calendars, and, more recently, e-portfolios and back office integration from class registration to distribution of grades. But none of these features seems to capture the imagination of faculty like being able to start and lead a discussion that students can be part of at any time that fits their busy schedules from any computer connected to the Internet anywhere in the world. The password-protected environment encourages faculty to share documentation, e-reserves, and other materials that otherwise would need elaborate protection for Web distribution.

The beauty of learning management systems is that they are template driven. Similar to having learned where the library is on campus and subsequently always knowing how to get there, so too Blackboard and the other LMS programs become comfortable in their familiarity. The WebCT class this semester operates the same way as the WebCT class last semester—or at least the features should seem familiar.

The problem with learning management systems is that they are template driven. Not all teaching fits neatly into templates. If interoperability, standardization, and integration with the back office are not accompanied by sound pedagogy, they will not serve the seminary well. As Blackboard, Moodle, Jenzabar, and others add more features in response to the rigidness of the template, costs and complexity can grow. When I help faculty work with Blackboard or WebCT or Moodle, I usually suggest that they only use the LMS as a "skeleton" for what it does well and not as a repository of documents or media. The documents and rich media do not have to reside in the LMS unless one is using its password-protection feature. It is better to have a rich working area on a website with links into Blackboard or Moodle.

Other Issues

Where are the nonacademic models for work with congregations?

By definition, an LMS is built around an academic learning model. While that may serve our seminaries as academic institutions, where is the exploration of technology that prepares seminarians to serve in ministry far from an academic setting? Students see the advantages of Web-based discussion and studying from interactive online resources and naturally want to take that into their ministry. I've had students working in parishes ask to have a Blackboard "course" set up for them to use in the parish. While it is possible to treat parishioners as "students," Blackboard is not the right tool. I do not see most seminaries looking at big-picture technology issues for ministry. If the new minister arrives in the congregation with technological savvy, chances are he didn't learn it in the seminary.

Haves and have nots

At a recent ATS Technology and Educational Practices workshop for forty-four North American seminaries (most of whom had not received a Lilly technology grant), I heard concerns about exorbitant costs for various LMS systems and the danger of simply using one as a syllabus repository. The image used was "trying to put new wine in old wine skins." The spirited discussion ranged from ways to use LMS creatively to the fact that fewer and fewer seminaries can afford LMS if the prices escalate. Large seminaries or seminaries attached to universities with enterprise LMS will continue to use them, while smaller, freestanding seminaries may not have a choice. LMS may soon be a case of "haves" and "have nots," because even open source software solutions are not free.

Learning management systems sampler

Here is a brief look at some learning management systems[4] that range from free to costly:

Free (Caveat Emptor)

In an attempt to pull together some resources for the Wabash Center in fall 2003, I listed Nicenet[5], Interact[6] (a similar application from New Zealand) and Moodle[7] as free CMS tools. I would not list Moodle as free in the same sense as the other two today.

Nicenet (Internet Classroom Assistant) is built on the concept of free courseware that any teacher could use. Although it offers only the bare essentials, it works and might be one of the considerations for ministerial technology for the parish even though it still has an academic feel. Free makes the price right.

Interact asks the question, Would you like to "build a learning community" rather than "deliver a course"? It has less of an academic feel, and, therefore, might be more appropriate for the parish.

My concern about Nicenet and Interact for teaching in seminaries in 2005 is that academic LMS needs to be an institutionally thought through system with robust tools. These free tools will help individual teachers experiment, but building an entire academic infrastructure around them is a stretch. In the free category today I would include some of the instant messaging systems with their polling capabilities and links to pod/videocasts along with blogging and wikis, which might be all that is needed in some courses. Students are already familiar with these Web staples though most faculty members are not.

Open source but not free

Moodle has become a popular open source alternative to Blackboard in seminaries. Moodle is an open source learning management system that a seminary could mount on its own server or subscribe to through a third party provider like The Fisher's Net. Third party providers take care of hosting, upgrades, and technical support. Smaller, freestanding seminaries currently using Blackboard are anticipating Blackboard price increases that may force them to move to Moodle.

Denver Seminary opted to drop Blackboard and mount Moodle on its servers two years ago. Faculty member Larry Lindquist offers these strengths and weaknesses from two years of experience with Moodle:

Strengths

1. Easy to work with and set up groups (threaded discussions, etc.)
2. Moving items (assignments, presentations, quizzes, etc.) around in Moodle is quick and easy.
3. Students have remarked about the ease in finding things on Moodle (well designed).
4. Moodle runs on our local server, it's free, and we have experienced better technical support from Moodle than from Blackboard.

Weaknesses

1. Number of clicks necessary to add files has increased (frustrating for professors).
2. Mac users (students) have sporadically experienced some difficulty accessing files.
3. Grade book that came "standard" was quite poor. However, Moodle developed an add-on grade book that is much improved (we are currently using Moodle 1.4.2 even though there is a 1.5 available).
4. Quizzes (building them) are fairly complex and can be frustrating for professors. However, that is not a weakness experienced by the students.

Moodle and Blackboard compared. Moodle is open source and free to download. Blackboard is commercial proprietary software. Supporting Moodle on the seminary server and technical support is not free to an institution and has to appear somewhere on the ledger. Supporting Blackboard also impacts the seminary ledger in ways sometimes not anticipated.

The Fisher's Net, which hosts both Blackboard and Moodle on its own servers, offers another alternative to the seminary consortium. It has been licensing Blackboard since 1997, when the vendor first opened its doors. Gloria Doherty of The Fisher's Net says more than thirty seminaries have enjoyed an impressive discount on Blackboard licensing and application hosting services, currently at $4,000 annually per institution, but fee increases from Blackboard are inevitable. In 2003, The Fisher's Net began exploring Moodle as an open source alternative. It implemented a test of Moodle in 2004 and is now launching a production version that its consortium will test. The Fisher's Net will provide a Moodle system that the consortium will share at $4,000 annually per institution. The system is housed in a comprehensive hosting facility, using a dedicated server with high speed connection that is secure and continuously monitored. The annual fee also provides engineering to perform repairs and regular updates on the Moodle system. Doherty says:

> Both Blackboard and Moodle are highly reliable systems with comparable features. Blackboard's presentation is academic, opening with announcements and providing a fixed navigation bar to organize documents and tools. Moodle's presentation adapts well for lifelong learning by providing three basic templates for structuring a course site: Weekly (calendar), Topic (categories), and Social (a forum).
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> Moodle provides a larger menu of resource and activity tools used to organize course sites with added features like journaling that is accessible only to the individual learner and instructor, glossaries, polls, wikis, and lessons with a question page that produces a learning tree. Blackboard's navigation is fixed,

making it easier for new learners to find documents and tools. Blackboard's grade book is more robust. Moodle provides more detailed tracking of each student's activity in the course site. Moodle also provides instructors with a more efficient method of providing feedback for individual assignments. The greatest advantage intrinsic to Moodle is the ability to customize the system to meet the needs of the consortium. Overall, both systems are highly successful in providing students and instructors with the highest quality virtual classroom.

In response to the growing need to integrate back office services from inquiry through graduation with the learning management system, The Fisher's Net has recently formed an alliance with ComSpec International, Inc. who delivers EMPOWER, an institutional administration system designed for higher education.[8] Through this alliance, The Fisher's Net delivers administration of Moodle while ComSpec integrates its administration system, EMPOWER, with Moodle to produce an economically priced enterprise system.

Jenzabar: another interesting commercial LMS. Jenzabar[9] for the last few years has ruled the back office in many seminaries. Two years ago it began to offer an LMS that was fully integrated with its back office. Luther Seminary of St. Paul wanted to integrate all its Web-based services and opted to buy the learning management module. This summer new versions of the learning module were introduced and Luther students spoke positively about the seamless way they can register, track, and explore class possibilities. The Jenzabar learning management module was expensive and may be well beyond the financial capabilities of smaller seminaries; however, Luther represents a growing number of institutions that highly value integrating infrastructure and simplifying the number of applications the student and teacher have to deal with. They raise the bar for what seminary students everywhere will come to expect from their institutions.

The future

I will borrow liberally from my conversation with Tom Walker which began this article. Here is a wish list:

- Learning management systems will be better integrated with other essential services and that integration, probably through a smart portal, will be transparent to the user.
- Learning management systems must get easier and more flexible to use. Adding new features is not the same thing as making a system more responsive, easier, and flexible.
- Learning management systems of the future will actually make content more attractive.
- Learning management systems of the future will integrate with better tools that students can use to shape the learning process.

Walker says that, in the future, talk of learning management systems as separate entities will be a nonquestion.

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1. Thirteen minute interview with Tom Walker, founder of Fisher's Net. Interviewer and editor: Jim Rafferty, September 2004. http://mncts.net/audioresources/walker/walkerintro.htm.

2. Summary of LMS options as of August 2003 presented by Jim Rafferty at the last InfoTech meeting in Indianapolis. http://mncts.org/workshops/infotechcourseware.htm.

3. Some LMS programs like Blackboard are built on proprietary source code while other programs like Moodle are built on "open source" code, which is available to anyone. The distinction becomes blurry when proprietary software is sold built on free open source models or proprietary software products like Blackboard encourage open source additions (like plug-ins) in its software implementation.

4. For a more complete survey of the ever-changing world of LMS, see Stephen Downes' insightful blog called *Stephen's Web*. If you wanted one resource that would help you understand the turmoil in LMS this would be it. He publishes several times a week. Go to Google and type "Stephen Downes." Then select "register." The blog is not specifically about seminary LMS but offers rich insights into the challenges of technology and pedagogy.

5. http://www.nicenet.org

6. http://cce-interact.sourceforge.net

7. http://moodle.org

8. http://www.empower-xl.com

9. http://www.jenzabar.net