LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE

Learning management system or the open web?

Watch the video
http://bit.ly/d18ac5

Aims and overview

In this episode we look at two different types of online learning environments: a centralised Learning Management System (LMS) and free, open access social media. We discuss the benefits of each and highlight some important issues that need to be considered when using each of them.

Written by Karin Watson

"...there are things that a Learning Management System does, particularly around guaranteed flows of information... and the handling of assignments... that no stand alone software can do as well..." *(Associate Professor Matthew Allen about Learning Management Systems)*

"I feel comfortable having the autonomy to deliver the course content in a way that I feel is appropriate..." *(Ian McArthur about open web platforms)*

"...an environment which is safe enough for a student to feel like they can actually post work, be identified, without any pressure from the public" *(Tam Nguyen about Learning Management Systems)*

"...with Facebook, with mySpace, with YouTube...I think we are really used to the structure of all these websites..." *(Student about open web platforms)*

For updates follow COFA Online on:

AUSTRALIAN LEARNING & TEACHING COUNCIL

Types of online learning environments

There are many different types of online learning environments available to teachers, yet there is often controversy surrounding which system is better suited to a University learning and teaching environment. This episode does not recommend one above the other, but rather aims to highlight some of the benefits and considerations to bear in mind when using them.

A teacher's choice of online learning environment depends largely on a combination and/or balance of the following:

- *What their university's policy is regarding online learning, and what system/s it prescribes or supports*

- *What the learning outcomes are for the individual class, and what type of interaction and functionality best facilitate this to provide an optimum learning and teaching environment for both teachers and students.*

Online learning environments can be divided roughly into 2 categories: Learning Management Systems and open access social media.

Learning Management System (LMS)

An LMS is a centralised, closed system that is secured behind authentication and can only be accessed by university staff and students. It caters for both educational and administrative requirements and in some cases, universities pay a licensing fee to use these systems. An LMS is sometimes also referred to as a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in some countries.

Examples include, but are not limited to:

- *Blackboard www.blackboard.com*
- *Moodle www.moodle.com*

Open access social media

Often referred to as [Web 2.0](Web 2.0), open access social media systems can be set up or used by anyone, and are not limited for use only by registered university students and staff. They are usually free, or can be used for free in a limited capacity, with a paid option offering more features or online storage space. These are also referred to as open source, social media, open web, etc.

Examples of open access social media are numerous, and include, but are not limited to:

- *Facebook www.facebook.com*
- *Twitter www.twitter.com*
- *Wikispaces www.wikispaces.com*
- *Flickr www.flickr.com*
- *Wordpress www.wordpress.com*

Learning Management System (LMS)

Key benefits

- **Centralised:** *All online components of a class are accessed and archived on university secure servers*
- **Authentication:** *Access to the online class is protected by password and is restricted to university staff and students only, making it a secure, private and controlled environment*
- **Tracking and Collating:** *LMS' usually have features that enable tracking of assignments and statistical analysis of participation, along with the ability to synchronise marks and grades with university administration systems*
- **Technical support and training:** *A university will usually provide a certain level of LMS technical support and training for staff*
- **Copyright:** *University copyright privileges for 'educational use only' (permission to copy 10% of any published content for example) are usually applicable as online classes and content are within the authenticated 'walls' of the university. Otherwise staff and students must follow general public copyright and creative commons requirements which are usually more limiting.*

Key restrictions, limitations or considerations

- **Training:** *Staff usually require training to use an LMS, and due to the complexity that can often be inherent in large LMS', many staff can initially find setting up and teaching a class daunting*
- **Exclusion of external guests:** *Because access is usually strictly limited to university staff and students, teachers are often unable to invite external guest speakers, lecturers, experts, researches or visitors to contribute to a class without undergoing lengthy administrative procedures to obtain access*
- **Choice:** *Some staff prefer the autonomy of delivering the course content in a manner or environment they feel is appropriate rather than using a prescribed one*
- **Cost:** *Many LMS' attract a licensing fee, or where there is no licensing fee, a university needs to employ support staff to customise and integrate the LMS into the university's administration systems.*

Open access social media

Key benefits

- **Familiarity:** *Most students are already familiar with these environments so it is sometimes easier to implement and engage students with each other and content*
- **Easy to use:** *Many teachers can set up these learning environments themselves without having to go through a more complex university administrative process*
- **Constant upgrades:** *Teachers are always using the most up-to-date version of the open access media, as version changes are automatically implemented for all users*
- **Free:** *Most open access media is free to use at introductory level or for general purpose use*
- **Inclusion of external guests:** *Teachers are able to invite external guest speakers, lecturers, experts, researches or visitors to contribute to the class, because users may be added manually by the teacher without going through university procedures*
- **Collaboration:** *It is easy to share information and collaborate with other institutions, organisations and*

industry on projects as there is no issue surrounding compatibility between platforms, operating systems and versions of software

- *Privacy settings: Most open access media has some level of authentication, and many have a range of privacy settings that can be easily controlled by the teachers and/or students*
- *Technical support: There is usually an abundance of support available in online forums and help sections of the various websites.*

Key issues to consider

- *Not integrated: These environments are not integrated into existing university administration systems. This has implications such as not being able to populate a learning environment automatically with students from university enrolment systems, and grades have to be recorded and entered into university administration systems manually*
- *No formal record: The record of students' interaction and communication is recorded on a system external to the university. Difficulties can arise when independent access is required by the university. For example, in the case of a dispute; if the teacher leaves an institution and does not pass on access information; the company hosting the service may terminate user accounts, the service changes it structure or range of services resulting in the loss of data, etc*
- *Potential hidden costs: While many open access media are usually free to access and use, there may be hidden costs such as: staff investing extra time to set up without direct support; limited features, data storage or upload speeds which can be remedied by paying for improved service or privileges*
- *No on-site technical support: In many instances a university may not offer technical support for open access environments if an LMS is already in place*
- *Unprotected walls: teachers are responsible for privacy settings and access, and staff may not be as thorough, knowledgeable or rigorous in providing the necessary protection and privacy required for its students or colleagues*
- *Copyright: University copyright privileges for 'educational use only' (eg permission to copy 10% of any published content) may not be applicable and staff and students may need to follow general public copyright and creative commons requirements.*

Conclusion - considerations for an Integrated Approach

There are obvious advantages and limitations of using either of the above learning environment systems. The rapid advancements in technology and the changes that this brings have led many teachers to suggest or move towards adopting a more 'integrated' approach between the two. This provides both teachers and students the benefits of a structured, integrated and protected learning environment that can interface with the dynamic and changing open access social media.

Ultimately teachers need to consult their university's policy and guidelines. Establishing what type of interaction and functionality best facilitate an optimum learning and teaching environment that supports learning outcomes, is another deciding factor in choosing which type of system is most appropriate. It is also useful to speak to colleagues about what has worked for them and any suggestions they might have.

Additional information

For further information about some of the various online learning options available, please visit the websites of the examples cited on page 2 of this document.

Additional reading*

Allen, M. (2009). Education and the Internet: Web 2.0 & renewed innovation in online learning. Paper presented at the Teaching and Learning for Global Graduates Forum, Perth.

Conole, G., & Alevizou, P. (2010). A literature review of the use of Web 2.0 tools in Higher Education. HEA Academy, York, UK.

Craig, E. M. (2007). Changing paradigms: managed learning environments and Web 2.0. Campus-Wide Information Systems, 24(3), 152-161.

DeSchryver, M., Mishra, P., Koehleer, M., & Francis, A. (2009). Moodle vs. Facebook: Does using Facebook for Discussions in an Online Course Enhance Perceived Social Presence and Student Interaction? Paper presented at the Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2009, Charleston, SC, USA.

Holcomb, L., Brady, K., & Smith, B. (2010). Ning in Education: Can non-commercial, education-based social networking sites really address the privacy and safety concerns of educators? Paper presented at the Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2010, San Diego, CA, USA.

McGill, T. J., & Klobas, J. E. (2009). A task-technology fit view of learning management system impact. Computers & Education, 52(2), 496-508.

Saeed, N., Yang, Y., & Sinnappan, S. (2009). Emerging Web Technologies in Higher Education: A Case of Incorporating Blogs, Podcasts and Social Bookmarks in a Web Programming Course Based on Students' Learning Styles and Technology Preferences. Educational Technology & Society, 12(4), 19-109.

Weaver, D., Spratt, C., & Sid Nair, C. (2008). Academic and student use of a learning management system: Implications for quality. Australasian Journal of Educational Technology (AJET), 24(1), 30-41.

*Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access

Acknowledgements

Interview and Production: *Simon McIntyre and Karin Watson*

Camera and Edit: *Creative Development – L&T@UNSW*

COFA Online would like to extend a special thank you to those who donated their time and expertise to the project by allowing us to interview them for this episode:

Dr Catherine Suttle
Lecturer, School of Optometry and Vision Sciences, Faculty of Science

Andrea North-Samardzic
Facilitator, MBT Program, Australian School of Business

Tam Nguyen
Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Built Environment

Rob Bamford
Lecturer, School of Design Studies

Ian McArthur
Lecturer, COFA Online and School of Design Studies

Associate Professor Matthew Allen
Head, Department of Internet Studies

Associate Professor Anthony Herrington
Head, Centre for eLearning

Dr Garry Allen
Director, Information Technology in the Faculty of Life Sciences

Professor Ian Macdonald
Director, Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT)

Dr Richard Mobbs
Head, Academic Liaison, IT Services

For more Learning to Teach Online, visit the COFA Online Gateway

To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.

www.online.cofa.unsw.edu.au

VISIT COFA ONLINE GATEWAY ▶

Simon McIntyre
LTTO Project Leader
s.mcintyre@unsw.edu.au
Phone +61 2 8936 0631

Karin Watson
Co-Project Manager
karin@unsw.edu.au
Phone +61 2 8936 0631

Search for COFA Online on:

About the project

The Learning to Teach Online project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

Australian Learning and Teaching Council