

## Chapter 8

# The Role of Learning Management Systems in the Administration of a Multi-Section Course

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter will examine how course administrators of multi-section classes can use learning management systems (LMSs) to create consistency, support instructors, and enhance the student learning experience. The authors draw upon their experience using a campus-wide LMS to illustrate the ways in which this technology can be used to enhance the teaching/learning experience. Specifically, they detail the development of a master course page and distribution of common course materials. In turn, the focus on consistency created new assessment opportunities through learning analytics.*

## INTRODUCTION

Learning management systems (LMSs) have become a ubiquitous part of higher education (McGill & Klobas, 2009) because they facilitate flexible course delivery through student management and support of instructional functions and resources (Ryan, Scott, Freeman & Patel, 2000). Universities now rely on Canvas, Blackboard, and other LMSs for a variety of course activities, such as posting assignments, grading student work, providing feedback, corresponding with students, and entering grades (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, & Liu, 2012). While these technology-based educational tools have considerable potential, they are “often misunderstood...and misused” by both instructors and students (Watson & Watson, 2007, p. 28).

LMSs can improve learning and reduce costs, despite a wide variance in cost and features of LMSs (Lievertz, 2012). While some institutions spend a significant portion of their funding on LMSs (Mtebe, 2015), there are effective LMSs available for institutions with limited resources (Tantawi, Abdelsalam, Mourarady, & Erlirfae, 2014). Twigg (2003) argues that all LMSs have the capacity to improve learning while reducing costs by reducing instructor time spent on “nonacademic tasks such as recording, calculating and storing grades; photocopying course materials; posting changes in schedules and course syllabi; sending out special announcements; and transporting syllabi, assignments, and examinations from one semester to the next” (p. 4).

In their examination of the effects of LMSs on higher education, Coates, James and Baldwin (2005) observed that “LMS are not pedagogically neutral technologies, but rather, through their very design, they influence and guide teaching” (p. 27). The utilization of LMSs in teaching, the researchers note, impacts “the way students explore and contextualize about their knowledge, confront complexity and work through confusion, and get summative and formative feedback” (p. 27).

Since students behave and learn in different ways, it is important to recognize and adapt to student learning styles when utilizing LMSs (Graf, Kinshuk & Liu, 2009). Indeed, Lonn and Teasley (2009) determined that instructors and students alike value LMSs for the teaching and learning tools they provide, though the use of LMSs for efficient communication was reported to be the most useful application of the technology.

LMSs are now commonplace in institutions of higher education, but they are used in various ways by individual instructors. This variation may be due to differing levels of comfort and experience with technology (Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006). With that said, LMSs need to be used consistently. This point is especially relevant to the delivery of a multi-section course with many instructors who teach the same class (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). However, establishing consistency is a difficult task (Lawton & Braz, 2011). This reality, coupled with our reliance on a campus-wide LMS, led us to ask, “how should course administrators optimize their use of an LMS to support and coordinate instructors in a consistent manner?”

In order to use our LMS to enhance instruction and ensure consistency among sections, we implemented several tactics, including developing a “master course” that provided common course materials (e.g., scaffolded assignments and rubrics). Our experience working to optimize our use of our campus LMS can provide a case study in the application of LMS technology to more effectively deliver a large multi-section course.

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