

Chapter 8.19

Future Directions of Course Management Systems

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ABSTRACT

Course management systems will unquestionably become one of the most critical enterprise systems in higher education. This is because these systems are more closely aligned with the core mission of teaching and learning than any others. Although these systems have already undergone extraordinary transformation in just a few short years, we are at only the very beginning of the evolutionary process. It is critical that CMS vendors look to the students, educators, and administrators that interact with these systems to identify what new tools and features they need. Consequently, the next stage of innovation in course management systems should therefore focus more on features specifically related to promoting better and more efficient processes for teaching and learning online. More flexible administration options should make these systems easier to maintain.

Emerging standards will continue to simplify communications and data exchange with other systems. Finally, the infusion of sound principles of instructional design and learning theory into the tools themselves promises to transform today's course management systems into tomorrow's expert systems for teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Course management systems (CMS) have exploded onto the scene of higher education. In the late 1990s, the course management system was a fragile, loosely coupled set of Internet-based communication tools organized to support teaching a course. Each course had its own user accounts that, in most cases, were entered manually. The systems consisted of general communication and collaboration tools that were not in any way specifically tailored to online teaching and learn-

ing. Even with these limitations, however, course management systems have become one of the fastest growing enterprise systems ever.

Today's CMS evolution has been driven by user demand. Now, students and teachers can use the same user name and password to access all their courses from a single site. In most cases, the user name is even the same for all systems. Today's CMS are also expected to automatically integrate with other enterprise systems to synchronize course catalog and enrollment data. These advances have helped to catapult CMS adoption not only for distance education courses, but also for blended learning and to complement traditional classroom courses. In its current state, the CMS space has only tapped the surface of what these systems can offer. Now that the foundational issues of accounts and roster management are in place, future evolutions of CMS will be much more interesting. They will certainly become more integrated with other institutional systems. The benefits of automated synchronization of information are significant and tangible. They will also be engineered to be more specifically dedicated to the process of teaching and learning. But, for CMS technology to continue to grow, it must find ways to save time, save money, or offer tangible benefits for teaching and learning not otherwise attainable.

To answer the question of how next-generation CMS should or will be extended to add even more value, one must consider the stakeholders of these systems and clearly identify their needs. As the market and the community it serves evolve, active listening will become an increasingly important tool in designing these systems. Only by identifying the needs of each group of stakeholders will CMS technology be propelled forward in the necessary and appropriate direction. The primary stakeholders are students taking online courses or using the CMS as a resource for their traditional classes, faculty who use the CMS to both develop and teach their courses, and the information technology (IT) administrators who

support these systems. To that end, the personas that follow attempt to provide a snapshot of each group of stakeholders, what motivates them, and some of the things they want and need from a course management system.

THE STUDENT

John is an 18-year-old freshman at Sunny College. The year is 2004, and John has grown up with technology. He has been using the Internet for both fun and school work since he was 10. Hardly a day goes by that John does not chat with his online buddies. He also enjoys online gaming where he is quite comfortable using the 17-button game pad control and simultaneously chatting with his virtual teammates about the virtual world they are conquering. When he is not gaming, John is either chatting online or using the Internet to research a class project. When John does not know a word, his first thought is to go online. Using a traditional dictionary does not even cross his mind. He is used to a world that provides him what he wants when he wants it. From on-demand movies to online access to his new bank account, the virtual world is an integral part of his life. John's parents are amazed at his ability to watch a television show, instant message (IM) with friends, and do his homework simultaneously.

John was amazed at the process he had to endure when he enrolled at Sunny College. He actually had to walk to three different buildings collecting and delivering paperwork. He could not believe what a waste of time it was. It took almost five hours to enroll in four traditional and one online course. Thankfully, John is told that from this point forward he will be able to enroll online. On the first day of classes, John learned that two of his traditional classes would make heavy use of the CMS for quizzes and homework submissions. Another of his classes would be using a stand-alone Web site not hosted in the CMS.

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