

Chapter 2

Learning Management System Evaluation and Selection: A Case Study of the University of Massachusetts System Methodology for the Learning Platform Review

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ABSTRACT

Educational technology goes hand-in-hand with pedagogy when it comes to teaching and learning. At the center of our collection of educational tools, especially those in online-only courses, is the Learning Management System (LMS). Compared to other newer technologies, such as blogs and wikis, the selection and implementation of an LMS requires more in-depth evaluation due to the higher re-implementation costs associated with making an initial poor choice. LMS choice goes beyond a simple comparison of the various tools available in the various LMS candidates. This case study examines the process by which the UMassOnline consortium chose an LMS to replace their end-of-life LMS. In this case we describe the Learning Platform Review process that drove our decision-making, the rationale behind this process, and the outcomes. This LPR process is based on agile methodology, and it was the first use case of the LPR for the UMassOnline consortium; we therefore also include a post-modern analysis, what we learned, and what we would have done differently.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2009 the UMassOnline consortium (UMOL) found itself at a crossroads. The consortium was tasked with finding a replacement for their current Learning Management System

(LMS), Blackboard (formerly WebCT) Vista. As an organization in change, this was a great opportunity not only to modernize their LMS offerings to their constituents, but also to develop and test new methodologies for software and platform evaluation and selection; as well as come up with new project management techniques that would ultimately benefit the organization beyond this current selection of a new LMS.

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BACKGROUND

About the Consortium

At the time of this undertaking, the consortium was entering its tenth year of existence. UMassOnline was created in 2001 to bring together high quality online courses offered by each individual UMass campus. The goal set forth by UMassOnline was to meet the online educational needs of, not only, learners local to Massachusetts, but also of national, and international learners, by offering accredited educational programs via internet based educational tools.

From a consortial point of view, UMassOnline didn't just aim to be a clearinghouse for courses and degree programs offered by the individual campuses. The aim was to provide the technology required to successfully implement online courses including LMS, Student Information Systems (SIS), Web 2.0 Collaboration tools such as Wikis; as well as other technologies such as single sign-on, course evaluation systems, and cutting edge learning technology initiatives, such as mobile learning. These are facilitated by their internal NIFTI (*Needs Identification Framework for Technology Innovation*) process.

At the time of its establishment, the various campuses were using many different LMSs, including *Prometheus*, used by UMass Boston and UMass Amherst; *WebCT Campus Edition 4* used by UMass Dartmouth; *IntraLearn* used by UMass Lowell; and a home-brewed system called "*COURSES*" used by the UMass Worcester Medical School.

In 2003, UMassOnline approached the campuses with a proposal to come together and select one LMS that they could all use. This process was a fruitful one, and it resulted in the evaluation and selection *WebCT Vista 3* as the LMS that consortium members would use. While the migration from the various LMSs was a bit rocky, for at least for some campuses, the consortium has gone through a number of successful updates, and

had, at the time of the beginning of this new LMS evaluation and selection process, successfully updated to *Blackboard Vista 8*. Over the years UMassOnline has expanded their constituents to not only include the five UMass campuses, but also ten other area colleges and universities.

Choosing a New LMS

In 2005 Blackboard acquired WebCT (Clabaugh, 2005) and had announced its intent to phase out the *Vista* and *Campus Edition* platforms in January 2013. This meant, that while the consortium, and the campuses, were quite happy with their LMS, it would be time to plan for a migration to a new LMS given that *Vista* would no longer be available.

The LMS market was very exciting at this time. Over the years the market had consolidated, with Prometheus being acquired by WebCT, and in turn WebCT being acquired by Blackboard. Blackboard had also acquired ANGEL, which made it seem like the LMS market was contracting. This, however, couldn't be farther from the truth. Along with established players in the proprietary LMS market, such as Blackboard and *Desire2Learn*, there were a number of start-ups like *Instructure Canvas*; as well as a number of mature providers of Open Source LMSs like *Moodle* and *Sakai*. There were also free LMSs, riding the wave of Web 2.0 software, like *CourseKit* and *OpenClass*. This was a good time to put out a request for pricing (RFP) into this LMS market!

Migrations between enterprise-level systems that support core business processes are almost always challenging and incur organizational risk. This is especially true when the system is customer facing, as is the LMS, which is used by university administrators, teaching staff, learning support staff, and most importantly, the learners themselves! Some stakeholders, including faculty and support staff, may be hesitant, rightfully concerned about migration, content and course fidelity, and investment in training.

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