A modern learning and teaching environment

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Learning is not something that can be strictly managed, but of course it can be directed and fostered. Engaging students by leveraging modern methods in a way that channels their curiosity, will inspire young minds, and will certainly enrich the learning experience.

Technology almost always has a part to play when schools look to enrich their environments, but technology is not simple. The traditional rules of communication and collaboration do not apply. And with countless distractions it is easy to lose sight of why we have chosen to incorporate technology into something as multi-faceted as education.

Learning starts with a relationship, an exchange of actions from one to another. And considering the deep relationship our students have with their devices, managing software in order to communicate, is critical for teaching staff.

A Learning Management System

The term 'LMS' is often used to describe software which distributes online or blended schooling and courses. An LMS may also centralise administrative tasks such as attendance, reporting and documenting student pastoral issues. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that the term 'LMS' was derived from another acronym 'Content Management System'. A name

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that is so synonymous with technical geekery it makes regular teaching folk quake in their boots. And quite rightly so, after all teaching shouldn't be filled with mythical acronyms usually reserved for ICT staff.

A preferred term by many leading LMSs (such as Edmodo), is a "teacher-centered social learning platform". This description captures the importance of community and dialogue for a learning space. However you refer to these digital spaces, it is essential that you understand what they can do.

If your students are using any form of technology throughout their day, then one would expect the consumption and creation of digital media. This may be in the form of a Word doc or PDF. As students begin to express their creativity further they will create images,

videos and audio podcasts. Your LMS will be the glue that brings together all of this media, the LMS will be a 'one-stop shop' for students to visit while doing homework or revision. You can use it to share the course assessment criteria, or any marking matrix. This digital location is very important for schools looking to reduce printing costs, while keeping all students on track on their learning pathway. In this article I will compare three modern LMSs and highlight the positives and negatives so that you can select a platform that suits you.

Edmodo and iTunes U have been in the making for many years, and they have gained a huge user base. Google Classroom (or just 'Classroom') on the other hand is very new, only being released in August of this year. Each system is quite unique, and although one is not clearly better then the next, they do have advantages and limitations when compared.

Personalised learning
Prior to technology use in the classroom, it was challenging, if not impossible for teachers to provide a personalised learning experience for every student in the class. Laptops and tablets have proved to be invaluable tools because of their flexibility and potential to appeal to almost all learning types if used effectively.

Edmodo and Classroom have been developed in a fashion similar to that of a Facebook timeline wall. Both students and teachers can engage in discussion on the wall, and teachers can share course documentation and assignments. More importantly both Edmodo and Classroom provide a method of private messaging as well. When a student feels a question to be deemed too trivial to ask in a group context, he/she can reach out to you for clarification. This could be done via email, but the thought of having all communication recorded and kept associated with the relevant course/assignment is very useful.

Edmodo goes one step further and has a great feature called Small Groups. Effectively groups within groups, this can be a great way to differentiate instruction and learning for students of different abilities in your class.

iTunes U does offer discussions associated with a course but only for all students and instructors to view. With the option for personalised help missing, iTunes U fails to accommodate this important criteria for a well appointed system.

iTunes U houses thousands of public courses and is an incredible repository of knowledge which all iPad teachers should be made aware of. If you're affiliated with an institution that has a public iTunes U site, you too can publish your course to the iTunes U catalog, effectively reaching millions of students. This community of classes for all to learn from is one strength of iTunes U, it was after all originally intended for universities to disseminate their material to large cohorts or distance students.

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Edmodo provides 'communities', a way for teachers to connect with other teachers and you can also share your own class code with as many people as you wish, achieving a global audience, but your classes will not be publicised in the way iTunes U makes your classes discoverable through the iTunes U app.

Accessibility
If you are already an iPad school, you have the advantage of being able to benefit from the best that Microsoft, Google and other developers have to offer, because all companies develop native apps for the iPad. But bear in mind, if you commit to using Apple's native iTunes U, your courses can only be consumed on the iPad/iPhone. On the other hand, Google Classroom and Edmodo can be accessed from any internet browser, which is great if a student is unprepared away from their computer, as mum or dad's smart phone can be used to quickly review any homework tasks which may have been set.

However Classroom, at this stage, is an entirely enclosed experience; you can only add students if they belong to your school, ratified by having an '@yourschool' email address. And this highlights Google Classroom's Achilles heel: your school must use Google Apps for Education to take advantage of this LMS. This means that you need to hand over management of email (from your existing Exchange service) to Google's 'cloud' and Gmail. This in turn brings many enhancements, notably the inclusion of all documents included in a Google Classroom being filed automatically in your Google Drive. Students can even submit work to you via Google Classroom, and that digital media is neatly added inside the assignment folder for you to access whenever you are ready. When handling of documents becomes this simple, teachers really can focus less on file management and more on teaching.

Simplicity and user experience
Edmodo has a simple interface and students feel familiar with the layout as it resembles Facebook, but beneath the simple interface is a whole plethora of options, and it is these enhancements that to some can feel overwhelming.

iTunes U maintains a very clean and clinical experience. Its simplicity doesn't distract the user and with native notifications built into the app, a student is always alerted to a new post. The courses have a very satisfactory checklist feature, allowing you to mark off tasks as they are completed.

Google Classroom courses can be personalised with great looking themes and the overall experience from a student perspective is streamlined and simple, with just three different screens to become familiar with. Furthermore if your school has gone Google, all students have one single username (their school email address) and one password to remember. A frustration with both iTunes U and Edmodo is that you are dependent on the student correctly keeping their username faithful to their actual name, and that the student remembers their password.

Edmodo appears to come up trumps against these two rivals, and for good reason. I work with many department schools throughout WA and Edmodo is a learning platform that I am seeing more and more of. It works great behind the stringent internet filters, and staff have found its stability across many devices a real blessing.

iTunes U is reserved for schools who have adopted a 1:1 iPad environment. Teachers can assign all types of materials and tasks and students are kept on a narrow pathway to their assessment dates. However with no option to receive documents from the student and no way to provide personalised feedback, this system may be better suited for mature, self-motivated learners.

Google Classroom is currently only available for Google Apps for Education schools, and this LMS is a good reason why you should consider the transition for your school. The streamlined, clutter free experience offers almost all that Edmodo does, but integrates into your own Google Drive beautifully, meaning that neither you or your students ever have a reason for losing work or not meeting deadlines again.

There are of course many other LMSs that you can use, and the competition seems to increase every term. But it is becoming clearer to me that a singular approach from the outset is probably the best way to go. So if you have the luxury of a clean slate, consider the above and choose an online learning environment carefully, so that you can provide clarity to your colleagues and consistency to your students.

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