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Online Courses Have Three Critical Components (and Learning Management Systems Are Not One of Them)

Michael Simonson

It is happening again. Vendors—and some well-meaning educational administrators—are talking about the power of course/learning management



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systems and claiming that the technology used to deliver online courses has an impact on student achievement.

How many times have we heard the phrase “put your course in Blackboard, or convert your courses to Canvas,” implying that this will make it a better course? The idea seems to be that putting something into an online learning management system makes an online course a good one.

Some may remember the statements of several decades ago about putting a course “on film,” “on video,” or even “on the computer” to make them relevant or effective or improved. As Clark (1983) so famously noted, “media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition” (p. 446).

Let’s be clear. There are really only three critical components of an online course—or any course, for that matter: content, design, and instruction. The learning man-

... continues on page 63

agement system can make an important contribution to course effectiveness, but only to the extent that it appropriately facilitates the “big three” components.

Content, design, and instruction; let’s examine each. First, as any publisher will say, content is king. That is why there is education: to provide access to important content and processes.

Next, design—or how the instructor organizes the vast quantity of information that could potentially be presented in a course. While there are many design strategies, the instructional design strategies presented by Dick and Carey, Kemp and Morrison, and Smith and Ragan, all based on instructional systems, are the most significant and important.

Finally, there is instruction, or what teachers do. This is probably the most important contributor to learning. There are many who argue that teaching is a science, and others who say teaching is an art. Certainly science and art overlap. Our warm memories of a great teacher’s artful application of the science of human learning clearly illustrate this.

The editors of *Distance Learning* encourage more—and more critical—consideration of the role of course management

systems. Among the questions worthy of investigation and discussion are:

- Are some courses inappropriate for placement in a CMS? If so, how do we decide?
- To what degree should courses be redesigned before placement in a CMS?
- Does a CMS impose a one-size-fits-all approach that may stifle creativity?
- Does the mandated use of a CMS cede academic authority to information technology staff at the expense of the faculty?

One simple measure of what makes a great school lesson, college course, or training session is what is remembered. As for the course management system, unless it impeded learning, no one remembers it.

And finally, as Bill Gates said “technology is just a tool.” It is unlikely that putting a course on “this or that course management system” is the path to quality online learning and teaching.

REFERENCE

- Clark, R. E. (1983). Reconsidering research on learning from media. *Review of Educational Research*, 53(4), 445–459.