One World Class·UMassOnline

UMassOnline Blog
Explore. Learn. Share. Connect.

UMassOnline
University of Massachusetts
Amherst Boston Dartmouth Lowell Worcester

W(h)ither the LMS?

Posted on July 27, 2010 by Michael Feldstein

The UMassOnline team welcomes Michael Feldstein, notable blogger and founder of e-Literate, a weblog about educational technology and related topics and Principal Product Manager, Academic Enterprise Solutions at Oracle Corporation, past assistant director of the SUNY Learning Network, and commentator on Online learning as a guest blogger and to the extended UMassOnline community for an event featuring Mr. Feldstein on August 5th. For those local to UMassOnline or planning to be in the area, please join us Thursday, August 5, at the Cermax Conference Center in Marlborough, MA.

Back in 2005, when I had the privilege of working alongside Patrick Masson and Ken Udas at the SUNY Learning Network (SLN), one of the challenges that we faced was the need to move to a new LMS. The system that SLN was on, a home-grown LMS built on top of Lotus Notes, had served the university system well but was showing its age. Accordingly, a group of us were tasked with identifying the needs of the university community and finding a platform that best fit those needs.

This is harder than it sounds because of the size and diversity of SUNY. The State University of New York is made up of sixty-four campuses, ranging from large R1 universities to tiny rural community colleges with everything in between, including a couple of medical schools, an ophthalmology school, a fashion design school, and a technical school. The ways in which these schools needed to use their LMS were very different from each other—and that was just looking at the campus level. When we dug deeper, we found that there was an enormous range of needs and uses even between individual faculty members. For example, I remember a couple of faculty members at the Fashion Institute of Technology (a SUNY school) getting excited about an image annotation tool that had been developed at Columbia University. They thought it might be useful for teaching art history and asked me to take a look at it with them. At first, they were thrilled with what they saw. It had rich functionality and was easy to use. But the deeper they looked into the details, the less satisfied they became. The tool was designed for use by a histology professor, and it turns out that teaching with images in a histology class is very different than teaching with images in an art history class. The tool didn't do what they needed it to do. The more my SLN colleagues and I

looked around, the more we realized that this is a common problem. Colleges aren't factories and students aren't widgets. Education needs to be individualized and so do learning environments.

At the same time, it makes all the sense in the world to share costs across multiple campuses for online education infrastructure. Supporting a mission-critical application like an LMS at the levels of performance and availability that students and teachers need can be hard and expensive. Everybody can benefit by pooling resources, particularly as we enter increasingly tough financial times for higher education. But how do we balance the need for centrally supported resources with the need for a rich and flexible learning environment? When SLN was evaluating the alternatives that existed in 2005, we came to the conclusion that no LMS we could find adequately met both sets of needs.

Five years later, the kind of system that we envisioned at SUNY still doesn't exist yet. In the meantime, new needs have grown with the explosion of consumer web technologies like YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter. The capabilities for learning, creating, and sharing that are freely available on the web are far outpacing the capabilities inside the traditional LMS. More and more people are asking the question about whether the LMS has fallen so far behind that it will never catch up. Maybe we are approaching the end of the LMS as a product category.

But I don't think so. While there is no doubt that we are on the cusp of a major change, I don't believe that change will entail throwing out the LMS. Advances in technology and in interoperability standards have made it realistic to propose centrally supported systems that scale far better and yet provide far more flexibility than current-generation LMSs, while also giving them the ability to interoperate with all the great Web 2.0 tools available online wherever that makes sense. Equally importantly, there is a much broader recognition within higher education than there was five years ago that such a system is needed. There are a number of different projects in development right now that give us reason to believe we will see substantially different—and better—online learning environments within a year or two. At the same time, as long as there are needs to protect student privacy, to track student progress, and to provide both students and faculty with a simple, unified, and seamless online learning experience, there will be a need for something like an LMS. It may work very differently from today's systems, just like today's word processor programs work very differently than WordStar and WordPerfect for DOS did. In my talk, I will focus on how the LMS can, should, and very probably will evolve over the next few years. You may be surprised at just how much more quickly these systems can change going forward than they have in the past. I know I have been.

I look forward to the conversation with you.