

Learning Management Systems Reviewed  
in the Business Context  
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## Introduction:

In approaching this week's writing, I wanted to explore LMS solutions in the workplace. I am fascinated with the ONID program's emphasis on learning communities, and on online learning outside the LMS. However, I have a nagging sense that in the business workplace such experimentation would be less well received. Rather, standardization is one approach to increasing efficiency in the workplace.

Part of my interest in this topic comes out of my consulting with the Chilkoot Indian Association several years ago. I was hired initially to help them develop an LMS subscribed to with grant money through their Human Resources department. Almost immediately, they asked me to create a website for them. Their web hosting was through GoDaddy and available to them through that service was Moodle, at no additional cost. I set up an instance of Moodle and we spent some time comparing and contrasting the products. In the end, their HR Director felt that both were incredible overkill for the training needs of the organization. I pressed for an additional application, supporting cultural preservation and transmission, alas; neither application was seen as mission critical at that time.

Returning to this project, I started with a preliminary Google search to discover LMS solutions used by businesses. The LMS market is an eight billion dollar market. Accordingly, there are scores of products and service providers. Moreover, frequently these companies are purchased by larger ones or simply go out of business. One resource the search uncovered was the [Top 20 list from Capterra](#). This page sorts the LMSs by number of customers, number of users, social media following and size of the vendor. However, following the links to particular product reviews additional criterion revealed, in particular, a features checklist, offering eighteen features.

I selected the following three LMS solutions to review:

- [Totara](#)
- [Blackboard LMS for Business](#)
- [Learning by SuccessFactors](#)

I am interested to review Totara since it is a version of Moodle targeted at business, its' market share is tiny in comparison to the other two I will be reviewing. Blackboard is the Gorilla in the industry with the largest market share. SuccessFactors is owned by SAP a global powerhouse in enterprise software.

### Decision Models:

To evaluate these LMS solutions I need some criterion. This is an opportunity to do both some library research and some internet research. I suspect that a fair bit of scholarly research is available on the topic. As well, I suspect that many white papers and professional association offer information on how to evaluate and select LMS for enterprise application. A quick search revealed, a recent article, “The VLE as a Trojan Mouse: Policy, Politics and Pragmatism” a case study of one New Zealand university’s process for selecting an LMS. “In this paper, we reflect on the political tactics, pedagogical strategies and approval processes involved in the decision to select Moodle to replace a proprietary system in New Zealand’s largest university-level distance education provider. Critical to the process was the explication of guiding principles, pedagogical criteria and identification of university requirements, along with politically astute alliance and consultations to endorse the selection process”(Brown, 2010). This case study is valuable in part because it offers relative transparency into a mission critical decision occurring in a politically charged environment and because it details aspects of a business decision in an academic environment. If I were part of an HR team shopping for a LMS for business application this article would be useful as well. First, because the decision model focuses on key performance indicators and institutional strategic priorities and second because it focuses on the work of instruction, pedagogical features, before it examines technology or cost factors. The process the authors describe took eighteen months, six of it on the business case alone, so a slow process perhaps. However, the university administration funded the project at unprecedented levels. “Notably, the budget went well beyond infrastructure and allowed for a fivefold increase in the existing level of pedagogical support. Never before had such a level of resourcing been available to support the technology enhanced learning within the University” (Brown, 2010). Throughout the article there is a sense of tension between faculty and ITS, however, in managing the decision process in this way a significant win-win opportunity was created benefiting both units.

The [Association for Talent Development](#) website offers professional association and credentialing in learning and performance. They offer a white paper, “[A Field Guide to Learning Management Systems](#)” on the topic of selecting an LMS and this more clearly in the enterprise environment. While it is easy to take the colorful presentation and the sidebars full of factoids lightly this is actually a very similar document to the scholarly article reviewed above. A significant difference is that this information is abstracted from a number of case studies and so offers themes and broad categories rather than situation specific elements. In summary, the document provides a definition of “LMS” followed by a brief step through sequence of important matters.

- centralize and automate administration

- use self-service and self-guided services
- assemble and deliver learning content rapidly
- consolidate training initiatives on a scalable web-based platform support portability and standards
- personalize content and enable knowledge reuse (Ellis, 2009).

They develop three topics more completely: cost and pricing models, procurement and implementation best practices, and product features. The sidebars while initially visually distracting actually have good information.

Begin with key performance indicators or strategic priorities. Second, determine learning strategy appropriate to the operation, list functional requirements, and list organizational requirements. Define the decision making process and key decision makers. Define the structure of the implantation and the resources necessary and finally select the technology.

While this decision model is based on enterprise wide technology selection, I can easily translate it to an individual or team approach to instructional design. The model can be used to make a personal decision about selecting a technology for instructional purposes, as well.

Review:

First, observation is that companies selling these products/services are dancing a fine line between transparency and opacity. They want to show enough to entice customers to submit a request for information without showing so much that competitors can know the product. Websites for these products seem to be a bit of an edu-babble, jargon dump. Accordingly, chasing out the details of specifications is difficult (hence, why the request for information phase is important). A lot of the information about products is now available through videos. Many of the videos are very slick and are simply long commercials with limited information. Key details like price for example are conspicuously missing. Totara offers a good video with a lot of information useful for decision-making. It is 55 minutes long. I limited my discovery of the other two products to 55 minutes as well. This in part to keep this project manageable and in also in creating the standard it was interesting to compare how much I was able to learn in the allotted time.

Blackboard in the business environment poses an interesting challenge. They offer versions of the product at different price points, basic, professional and performance, obviously, the more money the more fully featured. Thrown into that mix is a version of Moodle that Blackboard rebrands as Joule. Blackboard ProSites is the entry-level product priced at \$9500 annually, the fully featured product is called Blackboard Learn a comparison is linked here: [Blackboard Professional Education Solutions](#). I

cannot find a price for the full featured version on their website easily. I think part of the reason for that is that within BlackBoard Learn are lots of versions and features that can be added on hence pricing depends on the customization. I spent a lot of time trying to drill down in the Blackboard website and get to price, detailed specifications, hosting options, in the end I felt like the site was designed to force me to interact with a sales representative.

Learning by Successfactors is equally difficult to discover. I think that Learning is part of a suite of HR products. Like Blackboard you can purchase at various price points and you can mix and match some aspects of the suite. However, I wasted a lot of time looking for details on functionality, specifications, and pricing on the website. Frequently a pop up window prompting for a chat session interrupted my browsing the site so more evidence that the company is driving shoppers to interactions with a salesperson.

Turning to Totara, the video I mentioned above, is one click down from the homepage. It is clearly denoted by a button saying "Find Out More." Adjacent to the video is a link to a demo site, following that link shows instructions for logging into the demo site in a variety of roles, administrator, or student for examples. The video explains how to get a free version of the product, called "Seedling" to download, setup, and explore. The Totara website offers three tabs, Learning, Management and System and as one expects information relevant to the topics available below the tab. The video itself provides a lot of information about the product, the company and the services surrounding the product.

Sticking with my time limit of 55 minutes of product research, I feel that I know a lot more about the Totara product than either Blackboard or Successfactors. If this were a real request for information process, I would have to spend a lot more time with product specifications. I did learn enough to know that Blackboard and Successfactors are the more comparable products. In this case, Totara is an outlier and represents a different approach to LMS in the business environment.

#### Discussion:

I suspect my resonance with Totara is similar to what I tried to do with the Chilkooot Indian Association and that is a bit of "do it yourself." However, that cannot possibly always be the right answer; a small organization with some IT strength - then perhaps it is the right answer. However, a very large organization, even with a strong IT unit, maybe Blackboard or Learn are solutions that are more appropriate. I think an important question to ask as well is from whence the content? Are we producing it in house? On the other hand, are we in a heavily regulated industry and subscribing or purchasing content might be the better solution. Accordingly, a light version of Blackboard and a big library of instruction might be correct for the moment. If the shop is already deep into Google apps then

Blackboard collaborate may not add enough value. But then again if we are so deeply committed to Google then perhaps Google's LMS ought to be among the products reviewed. This paragraph gets to the complexity that Brown et al, were documenting in their case study of the New Zealand University. What are the key performance indicators; what are the organizations strengths, and how do those strengths silence key constituents? The case study clearly was about getting faculty and teaching to be the driving force in the decision. The authors gently mock themselves as they describe their work to write the business case, four drafts and six months. However, their business case was convincing and compelling as the senior staff funded the initiative extremely well. One of the political maneuvers was to prevent a strong IT department from running away with the process and either preserving the status quo, or purchasing a product that fit IT's needs. However, the high level of funding for the project had to positively affect the IT department – the rising tide, as it were, floated all boats. In this instance, we are imagining the purchase in a business context. A key stakeholder is the HR department. Accordingly, we need the LMS to integrate easily and well with procedures and existing HR systems. Above I touched on content some portion of content will be third party and the larger that percentage the more significant that factors into the purchase decision. [SCORM](#) (Sharable Content Object Reference Model) standards matter in this purchase decision. The other source of content is in-house development in the business scenario this is a very different issue from a higher education environment. Content creation will likely be focused fewer individuals, persons with the role of trainer, accordingly they can be trained to a higher level with the specific interface. The relative importance on assessment will also play a factor in the decision model. Therefore, a business situated in a highly regulated industry will likely value third party content, SCORM standards and assessment tools in skills management and high integration with HR systems. In this case, Learning by SuccessFactor might be more interesting. A large, multinational corporation, looking for ways to encourage both learning and collaboration but with less concern about regulation might find BlackBoard products better fitting their needs. A small business might resonate with the open source products, like Moodle or Totara. Here third party customization or integration with other products or suites might fit the needs well. As we know, Moodle is able to scale to quite a large size. Keeping it, or Totara, integrated with other HR and IT products and functions however is a hard question and one that need to be thought through a bit.

Conclusion:

In this discussion, I have focused on exploring discovery and decision models in the business environment. However, I have been aware throughout of the transferability to a personal situation, say, as an instructor, making decisions about technology in an online teaching situation. In some ways I think the business situation might be easier simply because work is done in groups and committees and because

one is obligated to report out to bosses. There are checks and balances. An instructor might not hit a source of feedback until the learners themselves are evaluating the technology through using it. Certainly, we can hope colleagues and administrators and learning communities could help inform the decision model but it seems important to build a conscious use of these resources in the personal decision model.

References:

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