Chapter I

Measure for Measure: Assessing Course Management Systems

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Abstract

The authors examine CMS as a new enterprise technology. Using a model of transformative assessment that frames value within alignment of institutional goals and mission, they define the questions that should be asked of each of the CMS stakeholders: teachers, learners, support services, leadership and the CMS vendor.

No more evasion...
Our haste from hence is of so quick condition
That it prefers itself and leaves unuestion’d
Matters of needful value.

Duke Vicentio (Act 1), Measure for Measure
Introduction

A few brief years ago, we knew not course management systems (CMS). Technology-enhanced learning often meant expensive initiatives developed by instructional designers and computer programmers. Those faculty incorporating technology into their curricula were usually entrepreneurs, risk-takers, or generously funded and safely tenured. Funding was for narrow science applications, research repositories, or large course redesign. Liberal arts faculty members were left to a few PowerPoint® workshops and the guilt-inducing notion that they really should develop some Web pages — though exactly why was, and probably remains, unclear. Few incentives were offered to do more, do better, or take the risks associated with a technology-infused curriculum.

Hagner (2001) reports that only a few faculty “entrepreneurs” were willing to take on the hard work and risk of failure associated with technology when the needed shift in institutional reward, collaboration, support, and expectation was missing. Then, something happened.

Across public and private institutions large and small, faculty embraced course management systems. In a short period of time, small departmental installations over-extended capacity and quickly gave way to institutional enterprise applications. Faculty development centers became CMS support sites. University technology staff became CMS experts. Instructional designers wrote thousands of best practices handbooks for effective discussion boards and online learning. Students began to ask if there was a CMS site for the course before registering. Universities began to create notation, policy, and process for technology-enhanced, hybrid, and online courses. In a culture where change never happens, something happened. What happened? What were faculty members doing within the CMS framework?

Did we find a tool that promotes deeper learning and better teaching? Did the CMS make mundane tasks easier for the instructor? Did the student engage in the material in a more direct or engaged way? Most anyone associated with the use of CMS will tell you that they don’t know the answers, haven’t asked, and aren’t sure what to measure. Common thought is that if so many faculty are using CMS, this must be good for teaching. If the students are embracing the new modes of delivery, something about the CMS must be effective for learning.

This common thought is based on a pinch of intuition and a dab of hunch, but not data. Others express the hunch that technology alone is not enough, and
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