Chapter XVIII

Course Management Systems for Learning: Future Designs

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Abstract

Author Barbara Ross, co-founder and Chief Operating Office of WebCT, Inc., posits that in the future the “course” will become a decreasingly important construct in the “course management system.” Building on a personal reflection on teaching and learning in higher education, she predicts an evolving focus on effective pedagogy will drive academic enterprise systems to support learning outcomes and assessment, a proliferation of digital learning objects, commercial and open source tool integration and an increasing focus on the student. In conclusion, she reminds skeptics of the changes in the last five years and looks forward to a bright, dynamic future.
Introduction

Long ago, in an epoch that evokes much nostalgia among aging baby boomers (and much eye-rolling among members of the generations that precede and follow them), I faced a dilemma common to college freshman both then and now. I had been shut out of a desired course and had a hole in my schedule that needed to be filled — fast — and preferably by something that didn’t meet on Fridays or any earlier than 11:00 a.m. The friend of a sister of a guy in my dorm at the University of Pennsylvania was said to be heavily recommending a year-long course entitled American Civilization I, taught by a professor named Anthony N.B. Garvan. Dr. Garvan was reputed to be a great lecturer, just back from a sabbatical. The course had been opened on his return, and there were seats. It was supposed to be difficult (according to the mythology, 80 percent of the students received Cs or below), but worth it. I signed up, bought a spiral bound notebook for 69 cents at the campus bookstore (which sits beside me as I type this) and dutifully reported for class.

“Norsemen in Greenland!” Garvan bellowed in sonorous tones on the first day of class and then proceeded through a lengthy discourse on calamities and disappearing colonies in the New World from Greenland to Roanoke. At the time I took the course, Dr. Garvan had been delivering it for over twenty years. Legend had it that just to keep himself amused, he had once taught it Merlin-like — backwards, from the present day to Leif Ericsson.

The learning experience was everything that is sometimes derided by those who confuse the medium with the construct of the message. Garvan was nothing if not “the sage on the stage”. There were 200 of us crammed into the lecture hall; the teaching assistant’s sessions were worthless (or so as an 18-year-old I adjudged), and I am quite sure that the essay questions we laboriously answered in the blue exam books were never viewed by the great man himself.

For two semesters, Garvan talked about Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, and Ulysses S. Grant. He explained the meaning of culture. We took notes in our spiral notebooks and read copiously from original sources. Spring came and finals rolled around. The lectures and the reading ended. The blank blue essay books were passed out one last time, and Garvan asked, in some elegant way I no longer recall, “What is an American?”

I wrote for two hours, and by the time I lay down my pen, something magical had occurred. In writing my answer, I reframed everything I had heard and read all year long, and understood at a different level than I had at any singular point in the course what Dr. Garvan was getting at. He had never told us straight out
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