Chapter VI

The CMS as Shapeshifter, Catalyst, and Engaging Learning Tool

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Abstract

Content management systems (CMS) have been purposed for different tasks on our campuses and are in danger of becoming all things to all people. In our discussion we re-evaluate those aspects of a CMS that appear to make the greatest impact on teaching and learning. While a CMS may do duty as a vessel for containing and interacting with content, we see its greatest appeal and persuasion in its availability to all learners and teachers and its potential to transform itself according to a user’s need. By separately analyzing common uses and current applications of a CMS, we identify the tools and components of a CMS that offer the most promise in the future.
Introduction

Most of us have been raised believing that the impact of technology on our lives is paramount and that more often than not, technology has changed our own “everyday practices.” We may all differ in welcoming social and political manifestations of a particular technology, but overall we tend to believe that a “proper” application of technology may bring benefit to our lives.

In this chapter we analyze how Course Management Systems (CMS) used as enterprise tools that ultimately support what academic institutions are all about — teaching, learning, and research. We revisit a CMS implementation at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and critically examine instructional strategies and pedagogies that have almost organically developed in their specific course environment enabled by the use of a CMS. We identify how at each stage of development, complementary principles of deeper learning are incorporated and absorbed into the teaching and learning environment of a CMS, moving from a model of content delivery and passive reception to a model of active engagement and autonomous, self-directed learning.

At UBC, the locally grown course management system, WebCT™, has acted as a catalyst to bring new learning technologies to the fore. With the use of new technologies, a set of new challenges has emerged: students, staff, and teachers engaged in the exploration of new media to interchange ideas and engage with the construction of knowledge. Content delivery in a traditional face-to-face and top-down approach was challenged by more interactive modes of knowledge acquisition. Technology, never neutral, played a big part in changing the delivery of “knowledge.” However, the manner in which a collective knowledge is managed and shared has become a challenge for all those engaged in the process. Learning is an interactive process. Inside a course management system, the autonomy and control of the learner, or client, to engage actively and intervene in the process of knowledge acquisition depends very much on the technical and administrative infrastructure provided by the CMS to access information.

The Beginning: All Needs Are Equal, or One Instance of WebCT™ for All

As the site where WebCT™ was developed, UBC has had a rich set of experiences with this first-generation course management system. These
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