Platform Evaluation for Higher Education Institute

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The University of British Columbia (UBC) represents a complex educational context due to the many purposes served by technology. The school uses Learning Management System(s) (LMS) for reasons that are similar to those of many other institutions; to extend access and increase enrolment (Nel, Dryer & Carstens, 2010), to improve the efficiency and pedagogics of teaching and learning (Coates, James & Baldwin, 2005) and to improve cost effectiveness. In the strategic documents from UBC, we notice a number of themes in the goals and priorities that might influence the choice of learning platform(s). The themes are

* The need to be open in the sharing of knowledge and serving for societal good;
* The need to support student engagement and achievement to improve student learning;
* The need to remain relevant in the academic market by offering flexible and innovative programming;
* The need to cultivate long-lasting and mutually beneficial relationships with alumni.

**Analysis**

**Sharing Knowledge and Serving for Societal Good**

As one of the world’s leading universities, UBC is seeking every opportunity to share knowledge broadly as well as provide high quality services and resources to the wider community and promote societal good. These commitments require an open platform feature to positively share knowledge, resources, materials and reduce the barriers for people to easily access learning (UBC, 2012).

Nel, et al (2010) included “access” (p. 247) as one of the necessary criteria to evaluate an LMS. They define access as the ability to provide more opportunities to involve more people in education. They believe educational technology has the potential to achieve this goal. In order to promote educational equity, UBC should implement an LMS that provides easier access for people from diverse communities.  UBC’s current use of the LMS Blackboard Connect, a closed system, is difficult to export or share openly with people outside of the system (Croteu, 2015).

However, platforms such as WordPress, Moodle and Eliademy inherently have an open nature in following ways. First, they are all web-based systems that allow students, staff and other people access to the content by easily sharing a link. It provides an easier approach for people who have limited digital skills and slow computers. Moreover, Eliademy allows people to create accounts through their social media accounts, which shows a more welcome attitude to people who are active on social media. Secondly, supporting multiple languages enhances the capability of these platforms to connect with global educational communities and learners from various areas. Last but not least, these platforms are increasingly mobile friendly; Moodle and Eliademy have even developed apps for improving the experience for mobile users. This feature enables ubiquitous learning with more convenience  (Croteu, 2015; Petrucci, Hamilton, Langford, Naylor, Rothney, n.d.). Ironically, the open nature of the three platforms might have some drawbacks to their openness to users. Since they all root from open source and rely on mass plugins to enhance performance and create a diversity of courses, users with low digital skills might feel overwhelmed at the beginning of their ventures on these platforms. Therefore, UBC set the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) to make and share WordPress plugins and provide technological support to users (Novak Rogic, 2014). However, if UBC continues to strive to contribute to external educational communities and stands for educational equity, open platforms like WordPress, Moodle and Eliademy are more suitable for UBC to achieve these goals.

**Student Engagement and Achievement**

The second theme noticed in the UBC’s strategic plan is to develop and implement initiatives that support student engagement and achievement (UBC, 2014).  This may translate to improving student learning by  providing access to blended, learner-centered, collaborative and personalized learning opportunities as well as other support services.

Blackboard Connect comes with a standardized learning space in terms of functionality and looks. Although Connect ensures consistency, it provides limited flexibility and a learning environment only to those who are enrolled in the course. It is often described as “clunky” and not very attractive by some users (Croteu, 2015).On the other hand, it is useful for basic administrative tasks, is secure and comes with encryption. Learning outcomes can be well supported by technology by providing a platform for multi-faceted synchronous and asynchronous knowledge sharing such as that provided by blogs, wikis, discussion forums, groups and live meeting tools.  (Coates, James, & Baldwin,  2005). With its closed nature, Connect could promote engagement only among an immediate community of practice unless coupled with other open platforms such as Wordpress and wikis. Therefore, by expanding the community of practice outside of the course might have an impact on an overall level of engagement. Blackboard Connect allows for creation of tests, quizzes, and surveys (15 different types of questions)  (Boston University, 2016) and other forms of assessment (e.g. rubrics, self and peer evaluation, oral feedback via a podcast). Surveys could be used as diagnostic assessment tools in determining student background knowledge and individual interests to personalize and fuel future learning.  The affordances of the LMS should allow for multiple means of action or expression, engagement and representation to accommodate individual learner differences (Coates, James, & Baldwin,  2005).

Adaptive learning and assessment tools will enrich any learning experience and better meet the goal of personalized learning. At the moment, Connect provides analytics in measuring student engagement and design options that have aspects of adaptive learning. Another affordance of this LMS is automatization of processes related to student information  (e.g. emails, student number, grades, etc.) where students could easily engage with their classmates and check on their achievement in terms of their grades, instructor’s/others’ feedback, the course expectations, and reminders in Calendar, etc. (Boston University, n.d.). An instructor may utilize the Announcement feature to publish  daily or weekly group feedback with exemplars to foster further engagement and achievement.  Connect provides a virtual space for any course content, transparency by its nature, and possibility for a greater degree of accountability in teaching and learning practices.

Connect could be further used for academic and non-academic services such as library, tutoring, counselling, career advising, mentorship, etc. in providing support and ensuring student success. Currently, the UBC Connect platform provides direct links to many of these services. An off-campus (and on campus) community of students may especially benefit from having access to these services through a secure online platform.

**Remain Relevant and Innovative**

The third theme that we notice in the UBC strategic documents is the need to stay relevant and prosperous in today’s educational market by offering flexible and innovative programming. As students demands change, so must the use and structure of an LMS. As careers become more complex and the job market more volatile, post secondary institutions are being challenged to provide relevant service and programming (UBC, 2014). Potential students are focused on preparing for successful employment in a climate of “increasingly specialized and modular careers, with requirements for lifelong upgrading and re-tooling, and indeed for greater graduate flexibility and transferable skills [are required] to equip them for more fluid working lives” (p.3). As such, students are seeking out highly relevant and inexpensive learning opportunities such as those provided by modularized programming or open learning opportunities in the form of micro-credentialing, Massively Open Online Courses (MOOC) or Open Educational Resources (OER).

In the case of a MOOC or OER, the only real constraint from Blackboard is that material is locked down to students registered at UBC. Although Blackboard could be used for a MOOC, it would require a complicated registration process that would likely prevent people from registering. Alternatively, an instructor could host their Blackboard course on CourseSites by Blackboard for free (Swopes, 2014). Since CourseSites requires that the course be branded by Blackboard and has a course maximum, it is not an ideal choice for larger institutions like UBC. To host a MOOC, UBC would need to adopt an LMS or other IT solution that provides an open platform; EdX, Canvas, Moodle, Wordpress or Weebly. Each of these also has their own benefits and drawbacks to consider. For example, Canvas and Moodle are robust LMS and will have full functionality in terms of learning tools, but will require a MOOC user to sign up for an account. Wordpress and Weebly will be much easier to access but will be very limited in learning tools; primarily discussions and surveys. EdX is somewhere in the middle with some learning tools, but a high cost for set-up and maintenance since it is not a supported LMS.

If UBC plans to offer modularized learning or micro-credentialing, the majority of the constraints exist in the registration and transcription processes. A course could easily be broken into its parts or modules to be individually delivered through Blackboard, then should the grade be reported and transcribed by the module or the course. One solution is a second transcript that tracks the student’s micro progress. A digital alternative might be using a badging solution such as Mozilla Open Badges, Degreed or a badging plugin for an LMS (i.e. Canvabadge for Canvas or Achievements for Blackboard). The benefit of a plugin is the easy integration, however providing a public transcript for display in an eportfolio requires the student to create a compatible online interface. Currently, Degreed and Badgesafe are the only solutions to offer a digital signature that ensures the accrediting institution.

**Relationships with Alumni**

UBC’s estimated 280,000 alumni (UBC Alumni Association, n.d., p. 3) play an integral role in the future success of UBC, not only in terms of financial support and promoting UBC globally, but also in their lifelong participation with the UBC community (UBC Plan, n.d.). The use of Wordpress for the alumni website is appropriate for achieving its goals of engaging alumni and generating financial support; however, the platform is underutilized in terms of facilitating lifelong learning.

Due to its openness and operability, Wordpress is more appropriate for the use for alumni engagement than other more closed LMSs, such as Moodle and Blackboard. A traditional LMS would not meet needs of the alumni community by greatly limiting access (Write, 2014). Currently, Wordpress serves a number of functions including access to open multi-media content which is essential for expanding UBC’s reach, the integration of curated up-to-date open content from social media sites, podcasts, RSS feeds, webinars and online journals which are important for promoting lifelong learning, and connecting alumni with global professional networks. In addition, the platform also supports learning for current students. UBC students are encouraged to connect with alumni through such programs as mentoring with the goal of creating a wider professional network and supporting intergenerational knowledge sharing. (Alumni UBC, n.d.)

UBC also uses Wordpress to solicit donations from alumni. The platform supports an integrated payment processing service enabling easy and secure donations. According to Development and Alumni Engagement in 2013/2014, over 59 million dollars in donations came from alumni, and alumni made up 59% of all donors. To solicit donations effectively, UBC must publically and openly share multimedia content in order to advertise its current initiatives. User analytics plugins can be used with Wordpress to track users’ activity to get a better understanding of the effectiveness of content and what appeals most to users. (“7 Best Analytic Solutions”, 2014)

While the Wordpress platform can support the continuous engagement of alumni that support their learning community and financial needs, the platform has not been fully exploited to support lifelong learning. There are significant gaps in the amount of open educational content available for alumni from different departments. Integration of, or easier access to, UBC’s MOOCs could provide added benefit to alumni. Wordpress could also enable alumni to apply online for their alumni card to improve access to online journals and library services. (Alumni A-Card, n.d.) Wordpress could also support a streamlined one-click UBC mentorship application process, instead of providing list of emails of contacts in each department, and could be featured more prominently on the website to encourage more uptake (Mentorship, n.d).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this document is to evaluate the suitability of a particular LMS (Blackboard) for UBC. The analysis and strategic documents indicate that the complexity of goals and initiatives make UBC an unlikely candidate for a singular LMS or online platform. The results support two drawbacks of LMSs identified by Coates, et al. One is the “restrictions on the migration of content”. And LMSs “may also be homogenising the creation, style and ownership of pedagogical knowledge” (2005, p.32). Therefore, as a strategy, UBC is officially utilizing the following platforms; Blackboard, EdX and Wordpress. Although Wordpress appears to align the most with the institutional strategies, its functionality as a LMS is limited. The choices that UBC made as delivery platforms are logical for their deemed purpose. Although there may be a desire for a unified platform, there does not appear to be a commercial solution.

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