



SecEd Guide to...

Learning Management Systems

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GUIDE TO...

Learning Management Systems

Stand in any public space and you will see young people texting, using social media or accessing videos. But when they go into school, they are often told to switch off their mobile phones and get on with their work.

However, with a Learning Management System (LMS) you can bridge the divide so there is no longer a world outside school where the students use gadgets to access information, resources and contacts digitally and another in the classroom where they are confined to pen, paper and text-books.

An LMS is not the same as a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Certainly schools need a safe repository for curriculum materials and vital web-links, but these days they need so much more. It is not just a case of putting content in and creating a library of resources. Interactivity, connectivity, internet safety and collaboration are essential too.

The system must support staff interaction. It can be hard to get teachers and support staff to meet face-to-face, especially if some of them work part-time. However, often they need to monitor a learner with special needs, perhaps identifying the efficacy of a new behaviour plan or discussing particular concerns. With the right LMS they can post comments or share strategies and ideas for helping a specific student and it is all kept in a central, safe, virtual reference area.

When you are looking to invest in an LMS, bear in mind that it really needs to offer anytime access in and out of school for both teachers and students. It also needs to support email, budgets, online testing, reporting and analytics, audio and video. It should let users submit assignments online and create forums, blogs or presentations according to curriculum requirements. It's a tall order.

Finding the money

Many schools have been surprised to learn that choosing the right LMS can save money. The initial outlay has to be balanced by savings on text-books, photocopying, and software site licences. New systems

are much more energy efficient than older models so there may well be further savings on running costs.

An effective LMS goes hand-in-hand with a school's handheld learning or one-to-one device programme, and there are different funding models for purchasing pupil devices. Some schools ask parents to buy a specific make and model, just as they might ask them to provide a calculator. Pupil Premium money is used to buy devices for those children entitled to free school meals.

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Some schools outsource this function and work with a company where the parents pay a fixed amount each month for two years, which covers the cost of the device plus insurance. This is a similar approach to a mobile phone contract.

Some schools allow children to bring in mobile devices from home. This provides a mixed economy of devices but can work very well, as long as all teachers are confident users of technology.

Flipping the classroom

Learning with technology is a rich experience and an effective LMS can play a crucial part, especially with the increasingly popular concept of flipped learning. When children see Carol Ann Duffy introduce and read her poems, it reminds them that verse is a

spoken medium and not a paper exercise. If they look at revision videos and watch an academic analysing some of the poems set for GCSE, it gives them a rounder interpretation than just listening to their class teacher. They can collaborate and produce a class resource where they collect responses to poems. Some teachers have been astounded by the quality of ideas.

Children who are reluctant to contribute their thoughts in class may prove articulate in a virtual classroom and the whole class benefits from their skills and knowledge.

In a Spanish lesson in the Midlands, a group was given a series of statements about China's one child policy. At home they watched a Euronews video and identified which were true and which were false. One of the advantages was that they could work at their own pace. Some students said that they had watched the video seven or eight times because they found the delivery was very fast and it took time to get tuned in to the rapid Spanish. In class they would have watched the video perhaps three times and those who did not follow would have given up or found answers by listening to other learners.

Flipping the classroom made them work independently, listen for key vocabulary, and puzzle-out the answers for themselves.

Bundles are a key feature of the LMS. A bundle is a collection of tagged resources including videos, web pages, documents, presentations and images. You might have a bundle for a single lesson or for a whole course.

Gary Futchter is deputy headteacher and a teacher of English at Notre Dame School in Plymouth. He created a bundle for Jane Eyre which his AS group was studying.

While some schools might use bundles as a teacher-created collection, Mr Futchter asked pupils to find and add resources too. In the end it became a wiki-type resource. It was collaborative and represented a common body of knowledge. Pupils learnt a lot about the text through their research and the final product will be an excellent revision tool for them later this year.

e-Safety

Young people use blogs and social networks to connect to people in school, in the community and across the world. If their digital presence is

unmoderated they may wander into very dangerous territory. On the other hand, schools need to make sure that the safety net is not a noose.

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When looking for an LMS, find out what is provided to ensure safe use of virtual networks and to prevent young people accessing material that is inappropriate. For example, there is quite rightly a great emphasis on blocking sexually explicit sites, but young people are affected by websites which feature racism, violence and cruelty too. Ask about the extent of any system's coverage in this regard.

Winning parents' confidence

Parents need to know that the technology is easy to use and that their child is safe. They are likely to be much more receptive to the technology if you can reassure them that the filtering of resources and web content and the monitoring of social media activity via an LMS is as secure at home as it is at school.

They often have concerns about their children spending too much time on the devices or messaging friends late at night. Some schools lock down the system at 9pm for key stage 3 children and earlier for younger pupils.

Other parents worry that they will not be able to access the devices and will look inept in front of their children, while parents who have taken an interest in their children's school work may fear that they will be shut-out by the technology.

For this reason, schools are well advised to organise an LMS training session for parents. They should also produce a handout with answers to common concerns and provide a good Parent Portal.

Remember, everyone needs a reason to engage with technology. For example, the Parent Portal can be a real time saver for those with more than one child in a school as it means they don't have to chase several teachers or nag their children.

Emphasise to parents that once they have their own log-in, they will be able to access information about their child and get an insight into how well they are doing. They can check up on grades and see which assignments they have completed.

Make sure there is something for them to look at and that it is easy to navigate. If parents are disappointed by their first visit to the Parent Portal, they may not return.

Improve teaching with CPD

There is no doubt that an LMS can change styles of teaching. Most schools have adopted technology on a large scale but there are still pockets of resistance.

Conventional wisdom says that it is older teachers – those who are not digital natives – who avoid technology, but often it is the culture of the school that is a determining factor. If schools have a lot of experience in using digital technology for teaching and learning and encourage staff to experiment and share practice, then teachers are more responsive to changes in pedagogy.

Some teachers are won over by the way that administrative tasks are simplified. If you want to notify 6th-formers about a residential at a university, you can choose specific groups of students within the LMS and post information so that they can access it immediately.

Other teachers like the way it changes the way they interact with learners. Instead of reading the text from a PowerPoint to those at the back of the room or getting groups to come forward to examine a diagram in more detail, the teacher can put the resources into the LMS where everyone can examine them in detail. Students can email questions so that teachers can offer individualised help and get a clear idea of where there are gaps in knowledge which need to be addressed.

Some schools buy a system and then try to force staff to fit in with it. Instead, help them understand how the devices can be used for learning and to assist with planning. Training in small groups seems to be the best option. On their own people can flounder and in big groups they won't ask questions or admit what they don't know. Effective strategies to engage teachers include working on collaborative projects, setting a problem for a group to solve, and keeping learning logs.

When looking for an LMS, ask companies if they provide training which covers pedagogy and what experience they have in helping schools to make the very best use of the technology. Whatever model of familiarisation you use, make it fun and do not overload teachers, especially those who lack confidence. Get them to play a game on a new device or work out how to access, compose and send an email. Show them how it will make their job easier. The most important thing is to plan long-term. Some schools focus exclusively on the practical elements, such as inappropriate use or promoting parental engagement, and do not think ahead.

The best schools review their vision annually to make sure that their LMS and its content is appropriate for their teaching and learning. Choose the right system and your school will enjoy the infinite possibilities offered by this very powerful technology.

Further information

- For a tour of My Big Campus, Lightspeed Systems' Learning Management System, visit www.mybigcampus.com/tour or follow on Twitter @mybigcampus
- For more information on Lightspeed Systems, visit www.lightspeedsystems.com/en-uk, follow on Twitter @lightspeedsys and Blog at <http://blog.lightspeedsystems.com/en-uk/>
- Lightspeed Systems' expert Earnie Kramer blogs for SecEd on topics including web-filtering, e-safety, bring your own device and mobile learning: www.sec-ed.co.uk/article-search/author/40

Case study: Notre Dame School

Notre Dame School in Plymouth has 800 girls and takes pupils from more than 40 feeder primary schools. Three years ago they decided to invest in a Learning Management System (LMS). They had two priorities – to find a solution which would offer 24/7 access to resources both in and out of school, and to develop safe social networking.

Notre Dame decided upon My Big Campus from Lightspeed Systems, which deputy head Gary Futcher said has proved to be a “really good learning support tool with a secure social network”. He continued: “It offers access to anytime, anywhere resources so pupils who are absent from school, perhaps those in hospital, can access lessons and materials and not fall behind or become isolated.”

So what advice would Mr Futcher give to schools about buying, implementing and making the most of a new LMS?

Go and see other schools

Staff from Notre Dame visited a local school. This was a decider for them, especially for the technical staff who could talk to other professionals face-to-face about issues and get advice and tips.

Choose your focus

Notre Dame targeted all groups but found that those in years 11, 12 and 13 were reluctant to buy in to the system and wanted things to continue as before. The younger pupils were more receptive. Schools might consider starting with the year 7s or focusing on just one key stage.

Show staff the benefits

Notre Dame still has a server with resources while My Big Campus is cloud-based. The school could have forced staff to adopt the new system by shutting off the server, but felt this was not a productive or professional approach to change-management. Instead they have looked for ways to give staff a reason to engage. For example, Mr Futcher has been keeping an eye on what is trending in education on social media and adds links to the LMS for the staff. Currently there is an interest in government initiatives, including on-going changes

to the GCSE curriculum, as well as links to blogs about what makes for outstanding teaching.

Cascade training

The school selected a small focus group of staff who were positive about technology, though not technical experts. Teachers from art, RE and biology were early adopters. They explored the potential of the system and cascaded new developments to staff on training days. The senior management team might consider allocating time off timetable to teachers and giving them some responsibility for training and for developing resources.

Use the LMS to get pupil feedback

In the past, teachers printed and distributed a paper-based survey and collated the results manually. Now the survey is filled in online and the results are automatically updated. In a recent survey, one of the statements for consideration was: “Staff in the English department listen to my views.” This scored lower than other responses so the head of English arranged an immediate meeting with student ambassadors. The survey triggered a quick response which meant that student dissatisfaction could be dealt with promptly.

Use it to ease transition

My Big Campus helped new year 7s settle in quickly. Pupils from the 40 primary feeder schools met on an induction day in the summer term. They were enrolled onto My Big Campus so they could communicate with staff and clear up any concerns they had about topics such as uniform and homework. However, an unexpected benefit was that they kept in touch with each other online over the summer and many pupils who were transitioning alone found that they had a group of friends when they joined the school in September.

Cast your net wide

Through social media it is easy to find schools that have the same LMS as you. Notre Dame is gradually getting involved with schools further field including a school in the Midlands, and they are looking forward to sharing ideas and resources and developing a network for CPD.

Key questions to ask suppliers

If you are looking to buy a Learning Management System (LMS) there are plenty to choose from. Exhibitions such as the Bett Show 2014 (at London's ExCel from January 22 to 25) offer schools a chance to compare a wide range of products.

An LMS is a major investment and impulse buying often leads to long-term regrets. Wise schools have a list of questions and a checklist so they know exactly what they are looking for.

What will we get?

Many systems come with some resources already in the system. This is very useful as schools make much faster progress with implementation if there is some content to edit and adapt. It helps them to build staff confidence and develop some skills in using the system.

What support can I expect from the provider?

Research the technical support options offered by the suppliers. Ask if the technical support extends to student users. "How do I change my profile picture?" is a key concern for many young people and they may also need answers to crucial questions, such as "Where has my homework gone?" and "How can I upload my presentation?" Find out how quickly they will get a response.

How do they notify us about pupil safety issues?

Many systems will do a key-word search but some have "a human eye" which goes beyond this. Find out if they can identify if a student is showing serious signs of depression or if some illegal activity is being organised. While most systems allow for email notification to a school safety officer, the best ones also have phone contacts. Make sure you check how they flag issues, how they notify schools, and under what circumstances they disable accounts.

Will the LMS support a range of devices?

Your school may have a commitment to iPads right now but three years down the line it may be

a different story. It is important to future-proof an expensive purchase. Your LMS has to be versatile and not tied in to just one set of devices. Many systems will lack that versatility.

Will it integrate with other products?

If a teacher wants to upload a YouTube video of a German song for a modern languages lesson they need to be sure that it will not be blocked by a web-filter. Find out if there is a single system sign-in or whether it will work with existing authentication systems so pupils can use the same username and password across the school network.

Does the LMS come with training services?

Some companies go into schools and provide training for teachers, but the best ones get groups of schools together and organise webinars and have things like training videos which can be accessed at any time. Ideally, they also host an online portal where teachers can ask questions or exchange ideas.

Can I have a free trial?

Find out if the company offers a free trial. This is good news for schools as they can try before they buy, but remember that this may also skew the statistics. People often sign up for a trial but don't become regular users. If a free trial is offered, be sceptical about the number of users quoted.

How much will it cost?

Look carefully at anything which is significantly cheaper than its competitors. Sometimes a business model has not proved successful and is offered at a lower cost to the education market. This might mean that the product will not be supported longer term.

Visit Lightspeed Systems at Bett 2014

Experts from Lightspeed Systems will be on hand at the Bett Show 2014 to answer any questions about Learning Management Systems. You can visit them on Stand D180.

This Guide To... has been produced by SecEd with support from Lightspeed Systems, which provides an integrated solution for mobile management, safety and collaborative learning and works with schools to make learning safe, mobile and collaborative. Visit www.lightspeedsystems.com/en-uk