

Instrumental View of the Learning Management System (LMS):  
A Technology Narrative

Stacey Lince  
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Dr. Jessica Parker

## **Introduction**

The communicative technology tool that has had the most profound affect on my life (in both positive and negative ways) is the learning management system (LMS). The LMS, also known as a course management system, is the communicative technology that allows educational content to be delivered in online and hybrid classrooms to students. The LMS is a powerful and controversial medium that has altered the course of my career, blurred the boundaries between my work and personal life, led to my enrollment in graduate school, and redefined my views of technology.

### **A Neutral Information Delivery Tool**

My first experience using a LMS was in 2007 when I created my first hybrid course using *Angel* which was available through a textbook publisher. At that time, I was working as an on-ground instructor and oversaw the medical billing and coding curriculum for a vocational college. The school was pushing for increased technology use which coincided with the expansion of my program to include four additional courses that would allow students to obtain an Associates degree in Health Information Management. Three of the courses I developed were on-ground. The culminating hybrid course was designed to prepare students to sit for a medical coding certification exam. The students spent their time outside of class reviewing materials, completing assignments, and taking quizzes in the LMS. We met in class every Friday where we clarified topics and discussed any fears or concerns the students had about taking the exam.

I admit the implementation of the course was from an instrumental perspective (Burbules & Callister, 2000). The LMS was free, it freed up classroom space on campus, and fit the schools definition of "increased technology use." In all honesty, I viewed the LMS as a "neutral" tool that was used to deliver content. As Burbules and Callister (2000) suggest, from this

perspective, the LMS was used as an "external technology" and as a "fixed object with a use and purpose" (p.5). For the students, the sole purpose of the LMS was to consume content to prepare for the exam. The social aspect of learning would then take place during our Friday meetings. From this instrumental perspective (Burbules & Callister, 2000), the course was "successful." The students appreciated not having to attend class on campus every day and during our F2F meetings, they came armed with questions and insights that enriched our face-to-face discussions allowing us to delve deeper into the course material.

### **Blurring Boundaries**

The "success" of this first foray into hybrid learning peaked my interest and quickly opened doors for me into the world of online education. In 2008, I obtained my first online course development contract and within a year I was working full-time as a course developer which later segued into becoming an online instructor for one of the schools that used my courses. In the beginning, being a course developer and instructor, afforded me a new flexibility in my work schedule. I could work "whenever and wherever." I felt a sense of freedom in my ability to dictate my own schedule which often revolved around my children's activities. I also felt a certain bolstering of my perceived sociocultural status. My newly acquired laptop, smart phone, and title of "Subject Matter Expert" led to the illusion that I was a powerful force on the rise in the field of "cutting edge" online education.

Burbules and Callister (2000) contend that the technology we use changes us culturally, psychologically, and physiologically. "We never simply use tools, without the tools using us." (p.6). Culturally, the LMS changed my concept of work and the ways in which I form community with students, administrators, and teachers. I communicate with these individuals only online and I have only attended one face-to-face meeting with the course development

team. Although I do feel deep personal and professional connections to these key people in my life, there are times when my work community becomes isolating. I miss the camaraderie with faculty and staff – there are no Friday afternoon happy hours or all telling "eye rolls" during staff meetings (Though, I have been known to send an eye roll or two through instant messenger during an online meeting).

The LMS has also adversely affected my psychological and physical health. In chapter one of his book, *Programmed or be Programmed*, (which I read for Dr. Parker's EDCT 559 course) David Rushkoff (2011) points out that "digital technologies do not exist in time" and we live in a "continuous now" (p.28). Rushkoff (2011) furthers this point by stating "as internet connections grow faster, fatter, and freer [and I would add more portable] we are more likely to adopt an 'always on' approach" (p.34). Within a short amount of time of teaching online, I found it seemed impossible to perform my job as a "teacher" without "always being on." My concept of time shifted. The members of these particular online classrooms live in different time zones which furthers this sense of time as continuous. I stayed up later and woke up earlier to answer student emails or grade assignments. I also became more sedentary since I was now sitting in front of a computer for long periods of time – sometimes as long as 10 hours a day.

I became further removed from my family. I would sit in my living room, face hidden behind my laptop, while my family watched a TV program or my children did their homework. My children would enter a room where I was working and ask questions which I always found myself asking to be repeated. While I was physically present in the room, I was mentally distant; lost in a chat room with a student, grading an assignment, or constructing a response to a forum post. I soon found myself constantly checking and responding to emails using my iPhone during social occasions.

Much of my behavior was in response to what Rushkoff (2011) calls "interactive urges" – the demands for expedient (and often unrealistic) turnaround times on emails, graded assignments, and other communications by school administrators and students. If my students did not get an immediate response to an email or message from within the LMS, they would seek me out through other digital media such as Facebook, instant messenger, LinkedIn, and Skype. When I was online performing personal tasks or working on course development, I began to operate in what I call "stealth mode" – navigating under the radar of student web browsers and internet searches so I couldn't be detected. As Rushkoff (2011) describes, always "being on" frequently put me in a position of feeling, "frazzled and exhausted" (p.35). I realized that my reactions to these urges did not fit my definition of "teaching and learning." I had to find balance between my online and offline worlds by learning how set boundaries, yet still be available to my students and family.

### **Limitations of the System**

In hindsight, I see that much of my exhaustion and stress was due to my teaching methods and the limitations of technology I used in my classrooms. The LMS used in my courses was developed by the company that produces the curriculum for schools. The courses are packaged and adopted by schools who wish to implement distance learning programs. The courses are currently used by 20 schools nationwide – a number which continues to grow every year. In addition to the medium through which the course is delivered, the administrators also determine the format of the content and the features used. The same format is used regardless of the subject. The course developers and teachers do not have a choice in the course design or the tools that should be used within the course. Teachers of these online courses are further limited by their inability to alter the course content. The only areas in which they are allowed to add

content to the course is through the use of news forums, emails, discussion forums, or chat rooms. The way information is delivered through this LMS is reminiscent of Skinner's teaching machine or programmed instruction in that the materials are arranged in such a way that the student can "make correct responses and receive reinforcement when correct responses were made" (Saettler, 1990, as cited by Russell, 2006, p.146). The difference, in my case, being that I had become the machine through the ways in which I provided feedback.

Students also do not seem engaged with the materials or each other. Most rarely view their lectures and often go directly to the textbook or search the internet to find the answers. Students find ways to "bypass the system" (Saettler, 1990, as cited by Russell, 2006, p.147) by acquiring textbook answer keys, emailing assignments to other students, and "copying and pasting" answers to discussion forum questions by using search tools such as Ask.com. The chat rooms are not used by students to "hangout" or work together on assignments, and I rarely have more than one student in a chat room at one time. Overall, the classroom does not have the feeling of a learning community where both the teacher and student create, collaborate, and share experiences.

What becomes problematic in the instrumental purpose of the LMS as a content delivery system is that it diminishes the ability of the teacher and students to be considered contributors or creators of the course content and the learning process and it discourages peer-to-peer learning. In this regard, the LMS brings to life [Jean Marc Cote's](#) (1901) depiction of school in the year 2000. The information is transmitted into the student while the teacher's role is merely to manage the flow of this information with the turn of a handle, or in the case of the LMS, the push of a button. It was this realization and my dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning experiences occurring in my classroom and the courses I developed which ultimately brought me to the

Educational Technology program at Sonoma State. I wanted to explore ways to produce online learning environments that allowed for collaboration, inquiry, shared experiences, and what Henry Jenkins (2008) defines as a "participatory culture – "a culture in which "members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (p.5).

### **Implications and Reflections**

Burbules and Callister (2000) argue that the "introduction of new technologies into complex social practices and institutions is not a matter of specific choices, but a constellation of changes, some active, some passive, some intentional, some only evident in hindsight" (p.1). Although I have painted a bleak picture here of the use of this particular LMS in online learning, it is important to acknowledge that the educational goals and "choices" made by the administrators and course developers in the use of the LMS and the format in which the content is delivered were with the intentions of producing quality online education. The purpose of these programs is to open doors to education for individuals who might not otherwise have access and create pathways for individuals to train for careers that have the ability raise or improve their socioeconomic status. These choices in technology also took into consideration the diversity of the students' previous learning experiences and the students' and teachers' technology experience. In this regard, despite the instrumental purpose of the LMS as a tool to disseminate information, it also becomes a "low barrier of entry" (Jenkins, 2008) for students and teachers who may have little or no experience navigating these online spaces.

Dr. Jessica Parker (2010) contends that today's new media environments can

"...foster and support a community of learners, create a shared culture of participation in which youth contribute their knowledge of the world, and simultaneously demonstrate a keen sense of creativity within these mediated experiences" (p.7).

The challenge for an instructor and course developer who uses this particular LMS is similar to that of an on-ground educator in questioning how to bring these new media experiences into the classroom within the current limitations of the system. I, like other educators, have to refine my own practices within these limitations and seek ways to link students to content outside of the LMS in an effort to create collaborative and engaging learning environments that allow for deeper learning experiences.



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