The Benefits of Utilizing Learning Management Systems in Peer Tutor Training

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Abstract

Tutor training programs are essential for the success of a learning center. For the learning center to adequately serve its students, the tutors must be given proper training, support, and guidance. By utilizing technology, especially learning management systems (LMS), in tutor training programs, learning centers can raise their quality of tutors and contribute to the success of their students through these tutors. The following article will show how one University is using an LMS as part of their tutor training program. In addition, the definition, basic uses, benefits, and challenges of LMS will be addressed. If used effectively, other institutions can use their own LMS as a low cost way to improve their learning center's training program.

Introduction

A majority of universities and colleges in the United States and around the world use some type of Learning Management System (LMS). In fact, "the Campus Computing Project's most recent survey of nearly 500 institutions found that only 7% had not selected a learning management system for campus-wide use" (Kats, 2013, p. 1). LMS' allow educators to track student progress and manage their course (Stantchev, Colomo-Palacios, Soto-Acosta, & Misra, 2014, p. 612). Cheng, Safont, Basu, & Goebel (2010) define an LMS as "a software for planning, delivering, and managing learning events within an organization, including online and virtual classrooms and instructor-led courses" (p. 21). Popular Learning Management Systems include Blackboard, D2L (Desire to Learn), Moodle, Canvas, and eCollege. As of 2016, Blackboard was the most popular LMS with almost 1,200 institutions using the platform, which makes up

31.9% of the market (Edutechnica, 2016, n.p.).

Learning Management Systems have been around since the 1960s with the introduction of the PLATO system (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations), and "it was the first system to combine graphics with touch-sensitive screens that were used in learning" (Cheng et al., 2010, p. 25). The purpose of an LMS is simple, coursework that was traditionally done in the classroom, such as testing, lectures, and discussions, can now be housed and completed online. LMS' will continue to change and grow as the technology does, but the goal has always been the same: learning management. It is up to the students and educators to utilize an LMS for effective and efficient learning to take place.

Since the ultimate goal of an LMS is to manage, then it should be utilized outside of the college classroom. At West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCUPA), both faculty and staff members can request D2L pages be set up for non-coursework purposes. All courses at the University are automatically assigned their own D2L page and class rosters are automatically updated. If a staff or faculty member wants a D2L page, they must fill out a request. As the Assistant Director of the Learning Assistance and Resource Center (LARC), I filled out a request to have three D2L pages set up for the purpose of tutor training.

The LARC at WCUPA is certified and trains its tutors through the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). There are three levels of tutors, which is why I requested three D2L pages, one for each level. This was a brand new idea for the spring 2019 semester. Prior to this, all training was done in-person, weekly assignments were emailed to the facilitators, training materials were printed and handed out to the trainees, attendance was taken by hand and materials were stored on computer files within the department. After going through a few semesters in my new role as Assistant Director of the LARC, I thought there must be a better way. The better way is using D2L, the LMS used by WCUPA, to organize materials for all the level trainings.

Benefits of Learning Management Systems

There are numerous benefits to Learning Management

Systems (LMS). Professors of courses or facilitators of training can use online tests or quizzes to gauge progress and knowledge of students, post materials or lectures, host discussions amongst students, have students submit assignments through the platform, mass email the class list, and much more. "The LMS brought together content delivery, communication, assessment and administration of online instruction into a single secure platform that could be accessed by anyone on the internet" (Kats, 2013, p. 4; as cited in Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; UlLman & Rabinowitz, 2004). By using a LMS in tutor training programs, all tutors need is their cell phone or another electronic device to access the training materials during in-person sessions. They also have the ability to access these materials, ask questions, and participate in discussions outside of sessions from virtually anywhere.

Other benefits include accessing materials at a later date, the ability to go at the learner's pace, the chance for learners, who may not participate in classroom, to express opinions outside the classroom, and the opportunity to carefully time and plan out a semester (Dehinbo & Odunaike, 2010, p. 5). In addition, instructors can hold irregular office hours, video conference, hold virtual classes when there is poor weather, hold exams, record lectures, and create space for peer feedback (Hampel, 2014, p. 36). The list of benefits goes on; however, it is up to the instructor to use all of the full tools the LMS software offers. It is also beneficial when all of a student's professors are not only all using virtual learning as part of their courses, but also using the same software. It happens in all institutions; professors may either not use online learning tools or use a different one than that of the university. For the students to receive the full benefits of a LMS, the instructors of their courses should all use the same system and use it more efficiently.

Challenges in Learning Management Systems

While Learning Management Systems (LMS) have multiple benefits, there are also challenges to these online platforms. Stantchev et al. (2014) summarizes those challenges in three points. First, all of the tools the LMS' have to offer are not always used by the educators designing their pages. Second, the timeframe of quarters,

semesters, and trimesters are constraining students and limiting time to collaborate. Lastly, "LMS are usually focused on the course and institution rather than on students and their needs" (pp. 612-613). For example, a tool, such as Google Drive, allows students to organize all their coursework and keep that information for as long as they wish. LMS' are designed for the professor's benefit: to help them grade, check for understanding, and have one place to put all of their learning materials.

There are many different features in the majority of Learning Management Systems. If the LMS is only used to post course content and grades, then the educators are not utilizing the full functions of the LMS. A second issue is that the majority of institutions utilize a semester schedule. Since courses are set up for a semester, students are only engaging in the coursework during the semester and may lose access after the semester is over or they graduate. Finally, LMS' may not be focusing on student needs. Instead, they focus on the needs of the professors to grade, post assignments, and upload content.

In addition to these three main issues, "social networks, cloud based services and mobile applications come to support and complement the lack of LMS' features" (Stantchev et al., 2014, p. 613). Put simply, there are many e-learning tools available for educators to use outside of Learning Management Systems. The Learning Apps project is one example of putting all of these tools and systems in one place for educators (Alier, Mayol, Casañ, Piguillem, Merriman, Conde, Garca-Peñalvo, Tebben, & Severance, 2012, p. 118). LMS' should be more involved in these types of projects to bring online learning to the current generation. A study conducted by Stantchev et al. (2014) found that:

> Dropbox receives better valuation than LMS for the
> three considered constructs: attitude toward using,
> perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. These
> results show the limitations of LMS with regard to
> collaborative work and information/knowledge sharing.
> Thus, higher education institutions must prioritize
> general learning needs and student collaboration rather

than focusing on academic and institutional objectives. (p. 617)

While this study used Dropbox as a comparison for LMS, an argument can be made for the popularity of Google Drive. Studies have shown that students would rather use and find more benefit in using cloud file sharing services, such as Dropbox and Google Drive, rather than a LMS (Sadik, 2017, p. 2). There are also many tools outside of file sharing that Google Drive uses that benefits students. "One of these tools is Google Forms, which allows instructors to develop quick assessments for students (e.g., quizzes or surveys), collect information from students, or create rubrics for assignments" (Sadik, 2017, p. 3). Other helpful tools on Google Drive include Google Docs, Google Sheets, and Google Slides, which allows students to all work on the same document, sheet, or presentation at the same time from different devices.

When institutions are purchasing an LMS, they have many people to keep in mind, including faculty, staff, and students. "It's hard to buy a product that will satisfy the needs of an entire community, especially for complex processes like teaching and learning" (Feldstein, 2016, para 2). In addition, there is usually a resistance to change when it comes to changing technology in an institution. The students are continuously filtering in and out, but many of the faculty members, especially tenured ones who design their courses on D2L, Blackboard, or a similar site, may be against the change of a new system even if it is more helpful.

Even if a new LMS system would benefit both the student and faculty members, it can be very difficult to get everyone on board. It is extremely important to get all the classroom faculty using the designated LMS for the benefit of the students. If colleges and universities help their faculty members build their online sites, it could make a smoother transition and help all involved.

Tutor Training in Higher Education

Studies have shown that peer tutors, especially new peer tutors, need high levels of support and training from their supervisors (Mcfarlane, 2016). A popular method of tutor training

is certifying tutors through the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). "The paramount purpose of the CRLA's tutor certification process was to set an internationally accepted standard of skills and training for tutors" (Walker, 2016, p. 21). The CRLA goes beyond tutor training and also offers support for tutor selection, experience, and evaluation (Walker, 2016, p. 22).

Learning centers are certified through the CRLA, and there are over 1100 certified institutions in seven countries, including the United States (Walker, 2016, p. 22). The post-secondary institution is the one that becomes certified through the CRLA, not the individual trainer or tutor. "Once certified, the tutor training program is authorized to certify tutors as they meet the certification requirements" (CRLA, 2018). West Chester University of Pennsylvania is a Level III certified Institution through the CRLA.

New tutors spend their first semester in weekly Level I training sessions with the Director or the Assistant Director of the Learning Assistance and Resource Center. Some of the topics for Level I training include: tutoring definition and responsibilities, tutoring guidelines and tutoring do's and don'ts, techniques for beginning and ending tutoring sessions, learning theory and learning styles, role modeling, communication skills, active listening and paraphrasing, referral skills, study skills, problem solving, etc. (Schotka, Bennet-Bealer, Sheets, Stedje-Larsen, & Van Loon, 2014). The goal of Level I training is to help college students develop from an excellent student to a component tutor because those two things are very different. At the LARC, we define a component tutor as one who is able to help our undergraduate students become independent and active learners. For us, it is not simply about helping the students gain the A in a course but helping them understand the content on a deeper level and making them aware of their own learning styles and study habits. By using D2L in tutor training, this makes the task of creating component tutors much easier. In addition, it adds another layer of support for these new tutors.

At WCUPA, tutors have the opportunity to continue their tutor training through Level II and Level III CRLA certifications. While Level I is mandatory for new tutors, the LARC does not mandate the other two certifications. There are incentives in place to make

students want to obtain these extra certifications, such as pay raises, leadership opportunities, and the obvious enticement of a résumé booster. These two certifications give the tutors the opportunity to become advanced in their tutoring, conduct training sessions for other tutors, and assist in observing, supervising, and mentoring newer tutors.

Utilizing Learning Management System in Tutor Training Programs

West Chester University of Pennsylvania utilizes D2L as its Learning Management System. "Content Delivery in D2L is structured like a table of contents, which permits the learner to progress in a logical manner through the course" (Kats, 2013, p. 13). As a pilot program, D2L pages were set up for CRLA tutor training over the winter break, prior to when the tutors would be using the platform for the spring semester. Since this was a pilot program, we anticipated there would be trial and error and improvements made throughout the semester. In the following sections, the focus will be on the D2L features that are used by the facilitators of tutor training. These include content, attendance, assignments, discussions, and class list.

Content

Prior to using D2L pages, all tutor training materials were kept on department computer files that could only be accessed on-campus. The facilitator would typically print out enough copies of the materials for everyone. Besides the fact that this was tedious and time-consuming, it was a major waste of paper and the majority of materials were trashed at the end of the semester anyway. When done correctly, e-learning makes it easier for the user to access training materials and contribute toward a goal of a more sustainable campus (Wheeler, Byrne, & Deri, 2003, p. 102).

Currently, all training materials for Level I: Novice Tutor, Level II: Advanced Tutor, and Level III: Master Tutor certifications are on the D2L pages under the content section. Tutors can follow along during training and facilitators can access the materials from any tablet or computer. In addition, a syllabus has been created for each level, which is also available under the content page. Finally, handouts

for individual hours of training are posted under the content section. For example, all trainees must complete a "Colleague Observation" of a certified tutor and attend an "Academic Success Workshop" on campus. The observation requires a form that must be filled out by the trainee. By making it available online, tutors can fill it out and submit it on D2L or print it and complete by hand. For the workshop, students must print and gain the facilitator's signature.

Attendance

The attendance tool on D2L is a simple one. The platform uses the class list and the facilitator of the D2L page must create an attendance register. At the LARC, we use the pre-designed register. All the facilitator needs to do is add a "P" for Present or an "A" for Absence. For Level I and Level II training, there are three different training times and two-three different facilitators. If a student misses a training session, this makes it easy for them to attend any of the others. Prior to the D2L pages, attendance was taken by paper, given to the Assistant Director, and entered into excel pages that were kept on department computer files. It has happened where a facilitator lost the attendance sheet, making it difficult to enter and keep accurate attendance records.

Assignments

There are a few assignments for all levels of training. For Level III training, the tutors must plan and run a Level I or Level II training session, complete formal tutor observations, mentor new tutors, and complete a final assignment. Previously, the trainees would complete an assignment and email it to the Assistant Director. For Level I and Level II training, the assignments include independent work and a final essay. The system automatically timestamps and places submitted assignments in alphabetical order, which is a useful tool for the facilitators. The facilitators also encourage the tutors to use the assignments tab to keep track of their work for training and use the tab to create a tutor portfolio.

Discussions

Prior to using D2L, tutors in training would send "Independent Follow-Ups," short reflections based on a question posed at the training session, directly to the Assistant Director via email. The Assistant Director would attempt to filter these responses

by having them go to its own folder; however, this only worked if the tutors remembered to use the correct subject heading. Now these short reflections are on discussion threads on D2L. This is used on all three CRLA levels. All the tutors in that level of training can see each other's responses and are encouraged to respond to others and engage in meaningful conversations. "Using a platform of your preference for online discussions, students can build a learning community around discussion topics, participate at their own pace, allow different types of student learners to contribute, and increase individual student learning" (Lieuw, 2014, n.p.). This has been great for tutors who are more hesitant to participate and voice their opinion during in-person sessions. I find many of the tutors shine in their writing ability and are able to give meaningful and thoughtful responses to the given prompts.

The discussion board has also been used for tutors to ask questions about training, tutoring, or the LARC in general. This second part has been used more in Level I training, as this is for new tutors. These can be asked and answered anonymously. While the professional staff of the LARC considers themselves approachable, tutors may be worried about asking questions they deem simple. This is a place for them to ask those questions and the Director or Assistant Director can answer.

Class List

Since LMS lists all students enrolled and their email addresses, it allows the instructors to email the entire class, select people, or just one person in the course. In addition, this is where the facilitators can add leaders, other instructors, or guest contributors to the course. For the purpose of tutor training at the LARC, the Assistant Director adds numerous leaders to the course, including other tutors who help grade submitted material and keep track of attendance.

Future Plans

Next semester, we plan to utilize D2L at the LARC in a new way in addition to using it for the above training purposes. Many organizations on campus will use a D2L page for their student workers or volunteers. Our department will enter all active tutors into the site (and then remove them if they choose not to return

for the next semester, while also adding the new hires). The site makes it easy for all leaders on the page to send mass emails. In addition, we'll post our tutoring handbook as a digital copy versus a printed copy to make it more available to tutors and help in the department's sustainability efforts. This is also a great place to post announcements, including orientation details, meeting times, training dates, weather related closings, etc. Finally, handouts can be posted on the site, such as paper time-sheets and observation papers.

Since the training sites are permanent and will be used from semester to semester, the facilitators of training will continue to build the tutor training D2L pages. Right now, the department is using the basic features of D2L, which are all listed above. The department would like to move into more advanced features. One example includes creating tutorial videos to post on the D2L site, such as narrating tutoring scenarios for training. This would be in place of the scenarios being written out and posted on the site. I will continue to research LMS' and how to best utilize them in a training setting. The ultimate goal would be to create a guidebook that can be used at any institution, regardless of designated LMS, to create online training for tutors or similar organizations.

Conclusion

Learning Management Systems are used in most colleges and universities in the United States. One of those Learning Management Systems, D2L, is used in 11% of institutions as of 2011 (Campus Computing Project, 2011, n.p.). One of those institutions is West Chester University of Pennsylvania, where online courses are available. In addition, faculty and staff can request D2L pages be set up for program or training purposes.

The Learning Assistance and Resource Center at WCUPA is a learning center that trains its tutors through the learning outcomes and standards of the College Reading and Learning Association. For the first time, D2L pages were set up for all tutors as part of a training course for the spring 2019 semester. It has been extremely successful by giving the tutors access to training materials, online discussion boards, utilizing attendance tools, and having assignments turned in electronically. While there are many benefits to LMS, there

are also many challenges. If these challenges can be addressed, while best practices are studied, a learning center can create a more meaningful and productive way of supporting and training its peer tutors. This would not only benefit the tutors and facilitators but would trickle down to the success of the students.

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