Three Open Source Learning Management Systems

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CourseSites

According to "The Top 8 Free/Open Source LMSs" (Medved, 2016), *CourseSites* avoids

some of the problems of some open source Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as a lack

of support and the need for technical ability on the part of the course designer. A quick look at

CourseSites' home page (http://www.coursesites.com) and one discovers that *CourseSites* allows

the creation of five courses for free (BlackBoard, 2016). Upon further investigation, I was

impressed with the wide variety of available options. Some of the items that course designers can

incorporate include tests and quizzes, multimedia, student collaboration tools, social media,

mobile learning, and accessibility features for people with disabilities. The course creation tool

looks like it is especially helpful for first-time instructors. State learning standards are built in

and easily integrated into lessons by instructors. *CourseSites* appears to include everything that

an instructor would need to develop an interactive on-line course.

CourseSites has some options to make it easy for instructors to create and manage

courses. The Grade Center makes it easy to see grades for students and activities. Collaboration

tools are not only for students, courses can have co-instructors so that two or more instructors

can collaborate on the same course(s). According to the "Frequently Asked Questions,"

instructors can build an unlimited number of courses, but only five can be active at the same

time. This number of active courses is probably sufficient for most instructors.

Student enrollment looks like an easy process. Instructors send students the course link to

invite them to enroll in a course. If the instructor chooses, the course can be open to anyone to

enroll, but the default is "instructor-led" enrollment. There is an option that can be checked to

allow students to email enrollment requests to instructors for "instructor-led" enrollment.

Parents, guardians, and other interested people can view courses as guests without being full

students.

CourseSites seems to me to be a simple course creation tool that individual instructors can use to reach their students. Schools and other institutions would need to subscribe to *Blackboard* to access the full range of tools designed for them, but individual teachers can use *CourseSites* for free.

Canvas

Like *CourseSites*, *Canvas* (https://www.canvaslms.com) has both free and paid services. The paid version has a free fourteen-day trial that includes all of the content *Canvas* has to offer. The free version requires the instructors to provide their own content, but it utilizes the same learning platform. Instructors can create individual courses that remain on *Canvas* for future use: "Teach your class on *Canvas* for free, forever" (Instructure, 2016). While a large amount of Web site space appears to be aimed at schools and other institutions, individual teachers wanting to develop free courses can find information with a bit of digging. I was unable to find information on the number of courses that an individual instructor can have live in the free account.

As a school teacher, the "K-12" tab attracted my attention. I like students can earn badges for their work and that instructors can provide audio and video feedback. I can see a student being aided by a screen recording of a confusing technical procedure. Instructors can integrate common core and state standards into their courses. There are automated tasks, such as updating all related information when an instructor changes an assignment (syllabus, calendar, grade book). This is just a sample of tools that kindergarten through twelfth-grade teachers will find helpful.

Like Blackboard, the full paid *Canvas* learning management system has many options that particularly appeal to communities of instructors such as schools, but the free version has

enough tools for instructors to make learning interesting for their students. Some of the tools available on the free side of *Canvas* include all of the features needed to build successful courses (including assignments, quizzes, grades, and collaboration), the Roll Call Attendance Tool, Canvas Parent, mobile availability, grade books, and dashboard images (Canvas, 2016).

I found the *Canvas* to be flashier and less informative than *CourseSites*. While *Canvas* claims to be easy to use for both instructors and students, their Web site was not as easy for me to use. The navigation bar at the top of the site often did not bring me to the detailed information that I was searching for, so I had to use an outside search engine to locate specific pages of information within the site. The "K-12" tab was very useful in providing a list of functions, but other information, such as the free versus paid options, was not as easy to find. In general, I tend to think that *Canvas* may be the less appropriate platform for me to use based solely on the fact that their Web site was less aligned with my learning style. Of course, this assumption may be hastily made and erroneous.

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Sakai

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Sakai "is aimed at academic institutions" (Medved, 2016), and the Web site (https://sakaiproject.org) does not offer a free version for individual instructors. It does offer a full learning management and course creation system to schools, universities, and other educational institutions instructors (Apereo Foundation, 2016). It includes a lesson creation toolbar and "Gradebook" for affiliated instructors. The user interface allows students to access their courses from computers or mobile devices. *Sakai's* user institutions can make a variety of adaptations so that it meets each organization's needs. Like other learning management systems, *Sakai* includes resources to assist instructors; including the ability to utilize calendars, chat spaces, assignment tracking, assignment grading, research aids, collaboration aids, tests and

quizzes, and drop boxes. Tools for administrators include a job scheduler, an announcement tool, delegated access, and site statistics. *Sakai 11* can be tried online for free through its affiliation with *Longsight* (https://trysakai.longsight.com/portal/site/!gateway/tool/!gateway-110). *Sakai's* main focus is providing educational institutions with a learning management system that assists the instructors and students to share knowledge and to collaborate in the learning process.

CourseSites Versus Canvas

After looking at all three of the above learning management systems, I decided to sign up for both *CourseSites* and *Canvas* (with the aim of discovering which site would be easier for me to start the course development process. *Canvas* had the easier registration process because *CourseSites* required that I choose my school from their drop down selection. My school was not available, and I wasted several minutes repeatedly searching for it before I decided to check what else was available in my area. I found my school district and went with that. Except for that inconvenience, registration went smoothly; neither site asked for my credit card. After the registration process, *CourseSites* immediately took me to the page on their site where I could begin creating my first course. *Canvas* sent me an email with links to a variety of training materials. I created a course name, number, and description within just a few minutes after registering with *CourseSites*. After some research and exploration on my own, I found *Canvas'* "Start a New Course" button. Once I created a course in *Canvas*, I quickly found their "Setup Checklist" button, which brought me to a list of steps and directions for creating my first course. *CourseSites* includes tutorials (https://www.coursesites.com/webapps/Bb-sites-course-creation-BBLEARN/pages/getstarted.html) that help new and novice course creators. After looking at the introductory materials provided by both sites, I have decided to start building my first course in *CourseSites* because I preferred their guides. It is not perfect (my course structure keeps

reverting back to the default), but it seems like a good place for me to start.

References

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