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An Argument for Simplicity: Have Learning Systems Become Too Complicated?

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As a college adjunct, adjunct pay being what it is, I typically try to stitch together a semester of classes at different institutions. Consequently, during the height of the first COVID surge, when campuses nationwide were closing down to carry on instruction, I found myself having to master three different learning platforms. When I received an offer to teach at a fourth school, for only the second time in my eleven years of teaching (I had a thirty-year corporate career prior), I walked away from a job because it required learning how to use a *fourth* online system.

Blackboard, Moodle, Webex, Cengage, Canvas—the variety of Learning Management Systems (LMS) I’ve dealt with on New Jersey campuses has left me not only supremely frustrated by the lack of standardization, particularly among public institutions, but wondering about the usefulness of these learning systems. I wondered if, in the quest to present a school as a technologically advanced campus, administrators had become enamored with the bells and whistles of these learning platforms instead of their practical applications. Was this a triumph of marketing over need? And that’s the key word: “need.”

Having experience in both the corporate and academic world, I’m not a fan of the idea that colleges should be run like businesses, but there is one thing about technology I did learn from my corporate experience: IT personnel were always enthused about what new office tech systems *could* do, but what kept them in

pragmatic check was management’s rejoinder, “What do we *need* it to do?”

In my eleven years of instruction, I’ve taught at a dozen different institutions, and while it’s a broad generalization, it’s my observation that most of these LMS acquisitions have been based on what these systems could do rather than what the end users—faculty and students—need them to do.

Use of an LMS presumes the school’s hardware, the commercial internet connecting institutions to the student, and students’ hardware will always work well and integrate smoothly; there will be no glitches, system crashes, weak signals, outages anywhere in that chain, or incompatibility problems.

Further presumption: Students universally have both internet access and access to quality home computers. When I’ve taught at urban two-year colleges where most of my students were low-income, this was a leap of faith more than a data-supported premise.

Another presumption is that because today’s student demographic spends so much time in a multimedia universe, they are universally technologically adept. My experience is that the hours they spend TikTok-ing, texting each other, Instagramming, streaming video on their phones, etc. have little correlation with their ability to navigate learning systems, and that for some—particularly older returning students—doing so can be particularly challenging. The difficulty is compounded in urban two-year schools where the

majority of my students deal with ESL hurdles as well as access issues.

The online instruction community, based on what I've researched, takes the stance that there are strategies to help faculty and students upgrade to the complexity of online learning systems. The idea that maybe these systems are overly complicated, that maybe not all of the bells and whistles are necessary, does not seem to enter the discussion, and maybe that's the problem: treating the increasing complexity of online systems as an inevitability rather than tech for the sake of tech. There's a fair bit of self-service in that stance in a market where e-learning tech company Racoon Gang was valued at \$250 billion in pre-COVID 2020.

Blackboard, one of the most popular systems, doesn't publicly reveal pricing, but a 2019 article on Better Buys estimates that, at that time, Blackboard could cost a university somewhere in the neighborhood of \$160,000. Since we're talking tuition and even taxpayer dollars, perhaps we're due for a reappraisal or at least a consideration that perhaps lean and mean is a more cost-effective—and useful—technological path.

No one argues that remote learning during the current health crisis isn't a practical necessity but, again looking back on my corporate experience, weighing need against technological dazzle, I would argue that there are instances where simpler is better.