



The One-Click Hero of Learning

And Why You Might Want an LMS

By Monika Davis

As manager of the instructional technology program for my school district, it's my job to promote the use of technology to enhance and support teaching and learning. With more and more digital resources and devices available for use in schools, it's an exciting time to help teachers and students transition to a digital curriculum management system.

In DeKalb County, we've tackled a number of challenges and learned some valuable lessons about the importance of digital curriculum management.

District Profile: Large, Diverse, and Autonomous

Our district, DeKalb County School District (DCSD), is located in metro Atlanta. We have 136 schools across five district regions, each with its own regional superintendent. Our 6,400 teachers work with 103,000 students who speak 160 different languages. Upwards of 69 percent of DCSD students are economically disadvantaged, and most of our schools are Title I.

I have a team of five instructional technology specialists, all certified teachers, who work as instructional coaches, helping teachers to integrate technology. They're assigned to different regions of the district and they confer with the regional superintendents to prioritize the needs of teachers and students.

Problems with Multiple Platforms

Our instructional technology staff has always been present in our schools, but there was no district standard for sharing or integrating digital curriculum resources into teaching. Resources that were procured by the district were tracked for use. However, there were many other digital tools purchased at the school level that were available to teachers and were not tracked.

Another challenge we faced was consistency in the communication of standards and assessments using a digital platform. Our systems and processes were disjointed. And the assessment tools we were using lacked options and flexibility.

Additionally, there was limited collective tracking of tools and how teachers were applying them to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. We saw pockets of success around the district, where teachers were embracing blended learning, but it was not systemic.

Surprisingly, we found that many teachers were not using the digital resources they had at their disposal. There were teachers who didn't know how to access and leverage the digital platforms for curriculum planning. And with multiple learning management systems, many teachers were also overwhelmed by so much choice and uncertain about where to go for different digital tools to support curriculum and instruction. We had teachers who were rockstars with one tool or app who taught their peers. And then in another school, there was their super-teacher who popularized a completely different type of courseware. It was random all over the place even though we had complete libraries of great digital curriculum available.

Developing a District Digital Curriculum Strategy

Bottom line? DeKalb County Schools lacked a district-wide strategy for implementing digital curriculum as part of a larger commitment to teaching and learning. Given that

the district was developing a five-year strategic plan, the timing was right to begin creating a digital curriculum strategy. It probably comes with no surprise that we attended a Learning Counsel digital curriculum transition discussion event at this time as well.

With our technology plan aligned to the larger district plan, we were able to develop a vision of how technology could support instruction and learning and of how we could use technology to engage all stakeholders, including families.

As we developed our plan, it became clear that we needed a single learning management system that incorporated four key components:

- Assessment tools for easier delivery of assessments and more reliable data analytics.
- Curriculum management tools to support a district-wide move to blended learning.
- Professional development tools to support teaching with blended learning.
- Communication tools to stimulate greater family involvement in student learning and also to enable non-English-speaking parents to learn along with their children.

In early 2015, we began a comprehensive search for an integrated learning management system to deploy across the entire district—all five regions and all 136 schools. We subjected five learning management systems to an extensive review. Ultimately, we chose itslearning because it best supported those four key pillars: assessment, curriculum, professional development, and communication. We wanted a learning management system with the capacity to deliver a “living and breathing curriculum.”

Creating a “Living and Breathing Curriculum”

We didn’t want a rigid, inflexible learning management system. We wanted district-level control but with enough flexibility for teachers to curate their own content. Our first step was to use the platform for assessments by working with all our teachers to deliver a mandatory district-wide summative assessment via the new technology platform.

To tackle the shift to curriculum and instruction infusing blended learning strategies, we spent the last school year working with an early adopter group of 750 teachers. We began with the basics of blended learning and then guided teachers in using the digital curriculum tools provided by the LMS platform for planning and instruction. Based on what we’re learning from the early adopter group, we’re moving forward this school year to implement the platform for curriculum management throughout the district.

I’m excited to reach that goal.

No matter which “system” or other digital curriculum repository you develop, today, I can tell you, that you can’t live without it. So get all interested players to the table, get your planning done, your “can’t live without” requirements listed and start. ■

A single Learning Management System is needed that incorporates four key components:



Assessments & Reports



Curriculum & Blended Learning



Professional Development



Communication & Family Involvement



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