TOPcast Episode 12: The LMS: Past, Present, and Future

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TOM   From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning, I'm Tom Cavanagh.

KELVIN   And I'm Kelvin Thompson.

TOM   And you are listening to TOPcast: the Teaching Online Podcast. Greetings Kelvin.

KELVIN   Greetings Tom. "That's my favorite podcast." That's what you said last time or some time ago.

TOM   Yeah, it still holds true.

KELVIN   *(laughter)* There it is.

TOM   It is still my favorite podcast.

KELVIN   There's always a threat that maybe it'll cease being. It'll go down in the rankings on my podcast app.

TOM   I found some new ones lately, and I've really been enjoying them. Frankly, they are much better than ours, but strangely enough, this one is still my favorite.

KELVIN   *(laughter)* I can relate to that. I can relate to that entirely.

TOM   So, we are off and running here. This is—correct me if I'm wrong—the last of this season? Is that right?

KELVIN   I believe that's correct.

TOM   Wow.

KELVIN   It's hard to believe.

TOM   A whole year of this nonsense!

KELVIN   Yeah. Are you going to keep doing this?

TOM   Yeah, well, we'll do one more episode.

KELVIN   And then we'll go from there.

TOM   We'll look at next year. So this should be—if it airs in the sequence that we think it will—number twelve.

KELVIN	Wouldn't it be funny if it was number one?

TOM	Number one. Well if you're listening to this, and it is not labeled correctly then we have not edited it properly. So this means that I have had eleven different—give or take a couple repeat—coffees with you [Kelvin].

KELVIN	That's true.

TOM	And if tradition holds, there will be one more today.

KELVIN	Yeah, I think that's true. Actually, I just ran out and was late for us recording here because I picked up a coffee for both of us from a new-to-me café just four—count 'em, four—miles away from where we sit. I did this because—you [Tom] didn't know this—we're going to talk briefly about coffee café conflation. That's a new thing I just invented.

TOM	Coffee café conflation? …Sells sea shells by the sea shore.

KELVIN	That's right. It's alliterative. So some cafés are linked inexorably, and understandably that the coffees they serve, some of these roasts their own coffee on site. We've been to one of those in Tallahassee. Remember? The Catalina Café. That was nice.

TOM	I do remember. They had a—what was it?—a clover?

KELVIN	No.

TOM	No?

KELVIN	No. They had a roaster, and they did a pour-over, and it was good. You had a Yirgacheffe. It was nice. You enjoyed it.

TOM	I did! I honestly can't say it, but I enjoyed it.

KELVIN	And so, you know, some roast on site. Some serve a licensed coffee of some sort. Some cafés are in the business of being an excellent third space, where they provide a great setting for conversation or work or whatever, where carefully curated high-end coffees are part of the overall ambiance. So in those kinds of places—like The Vespr down the street—coffee and the setting have a relationship, but they're not the same thing. So I'm going to pour this here for you [Tom]. I don't know what you've put in that cup as well, but this is a Nicaragua Kailash from northern Nicaragua.

TOM	Nicaragua Kailash, you say?

KELVIN	That's right. I think it's kind of nice. I've had this before. It's tasty. So in today's episode, we're going to talk about conflation of another sort, in which online education is

seemingly linked inexorably with the LMS. But first, taste this coffee. See what you think.

TOM   All right. Let me dress it up. Nicaragua Kailash…rhymes with eyelash.

KELVIN   I guess, but hopefully there were none of those put in this cup. That would be kind of gross.

TOM   *(takes a sip)* I like. It's good.

KELVIN   I didn't bring the more avant garde one that I had a couple times because it's a little edgy, but this one I like a lot. It's very tasty. Very forgiving. So the LMS and online education…

TOM   Yes. That is what we're talking about today.

KELVIN   That's good.

TOM   Why don't you tell the home audience what LMS stands for?

KELVIN   Okay, here's a funny story. So LMS, generally speaking, stands for learning management system, and this is one of those areas, Tom, in which you have actually done what many people have been unable to do before and that is change my behavior.

TOM   *(laughter)* Really? How so?

KELVIN   Well, because, you know, you've always been consistently a learning management system—LMS—kind of guy. Historically, I was a course management system—CMS—kind of guy.

TOM   Oh, you were one of those!

KELVIN   I was one of those people. You know, because I insisted on holding to the principle that you can't manage learning. You can maybe manage a course, and the software could be helpful to you as you go about managing a course, but you can't manage learning. But then there were content management systems…

TOM   Well, I must confess at one point I was an LCMS guy.

KELVIN   Well there you go. Learning content management system. Yeah, exactly. You get all these acronyms going around and finally, you know, I just…Everybody else was doing it—going to a learning management system—and then people were getting confused over content management systems. Finally, I just gave up and called a learning management system.

TOM   Yeah, because WordPress is a content management system.

KELVIN   Right, exactly.

TOM   So, yeah. Learning management systems. If you know anything about online learning, you've probably heard the acronym LMS.

KELVIN   We hope.

TOM   Yes, and so I think I understand your coffee [café] conflation conundrum.

KELVIN   That's good! That's a quadro-alliterative…*(laughter)*

TOM   Because a lot of people think that online learning is an LMS and an LMS is online learning. And perhaps, with some justification, because I often hear complaints from faculty that the LMS—with its inherent affordances and limitations—forces them into certain kinds of course designs and certain kinds of student interactions, and perhaps the more critical ones might claim that it doesn't allow them to do the kinds of things they want to do just because the system is designed a certain way. So, you know, self-fulfilling prophecy. There it is.

KELVIN   Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So, I don't know…We've talked about this briefly before we hit record or before professionals who were trained in the pressing of record did that…

TOM   We have a vast team behind us who know how to press the record button.

KELVIN   Don't call them "vast". *(laughter)* They're very fit people.

TOM   *(laughter)* They are. They're healthy.

KELVIN   *(talking to "team")* Don't be offended. *(to Tom)* They're waving. *(to "team")* Put that finger down! That was not very nice at all. *(to Tom)* So, we've talked about maybe three things here, right? Where are we? Where have we been? Where are we going? Does that sound all right?

TOM   Sounds good.

KELVIN   Okay, so where are we, Tom?

TOM   We're sitting in a studio in Orlando, Florida. *(laughter)* So yeah, I guess maybe we've kind of already started touching on that—that online learning isn't necessarily the same as learning management system, but it's really hard to separate one from the other just because of practice and what has become recent tradition.

KELVIN   Yeah, that's funny, right? I mean, it seems, you know, I saw a little factoid from Phil Hill in this blog post that he did. He pulled some data together. The one little thing that really stood out to me—and we'll talk about some other ones in a minute maybe—but home grown LMSes apparently still around some?

TOM   Yeah.

KELVIN   And in this one little graphic that he had, it had like how long each of the brands of LMS have been at institutions, and home grown was a category. It was like 23-point-something years. I'm like, somebody had a LMS that they built themselves, and they've had it for over 23 years?

TOM   I hear those stories once in a while, and it baffles me sometimes, but it's still out there. And we get a lot of visits from other schools who kind of are interested in how we do online learning, and every so often somebody comes through and says, "Oh yeah, we've got this proprietary system we've built, and yeah, it's not quite doing the job. So tell us about your LMS."

KELVIN   Right, right.

TOM   And I think it's amazing that they've been able to continue to support and expand a proprietary home grown system. When we were looking at our LMS migration a few years ago—we operate out at a fairly large scale, and we do a lot of online learning—it didn't even occur to us that 1) we could build something ourselves, or that we would be able to choose a provider that couldn't handle our scale, so we needed a company that did nothing but build LMSes and support them as their full-time, RNDN, ongoing job. And for you to be doing it kind of on the side is both impressive and horrifying at the same time. No offense to anyone who's doing that. I'm totally impressed by you.

KELVIN   Yeah, I'd kind of really like to find out more about it. You know, I'm fascinated like, okay, how big a deal is the LMS at the institution? Is it a little peripheral thing, or is it a central thing? Have you been able to keep it supported well and all that? Because I know how difficult it is here when someone else built it. It's fascinating. But yeah, from that same graphic, it was like the average length of time that institutions have had their current LMS was almost nine years. 8.8 years.

TOM   That's interesting.

KELVIN   Which sounds like a long time.

TOM   It does. Yeah. Although, if you think about, we've been on our current LMS for three years. Prior to that, it was, what, fifteen?

KELVIN   Yeah, that's true.

TOM   Through various versions of it.

KELVIN   Yeah, that's true. Okay, so here's little of—this kind of goes out of sequence, I guess—but a little bit of lore. I'm sure you've heard this story, right? So according to lore, Murray Goldberg himself flew down from the University of British Columbia with a CD on which his WebCT, the original 1.0 or whatever it was…

TOM   We probably still have the computer he installed it on.

KELVIN   I think…Is that the one I'm using? *(laughter)*

TOM   *(laughter)* Might be.

KELVIN   And you know, he installed it, and we went from there, and we were WebCT for a long time and Blackboard and so forth. But things have changed a lot, right?

TOM   Yeah, absolutely. In fact, it's interesting. There is a fairly well-known infographic that shows the state of the LMS. I think it gets updated every year. If I'm not mistaken—forgive me if I'm wrong—I think it's a Campus Computing Project that does it. It shows the consolidation of the marketplace where on the left side of the chart you see all of these different players, and over time, they've either been swallowed up by each other or gone out of business or bought by each other, and now we're down to a few in the marketplace that kind of dominate. I would say, at most, a half a dozen, and some of those are much bigger than others, obviously. And then there's kind of every flavor. If you want open source versus commercial versus something you can run yourself versus, you know, cloud or on premise or, you know, every variety of approach, you can kind of get it. And what surprises me, Kelvin…

KELVIN   Tell me, Tom.

TOM   …is that there seem to, every year or two, be new entrants into the marketplace. And I am surprised by that, because I keep thinking that the marketplace is pretty mature—which, you know, maybe it's not—and there are a few players that seem to have a lot of market share, but then every so often, new ones pop up. And so the one that seems to be making a lot of noise now is Instructure and Canvas which is only a couple of years old, but then there are new things like Schoology that keep coming up, and then there are others, as well. So it seems like yeah, just as some go away—whether it's Angel or whatever—new ones come into the marketplace.

KELVIN   Well, so, interesting, right? So, I think there may have been some data from Justin Menard from LISTedTECH end the year, but so according to the chart that I found from him, it was like maybe arguably three commercial LMS vendors with over 10% of the higher ed. market. I think Blackboard, D2L, and Instructure, and then, of course, you [Tom] mentioned open source and Moodle open source still has a pretty good chunk of the higher ed. market.

TOM	And depending on how you run Moodle, it could be that that could be a commercial offering as well if you have some sort of partner running it on your behalf. Or Sakai even, if somebody is running that on your behalf. You're paying somebody to manage that for you. Is that open source or not?
KELVIN	Right, exactly, and I don't know how exactly they calculated that for that particular graph either, but I was fascinated, too. Pearson will show up on some of those, up until very recently, historic charts with some segment of the market, and, you know, they announced not long ago that they were kind of getting out of the LMS business with—I thought this was fascinating—this statement that they're leaving to focus on products and services. I think it was something like "where the learning actually happens" or "closer to where the learning happens".
TOM	It's interesting since I don't know, how many LMSes did they own? Two or three?
KELVIN	Yeah, and so when they go to that individual, more granular level, like, "Okay, there will be an LMS in there somewhere, but we're not going to focus on that." So I think that's interesting. So they're a big company, right? And divesting themselves of that, as you [Tom] say, others are coming into the market at the same time. So, very intriguing.
TOM	So, that's kind of a little bit of where we are/where we've been. Certainly that lore. Where are we going? Right? That's next. And there's been a lot of predictions of the death of the LMS, right?
KELVIN	That's true.
TOM	Which I think the predictions of its demise have been a bit premature.
KELVIN	That's true, and you know, I told you [Tom] before I don't really do predictions but I did. I went back and looked. I did a little personal podcast for a while a number of years ago, and in 2008—I think it was—I put a little nine-minute segment together on why the course management system is not going away.
TOM	Well then, you weren't wrong.
KELVIN	I wasn't wrong!
TOM	Because the course management system didn't go away.
KELVIN	Oh. *(laughter)* Wait a second.
TOM	*(laughter)* You were wrong!
KELVIN	That's right. Like, "Aww, man, still over a million or something." Whatever that is.

Yeah, I think things are a lot more flexible now, and I think they're only going to get more flexible, right? But going back to behind us for a second, you know, one thing: I just want to give a shout out to Brigham Young University. They had this loosely coupled gradebook concept for a while, and I loved the idea that basically: here's a gradebook, here's authentication into that, here's your educational records, and then there's a variety of ways of pulling things into that. Jon Mott, you know, was advocating for that, and literally, before today's episode, I found a vintage—this is hilarious. I don't think I've ever seen these before—a vintage nine-minute interview recording between Jon Mott and Jared Stein, who's now at Instructure, talking about the loosely coupled gradebook program. I don't—that I know of—that has not gone anywhere further, but, now the modern LMSes are seeming to build upon that through things like learning tools interoperability, right? LTIs and other concepts. That flexibility is a thing.

TOM   Yeah, and it's a fundamental premise that Canvas has built upon, but certainly not exclusive to Canvas.

KELVIN   Right.

TOM   Well, it even harkens back to the work that Jim Groom did at Mary Washington where, I mean, he was definitely in the camp of "I don't need no stinking LMS. I can build a robust interactive online learning environment using blogs and apps and all kinds of other tools." That's certainly true if you're Jim Groom and you're willing to put in the effort, you know. I mean, most of the faculty here, I imagine, probably aren't willing to do that kind of very effective but, you know, time-consuming work to build the course in that fashion.

KELVIN   That's more boutique, you know, I guess we'd say, rather than enterprise scale. I feel like Fox Mulder sometimes. You know, like, "I want to believe."

TOM   "The truth is out there."

KELVIN   "The truth is out there." And I really respect, you know, the whole edu-punk thing and Jim Groom and the blogging thing and being outside the LMS and all that, but I know that while an individual instructor might want to do that and be willing to put in that kind of time and effort, you can't build an institution online education program on that.

TOM   And if we look at our own operation here, we're built for scale, and it's really hard to scale an artisan learning management system.

KELVIN   Yeah, that's better than boutique these days. It's artisan. Artisan coffee.

TOM   Not that either one is bad. I mean, there are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. So kind of what Groom was doing, and then I've heard Ray Schroeder talk about this previously, where the future of the LMS is just a series of personal apps that you can plug together to build your own kind of personalized learning environment, and I

think that is in many ways coming true. If we look at the space today, it may not be exactly what Ray predicted at that time, but I think he was on to something. And you [Kelvin] mentioned LTI. I think through LTI, we're doing quite a bit of that here, and some of our sister institutions around the country—Utah State and Berkeley and others— are also doing some really interesting things with LTI.

KELVIN   No, I think that's right. I think that kind of flexibility and putting things together in some kind of reliable way makes sense. I think right now the LMS is still the core of that—and this is a horrible metaphor—I think maybe—just this visual came to mind—like, you know, the blank for a Mr. Potato Head, right? You know, there's this thing, and then all this stuff plugs into it and whatever.

TOM   Well, and there's an actual term for it, and I know [Kelvin] you're familiar with it. It's called the Learning Stack and—

KELVIN   *(interrupts)* I thought you were going to say the Mr. Potato Head. I was going to be really impressed.

TOM   Well, Phil Hill has written about this, and Marti Harris from Gartner has written about this, but the idea is that it's…the LMS serves as a basic foundation for some of the main stuff you want to do, and then you integrate custom apps through standards-based tools to build a custom version for either your institution or yourself as a faculty member or perhaps yourself as a student. So, for example, say that you [Kelvin] and I are both students in a class.

KELVIN   Okay.

TOM   And there is an integration built into the learning management system that allows me to plug Dropbox into it, because that's where I keep my stuff, but you've got OneDrive, so you plug OneDrive into it. Well, we both now have kind of two different versions of the LMS that are customized to meet our needs. We're plugging in our own personal apps to allow us to manage our learning environment. That's a very surface-y sort of example, but it kind of illustrates the point, and if you take it to its extreme, think about a learning management system perhaps as just a repository of a roster and allowing FERPA protected communications and maybe a gradebook—or maybe not even a gradebook— and then all of the elements and features of the LMS are plugged into it as standards-based modules. That gets really interesting.

KELVIN   Oh, I agree.

TOM   And it sort of disaggregates the whole LMS as a black box.

KELVIN   And a bloated black box at that. Ooh, that was tri-alliterative.

TOM   A bloated black box! Well, we don't have a lot of time left, but maybe we should say

something about the next generation digital learning environment. You [Kelvin] and I have both been involved in some of that coming out of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative. Do you want to say a few words about that?

KELVIN   Well, why don't you get started? Because I don't do pippy.

TOM   *(laughter)* Yeah, I'm afraid I don't either. It has this awful acronym—and Malcolm Brown and Veronica Diaz will be the first to tell you how awful it is—but the NGDLE—next generation digital learning environment—and the idea is to envision what is the next thing that's not an LMS that can help manage digital learning? They're not even saying online learning. And they've come up with five different dimensions, and I think that they're pretty good, and they're useful in thinking about what educators might need to enable digital learning in the future. Maybe even the present. So I'll run through them quickly. Number one is interoperability and integration which allows the parts to be connected and to share data.

KELVIN   That's kind of what we've been talking about.

TOM   Yeah, that's kind of similar to what I just said, but that also overlaps the next one, which is personalization so that learning environments and activities can be tailored to individual users. The next is analytics, advising, and learning assessment so that course-level learning analytics—as well as planning and advising systems that focus on student success—can be a part of this environment. Collaboration, which is I think a broad term that implies a lot of different kinds of interactions: student to student, student to faculty, faculty to faculty. You know, whatever the case might be. And finally accessibility and universal design, and I'm pleased that they put this at the same level as these other things because that's becoming more and more important so that everybody can access education.

KELVIN   Yeah, I think what I'm fascinated by is the conversation thus far we've been talking about—again this is kind of Mr. Potato Head kind of core—the Learning Stack that you plug things into, and this sort of, at first glance, sounds a lot like that except that I know they would say that at EDUCAUSE, NGDLE stuff maybe is not the next gen LMS. An LMS might be part of that. So that messes with my mind a little bit, because I'm trying to get my head around how this would all play out, and it's more about the that maybe there's not a Potato Head. There's just the little parts and they're more like LEGO bricks.

TOM   Yeah, think about it as LEGOs. That's the [Learning] Stack metaphor. And I think that works because there are certain LEGO parts that are shaped certain ways, and they work for some kids and other kids want to build something else. When I was involved early on with some of the NGDLE discussions, there was some criticism of the LMS in the room by the participants, and I was never one of those. I don't hate the LMS. I actually think the LMS has enabled us to do some really amazing things here relative to online learning and student access and interaction. I understand its limitations, and I understand, but there are limitations in a face to face classroom just because of the way the classroom is set up.

KELVIN	Sure.
TOM	You would love to do certain things in that classroom, but you can't because you've got four square walls and you've got certain kinds of desks, and so you make the best you can.
KELVIN	Unless you take your class outside and sit under a tree.
TOM	Right. Yes, but you can do that online, too, with a laptop or a tablet.
KELVIN	That's right. Take everybody out into the blogosphere or something, but there's still a classroom to go back to. And so I think about that, you know, it's not just abandoning this. I mean, there is still home base, and anytime you're going to have institutional education—let alone institutional online education—you're going to have some kind of home base.
TOM	Absolutely, yeah, and you need structure—like it or not—you need structure. As much flexibility you can give faculty and administrators to manage that environment, to do the kind of creative things they want to do…I do think there's work to be done, and there's a bright future, but I'm not going to bash the LMS because I actually have really appreciated what it's done for us.
KELVIN	Oh sure. Well, I don't know if that's a great place to leave it, but what I'm kind of hearing us say is that, well, there's a lot of options, right? But the LMS is probably going to continue to be a part of whatever online education is or becomes in the future. It's probably still likely to be an important part of that equation.
TOM	Yeah, I think that's true, and you know—kind of as we were saying—the LMS or whatever it may evolve into will continue to be a part of it, but what we see are increasing flexibility and personalization in that environment.
KELVIN	Absolutely, which is—you know, we started this talking about conflation—but that description, that statement, you just made is probably hopefully true of online education as well.
TOM	Yeah. Let's hope. So on a hopeful note! My coffee's gone. Thank you.
KELVIN	You're welcome.
TOM	Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.
KELVIN	And I'm Kelvin.
TOM	See ya!

KELVIN   Hey! Before you go, since we're a year into this podcast, it's a great time for us to say, "Thanks for listening." But we'd like to hear from you. Please let us know what you like, what you don't like, and what changes you'd like to see. Feel free to send us an email with your comments to topcast@ucf.edu. If you include your mailing address, we'll even send you a custom TOPcast device sticker.