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Online Learning Software – Why Pay for It?

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UNITED KINGDOM

Numbers with pound signs in front and four noughts following them are quite usual for the basic price of e-learning software. In spite of the high cost of software and criticism of it, many organizations are still locking themselves into expensive contracts when there are freely available alternatives that can deliver most of the attributes of commercially available Learning Management Systems (LMS).

Learning Management Systems were developed amid the dot com boom of the 90s and are typical of the simplistic software approach to managing human endeavors that were characteristic of that era. By buying and installing an LMS, it was claimed, an organization could provide online learning to its members, electronically track their progress through online testing and save a huge amount of money on face-to-face training. This claim proved to be somewhat extravagant with experience showing that the software was difficult to install and run, prone to faults and was not at all efficient at facilitating learning. With the benefit of hindsight the problems are easy to identify. For example, many of the learning materials were crudely adapted from paper-based courses and there was little understanding of how learners behave in an online environment. However the main problem was that the development was designer-led and that the learning architecture was 'locked down' in the sense that the learning administrators within an organization had no control over it. LMS of this era (and they still exist) have been described as an 'albatross around the neck of a company that stifles learning' (<http://parkinslot.blogspot.com/2004/11/e-learning-adventures-beyond-lms.html>).

Economic forces and a form of Darwinian evolution have now resulted in LMS that are based on research into online learner behaviour and which provide authoring tools so that learning administrators can create, edit and manage their own courses. We also have a much better understanding of how to make use of online learning as part of a blended approach that provides engaging and effective learning. It is now possible to write a course in Word format, include a range of interactive activities and to develop it in response to feedback. However, until very recently, the problem of the high capital cost of LMS software remained a major barrier to smaller and not-for-profit organizations. That is, until the advent of open source software.

Although the term *open source* software was coined in 1998 at a meeting in Palo Alto, California when Netscape decided to make the source code for Navigator freely available, the movement has its roots amongst computer hackers in the 70s who were radically opposed to the developing dominance of computing by large organizations. Richard Stallman is generally recognized as one of the main founding members of the open source movement and in 1995 founded the Free Software Foundation (<http://www.fsf.org>). The aim is to provide a pool of software (<http://www.opensource.org>) that is not only free but the source code (program language sequence that makes it work) is also made available so that anyone can modify it for their own purpose. From 'geeky' beginnings the open source movement is now responsible for a very wide range of reputable software that is entirely free. For example Open Office has all the functions of MS Office, is compatible with it and is entirely free (<http://www.openoffice.org>).

Why pay for software to convert files to pdf format (which means that they cannot be changed by the recipient) when there is a perfectly good free version (<http://www.software995.com>)?

The good news for organizations, and particularly those lacking money to throw at large scale projects, is that there are now open source learning management systems and authoring software that are entirely free. Not only are these free but they are easy to set up and use, bug free, well designed and highly effective at promoting learning. These have the advantage that they have been designed by educators rather than software programmers and are therefore much more learner-centred than the commercial alternatives. Additionally, because the source code is free, the development has gone through much iteration by different people who have progressively refined it. Few commercial software programs go through such a rigorous developmental process.

If a non-commercial product can be called a brand leader then Moodle (<http://moodle.org>) is certainly the open source leader of the LMS pack. It is so good that The Open University (<http://moodle.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=34002>) is using it to offer courses within its system. Moodle combines an LMS, a learning content management system (LCMS) and course authoring software all in one package. Load it on to your server (or have it hosted on a commercial server for you) and within a day you can set up and offer some basic courses. Loading Moodle on to a server does require the services of an IT specialist with experience of server management and who will provide a unique URL link to the site.

There are two key roles in using Moodle, the *Administrator* and the *Tutors*. The Administrator has access to an extensive menu for setting up the look and feel of what is seen by the *Tutors* and learners. Among other things, the Administrator controls the terminology used (tutor or teacher, learner or participant) how long the course will be offered for, if discussion forums will be included and if the course is only open to people listed on a database or to learners who self-register. This role does not require any programming skills and anyone familiar with the use of drop down menus will find setting up a course structure very easy. Obviously the learning architecture should be set up in discussion with the *Tutors* with the objectives and the learners in mind. There is no need to begin with a blank slate as there are many examples of actual courses on the Moodle web site to explore. Another key aspect of the Administrator role is to provide data from assessment exercises, the number of times learners log on and the time spent completing tasks

The *Tutors* can decide content from an extensive library of options including topic headings, assignments, workshops, exercises, assessment tests and web links. These are all menu driven and the content can be typed in using a Word type format or uploaded from files. By switching the *edit mode* off it is possible to view the page as the learners will see it – and this is a very helpful way of playing constructively to see what is likely to work best. Editing to correct mistakes or to make improvements can be carried out at any point, including when the site is live. The *Tutors* role might also include leading and facilitating discussions in the online forums if these are included in the course design.

Prospective learners visiting the web site might have to sign in using an approved sign on and password. They can then see the list of courses open to them and the topics included. The navigation is non-linear and learners can explore the topics in any sequence –but they are likely to be advised to begin with the first topic. Also, depending on how the course is set up, they might only have one chance of completing an assessment.

Although Moodle does include course authoring tools, there are also open source packages that provide this as a specialty. The open source leader of the pack in terms of course authoring software is most certainly Exe Learning (<http://exelearning.org/>), developed at the University of Auckland in New Zealand.

This has been developed by a team of educational specialists and programmers and is freely available as a download. Within minutes of installing you can begin writing a course. You select from a menu of *iDevices* and decide on the learning tools that you wish to include in your course. Examples include free text, true/false questions, fill in the missing words, file downloads, flash films and animations – and much more. All of these are edited in a screen closely analogous to Word and then, at a key stroke, converted into a web page that can be checked and re-edited. Courses authored in Exe can be easily linked into a Moodle LMS. For those of you who are technically savvy and skeptical, both systems are fully SCORM compliant. If you need an expensive comparison, check out Macromedia Breeze (<http://www.macromedia.com/software/breeze/productinfo/overview/presentation>).

What all of these open source products have in common is an understanding of the individual and (<http://agelesslearner.com/intros/informal.html>) random nature of learning.

They give the learner a significant degree of control over their own learning and they give the tutor the power to facilitate this. So, if online learning is on your agenda, or your current expensive software licence is coming up for renewal, do put a smile on the faces of your accountants by exploring the free software options that are now available.

To explore an example of a course using Exe learning software, go to:
<http://exe.urbanelement.com/>

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Jim FLOOD is currently working with a number of organizations to develop appropriate blends of learning based on open source software. If you are interested in exchanging information and experience, or you wish to explore collaborating on a new project, do make contact.

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