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Why aren't students using my learner management system?

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Learner management systems (LMSs) have added incredible opportunities for educators and learners to utilize ever-evolving technology. However, the learning experience for students can be frustrating if LMSs are not used effectively. This study examines the reasons why students became frustrated with the utilization of an LMS during a Master's course at a university in Sydney and offers solutions that educators can employ to ensure that the LMS user experience for students is positive.

Keywords: professional development, teacher education, learner management systems, technology best practice

Introduction

Emerging in the last 25 years, learner management systems (LMSs) have become almost ubiquitous in education, particularly at the tertiary level. For teachers, LMSs provide a central online location where they can store learning materials, run entire courses online, and engage with students beyond class hours. For students, they offer an access point for course materials and multimedia, as well as an opportunity for asynchronous learning with other students. Finally, for institutions, LMSs provide increased business opportunities, with options to offer courses or full degrees in distance learning formats for students who are unable to attend on-campus lessons. In short, LMSs have evolved and improved the educational landscape for all stakeholders involved.

Despite that, not every experience using LMSs is positive. For teachers, it might be a reluctance in wanting to integrate new technology, or a lack of understanding in using unfamiliar software (Stanley, 2012). For students, it can be a lack of familiarity with software or using new devices that impact their enthusiasm to use an institution's LMS. This research will examine how educators' use of an LMS in a Master's degree at one of Australia's most well-known universities engendered a frustrating experience for many students.

Literature review

From an educator's perspective, LMSs have become indispensable tools, offering a centralized platform for course materials, assignments, assessments, and communication. According to Almelhi (2021), LMSs help educators establish efficient teacher-student communication; facilitate students' comprehension; boost their instrumental motivation; engage them in active, interactive learning; and create instructor-student rapport. Furthermore, the integration of technology is an essential aspect of LMS usage, as teachers can incorporate multimedia resources such as videos, podcasts, and interactive simulations to enhance learning experiences (Azmuiddin & Mohd Radzuan, 2020).

To maximize an LMS's effectiveness, however, educators must adopt best practices that ensure optimal student engagement and learning outcomes. These include course overviews, clearly stated outcomes, culturally inclusive materials, accessibility, having multiple ways to engage learners, clearly defined assessments, rubrics that align with learning outcomes, and consistency in the user interface experience from one course to the next (Lewis, 2020). To ensure that best practices are adhered to, teacher training is also vital (Goomas & Czupryn, 2019).

Failure to implement such practices can have a negative impact on students' perceptions and uptake of LMSs. One common barrier to the adoption of LMS is technical difficulties. Students may face issues with internet connectivity, device compatibility, or the LMS's interface complexity (Al-Emran & Shaalan, 2015). Additionally, a lack of appropriate training on how to effectively use the LMS's features can contribute to student disengagement (Zharova et al., 2020).

Furthermore, instructors' attitudes towards LMSs can influence their students' adoption. If instructors are reluctant or unprepared to use LMSs effectively, students may be less motivated to engage with the platform. Finally, privacy concerns can deter students from using LMSs. Students may worry about the security of their personal information and academic data, particularly in the context of data breaches and privacy scandals (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2023).

Method

Methodology

The research methodology employed for this study was qualitative content analysis. This involved gathering data, such as interviews, forum posts, and focus group transcripts. Following collection, the data were analyzed, and keywords, phrases, and concepts were identified and coded. Once the data had been coded, they were grouped thematically. Finally, the categorized themes were analyzed, allowing conclusions to be drawn. The content came from two years' worth of analysis from queries made by students in the General Discussion forums for each course on the university's LMS, iLearn.

Participants

The participants were Master's degree students ranging in age from 25 to 64 years. Every student had experience with using an LMS prior to the commencement of the Master's degree program.

Results

Across two years and eight courses during the Master's degree, the students' most consistent point of contention with the university's LMS was the organization of the information and materials. Specifically, students had ongoing concerns about how confusing the user interface was and how difficult it was to find the relevant materials and weekly resources. An example can be found in the image below.

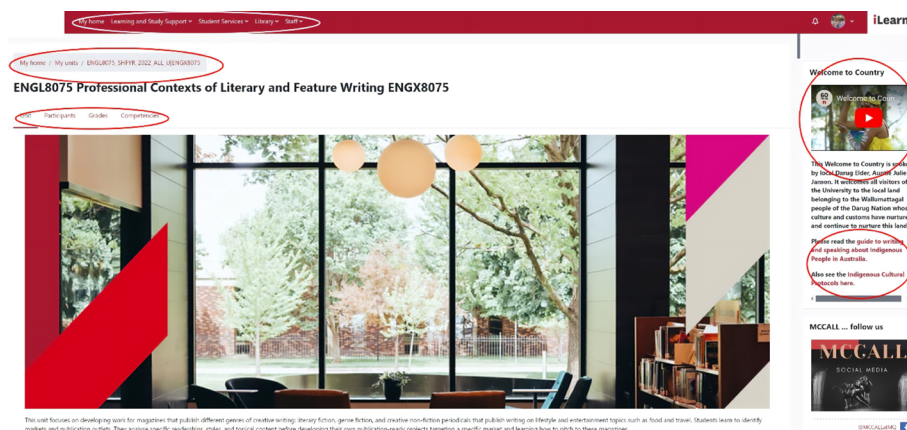


Figure 1. Screenshot of what a student immediately saw upon opening the course page.

Figure 1 shows how many links students often saw when first entering a course. In the course shown in Figure 1, students were presented with over 17 links to choose from – many of which were irrelevant to that specific course – and even more if the drop-down menus were clicked. According to many students voicing concerns in the General Discussion forums, the biggest issue was that many of the links, such as 'Library', 'Staff', and 'Student Services', were university-wide links that had nothing to do with the course and caused navigational issues when they were clicked.

The second biggest issue for students using the LMS during the course was the clunky organization of materials, links, and instructions. Figure 2 below offers an example.

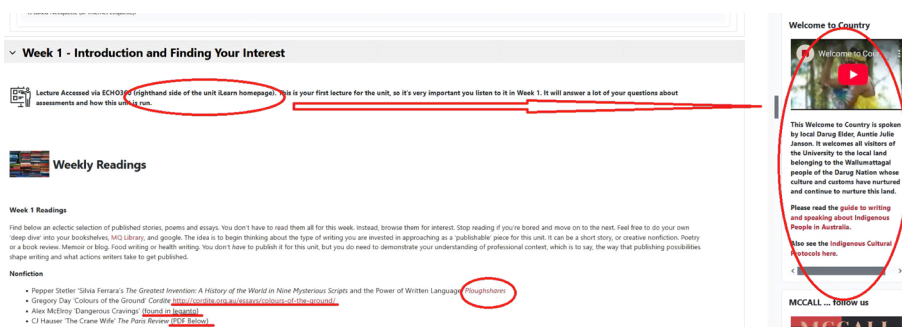


Figure 2. Screenshot showing instructions and link information that was different for desktop users and phone/tablet users.

In the topmost circled area of Figure 2, it says, “Lecture Accessed via ECHO360 (righthand side of the unit iLearn homepage)”. This was written for desktop users. However, for those accessing the course via smartphones or tablets, there was nothing to see on the right-hand side of their screens. In fact, students had to scroll to the very bottom of the page to access the ECHO360 links. This was an example of how the instructions often made navigation confusing.

Furthermore, the students expressed concern about how many times they had to sign in to different portals. To access video lectures, students went to another portal called ECHO360, where they had to log in. To access the course readings, the students often had to open Leganto (seen circled in Figure 2), another separate portal, where they had to sign in once more. As well as having to sign in three times or more during a single session to access the required resources, different browser tabs opened each time a link was clicked, increasing navigational confusion.

Finally, confusion surrounding dates and timelines was a huge issue for many students when they accessed the university’s LMS. Across all eight courses studied during the course, every section was labeled Week 1, Week 2, Week 3, and so forth. Figure 3 shows this.

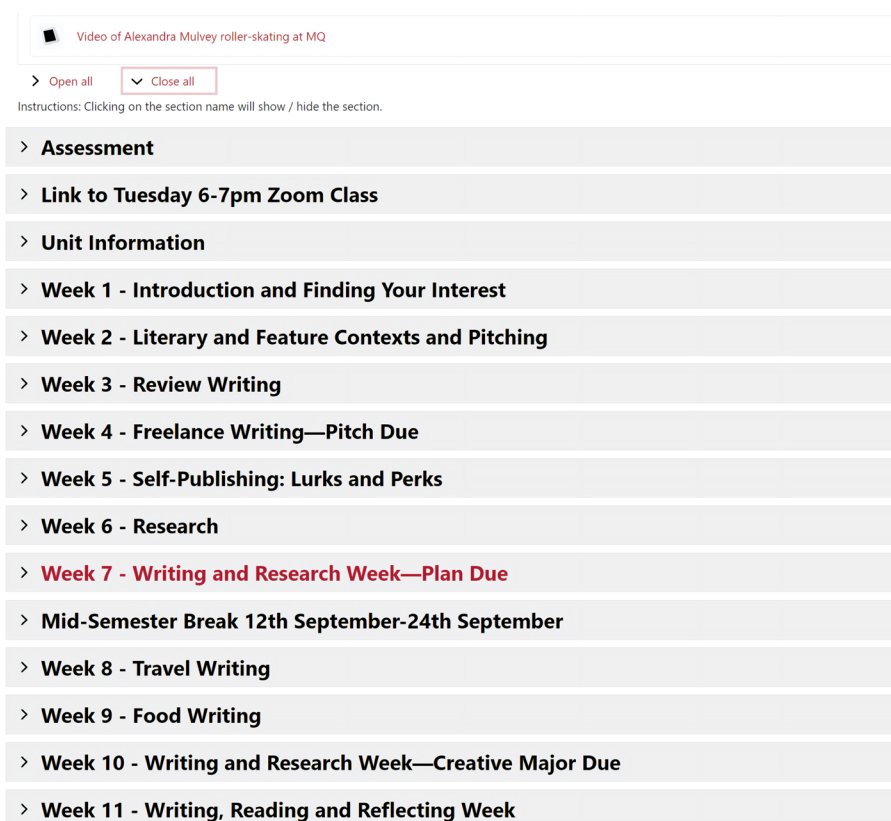


Figure 3. Screenshot showing no dates across the semester except for break dates.

Many students found navigating user interfaces like those in Figure 3 frustrating. The main reason was that many were full-time workers who had limited windows of time to work. Therefore, interfaces like those in Figure 3 made it hard to identify the dates that corresponded with Week 1, Week 7, Week 10, etc. Furthermore, for students studying several courses concurrently, it was more confusing because the teachers often set different dates for Week 1, Week 2, and so on. For example, Teacher A in Course A may have set Week 6 as 6–10 May, but Teacher B in Course B may have set Week 6 as 13–17 May because of a conference they had to attend in April. Many students expressed their frustrations at trying to identify which week they were in across different courses and wished for a clearer way of communicating timeframes.

Discussion

The results indicate that across two years and eight courses of this Master's degree program, there was a consistent level of student dissatisfaction regarding their interactions with the LMS. The same pattern repeatedly occurred: students embraced the course LMS at the commencement of each new term, then as the weeks progressed, their frustrations grew while their participation waned. Comments and queries on the General Discussion Forums showed ongoing confusion and exasperation with various elements of the LMS and how it was being used.

Fortunately, there are some simple solutions for several of the issues raised.

Firstly, explicitly writing dates next to topics can solve the frustrations around navigation. Figure 4 below gives an example of how this can be done and requires nothing more than editing the topic titles.

Storytelling and Portraiture in Photography - April 15-19

Class Worksheet

 [Storytelling Through Photography](#)

URL Links

 [Storytelling Photo 1](#)

 [Storytelling Photo 2](#)

 [Insta_Repeat Instagram Account](#)

Class Reading

 [How To Tell Stories \(Reading\)](#)

 [Storytelling Through Photography \(Questions to match reading\)](#)

Modern Japanese Photographers

 [Modern Japanese Photographers - Yoichi Watanabe](#)

Hidden from students

 [Modern Japanese Photographers - Motoyuki Daifu](#)

Hidden from students

 [Modern Japanese Photographers - Mika Ninagawa](#)

Figure 4. An example screenshot of my own LMS, showing how to write dates in the topic titles to help student navigation.

In addition, administrators of LMS course pages can reduce (or minimize) the number of browser tabs that open by nominating the clicked links to display as pop-ups within the course rather than navigating to a new tab – or sometimes a completely different browser. Figure 5 below shows how simply choosing “Display as Pop-up” (in Moodle), can keep the users within the LMS course while they access external site readings or videos.

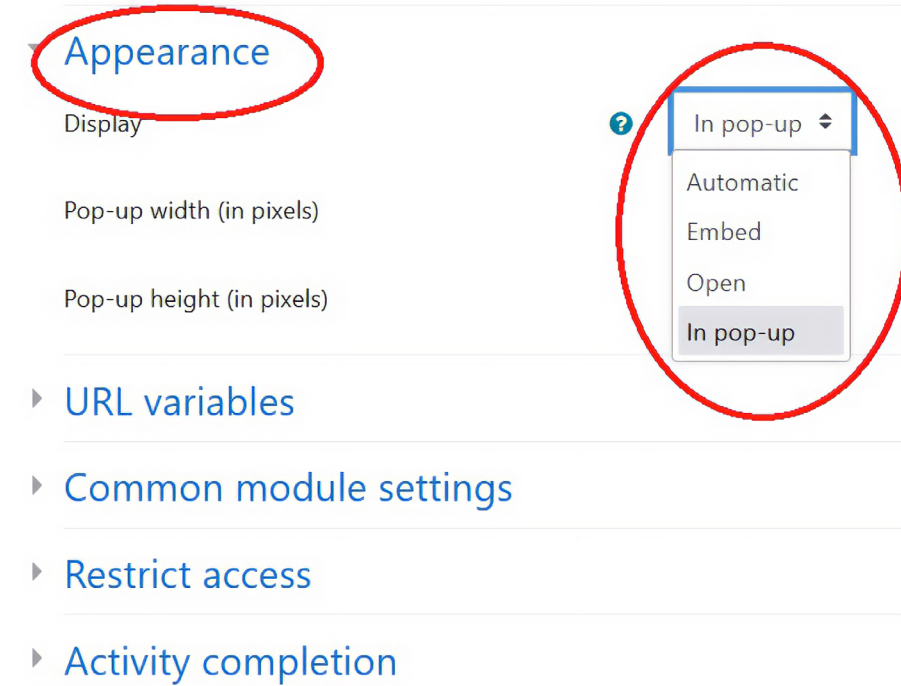


Figure 5. Screenshot showing how to activate a display in pop-up mode.

Finally, LMS administrators must always be mindful of irrelevant links. From year to year, resources change as educators update materials or deem old materials to be no longer useful. In those cases, educators must always either delete or hide links they are no longer using. Not doing so adds confusion because of how many links students must scroll through and decide which to click or not. Figure 6 below shows how hidden links display as gray (to administrators) rather than blue.

Hidden from students

Japanese Portrait Photographers



6 Japanese portrait photographers - 6 different styles



Kenta Nakamura - About



Hideaki Hamada - About



Ayano Sudo - About



Yuichi Ikehata - About



Noriko Yamaguchi - About



Golden Week Work / Homework

Hidden from students



Golden Week Homework - 1st vocabulary quiz

Hidden from students



Taking Portrait Shots

Hidden from students



Practical Work - Your Portrait Shots

Hidden from students

Figure 6. Educators should hide links that are not relevant for current courses (hidden links appear in gray).

Conclusion

Student compliance is usually the biggest issue regarding the use of course LMSs. It does not matter how good the technology is if students are not accessing it. For educators using LMSs, there are various steps they can take to ensure a positive user experience for students on the LMSs. This study highlighted the frustrations that experienced users of LMSs had during a 2-year Master's course. Many of those frustrations are avoidable and do not necessitate professional development courses. Ultimately, if educators want their students to access their LMSs and make use of the potential that LMSs present, they need to ensure they set up their courses to make the navigation and user experience as simple as possible.



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Iain Stanley is an Associate Professor at Miyazaki International University. He has 20 years' experience at the university level in Japan, and more than 25 across the Asian region. His Doctor of Education examined professional development best practices in the field of educational technology.