



XplanaCourse 1.0 Whitepaper

The Future of Learning: E-Learning Technology and Online Courses

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Introduction

In the fast-paced world we live in, it is sometimes a challenge not to get left behind. Today's competitive job market demands degrees from institutions of higher education in order to obtain a decent job. However, many obstacles such as soaring tuition costs and inconvenient class times prevent those with an interest in higher education from pursuing degrees. The expansion of e-learning in the form of online courses offers an alternate solution to a traditional brick-and-mortar learning experience.

What is E-Learning?

E-learning stands for electronic learning and encompasses the transference of information through such mediums as the internet, videoconferencing, satellite, and CD-ROMs. Current trends in e-learning tend to focus on the prevalence of online courses and online degree programs. For the purposes of this paper, e-learning generally refers to online courses unless otherwise noted.

Online courses are designed for students to complete within a specified time period and count toward a degree or certificate of some kind. The course is accessed via the internet and contains reading material, assignments, communication methods, resources and integrated learning tools.

Online courses are formatted with a learning management system that provides a manageable and customizable course for any given instructor.

The existence of distance education and correspondence courses dates back to the 19th century. Until more recent years, correspondence courses consisted of printed materials communicated between institution and student via mail. However, with the wave of technological advancements appeared new opportunities for the improvement of distance education. Teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and finally the establishment of online courses revolutionized distance learning for a fast-paced world.



Why E-Learning?

The possibilities with E-learning are infinite. While many working professionals wish (or are prodded) to gain a competitive edge by earning a Master's degree or PhD, they are often deterred by such factors as inflexible class times or an inconvenient commute. Adults may also hesitate to return to predominantly youth-oriented campuses following a significant absence from formal schooling. E-learning, and online learning in particular, proffers a convenient, cutting-edge learning environment for those whom typical university schedules do not accommodate. Online courses also offer people with disabilities, stay-at-home mothers and virtually anyone with a computer to partake in an innovative learning experience that extends beyond the classroom walls.

Traditional education models are predicated upon a "centripetal" philosophy in which learning occurs by pulling students into designated centers of learning where they obtain knowledge from centrally housed resources and a centrally-located expert. In contrast, e-learning qualifies as "centrifugal" learning, as the Web operates as the primary delivery mechanism, and students are 'sent out' from their location to interact with distant and disparate resources. In this way, e-learning offers the promise of true apprenticeship learning in which students venture into the outside world to learn from real-world exchanges and experiences.

This philosophy of centrifugal learning that powers e-learning also emphasizes personalized learning. Flexibility and the lack of set class meeting times for online courses enable students to complete assignments when individual schedules allow. In addition, individuals are able to learn at their own pace and work on assignments at whatever time of day is most conducive to learning. An assortment of interactivities, multimedia aspects and a myriad of learning tools included within the online course also target various learning styles. This emphasis on the individual is refreshing, as crowded classrooms and a lack of individual attention at many universities garner criticism from students.

The structure of online courses conforms to work with people's schedules so that they learn at their own pace on their own schedule. However, the adaptable nature of online courses is not the only advantage. An egalitarian environment exists within the online classroom. Though avatars, profiles and journals aid in giving identities to users, superficial factors such as gender, appearance and personality that influence classroom dynamic are nonexistent in the online classroom. For example, typically shy people may be apt to vocalize opinions or ideas in this moderately anonymous atmosphere. This equality results in a more productive and proactive learning environment.



Market Forces

Technological advancements transpire daily, constantly arming us with new tools with which we can seek knowledge. The internet spawned a global community in which a world of information is now accessible with just a few points and clicks of a mouse. In addition to providing the impetus to explore digital learning, the internet facilitated the development of comprehensive online courses that rival the traditional classroom experience. New technology has also transformed learning in the form of interactive media books that engage students and reinforce learning objectives. Technological progress is a driving force in the expansion of e-learning, as it removes educational barriers and provides opportunities for those unable to attain an education through traditional means.

Though many students prefer the traditional college experience, the flexibility of online courses coupled with the appeal of personalized learning establish them as an attractive learning solution. The 2003 Sloan Survey of Online Learning confirmed the existence of a significant demand for online courses, predicting that more than two million students will enroll in at least one online course during 2004. The Sloan Survey also revealed that 81% of all institutions of higher education currently offer at least one fully online or blended course, while a staggering 97% of public institutions offer at least one online or blended degree program. The current status of the incorporation of online courses into the curriculums of many respected institutions illustrates the public's desire for accessible education. Survey results reflect the success of online courses in that 67% of institutions cited online courses as critical in their long-term strategies. This mounting interest in online courses ensures a future for online courses and stimulates the quest for a preeminent design for courseware.

Online courses were formerly deemed questionable as to the quality of the education and whether online degrees were earned through the same merit as classroom-earned degrees. Online degrees were also regarded with caution due to the existence of diploma mills—companies that operate under a fraudulent university name and manufacture diplomas for a fee with no class work or effort required. However, the surge in popularity of online courses prompted a slew of distinguished universities such as Cornell and Stanford to integrate online courses into their curriculums. Now, most online degree programs are recognized by legitimate accreditation boards and employers regard online degrees from accredited universities without suspicion. This acceptance and subsequent expansion of online courses continues to motivate universities to improve their online curriculums.

Successful online courses rely heavily on the usability and effectiveness of a learning management system (LMS). This dependability of instructors on an LMS inspires fierce competition among educational software companies to release a paramount LMS. As a result, remarkable learning management systems continually enter the market. The expanding capabilities and effectiveness of these platforms entice increasing numbers of institutions of higher education to adopt online courses into their curriculums. The improvement of LMS invites more universities to offer e-learning options and thus generates a substantial demand for online courses and the further enhancement of LMS.



Standards

As the demand for online courses and degree programs intensifies, so will the pressure for an exemplary learning management system. Instructors of online courses seek systems based on participation, interaction, communication and structure. Most LMS platforms feature explicit content management capabilities for ease of use by instructors and are tailored to meet the needs of each course. Communication tools such as journals and announcement boards adorn most LMS platforms; some even tout a built-in Instant Messenger option. Since the efficacy of online courses is dependent upon the arrangement of an LMS platform, it is essential that the LMS provide an extremely structured course that promotes time-management for the hectic lifestyles of the students.

The most sought-after LMS features are that of usability and simplicity. As online courses are taught entirely via the internet sans the physical aid of an instructor, courses must be easy to navigate and understand. It is also essential that course management tools for instructors include detailed instructions and help documents must be constantly accessible for both instructors and students. These features are typical of LMS platforms; however it is features such as design and the ability to establish an online 'personality' that distinguishes one LMS platform from another.

In the midst of a congested marketplace teeming with seemingly identical products, WebCT and BlackBoard stand out as the most frequently adopted LMS platforms for online courses. WebCT and BlackBoard are comprised of a variety of impressive features. These inventive platforms exhibit real-time chat capabilities, whiteboards that support mathematical symbols and PowerPoint Presentations, and customized look-and-feel opportunities. The education potential of these platforms is vast; however, WebCT and BlackBoard have their limits. Though CD-ROMs can serve as supplemental learning material to the content found in the LMS, most forms of dynamic, integrated learning tools such as e-books and e-workbooks do not yet appear to have a presence in WebCT and BlackBoard. Interactive and multimedia elements are essential in an online learning environment, as students do not have the physical presence or lectures of an instructor to retain attention.

WebCT and Blackboard set further limitations on learning through the absence of an effective mechanism for guided learning. Without an easily navigable format, students often become lost or confused and may abandon assignments out of frustration. During the first few weeks of an online course, students tend to inundate instructors with emails inquiring, "Where am I?" and "What do I do next?" in reference to WebCT and Blackboard. A confusing design and difficult navigation inhibit the learning process. While WebCT and BlackBoard are robust in terms of content management and interactive tools, they are deficient in producing simple, easy-to-navigate fully-online courses.



Why XplanaCourse?

In a market saturated with virtually indistinguishable LMS platforms, XplanaCourse shines as an unequivocal panacea for online courses. Xplana Learning presents a learning management system that combines functionality, creativity and a sense of community to form an unmatched online educational environment. An interactive platform complemented by multimedia features invites participation while other LMS contain limited interaction. XplanaCourse extends beyond the parameters set by other LMS platforms and takes e-learning to the next level.

While other LMS platforms lack an easy-to-use format, XplanaCourse boasts a never-get-lost guarantee. XplanaCourse features innovative tools that ensure that the least tech savvy students will never question where they are or what to do next. A quick nav bar and toolbar heading allow for simple and speedy access to any aspect of the course, while an activities checklist tracks students' progress. The superior navigation and tracking functions exhibited in XplanaCourse steer students in the right direction in terms of both content location and personal productivity.

Through its numerous communication tools, XplanaCourse fosters a sense of community in an otherwise anonymous setting. As learning is often enhanced through collaborative efforts, communication among students and between student and instructor is vital to the learning process. Communication not only clarifies class-related questions, but open discussions of topics through message boards and group projects prompts deeper thinking. Communication among students, personal profiles, journal entries and avatars or pictures convey a student's personality and establish a comfortable learning environment. Communication tools diminish the distance gap and cultivate a sense of community among students located all over the country.

XplanaCourse showcases a premium design and unique functions that other LMS platforms lack. The most distinct feature of XplanaCourse is that of its unique structural design. All units, lessons and activities are broken into learning objects, which are stored in a Learning Object Repository (LOR). The LOR is easily searchable and learning objects are easily imported from the LOR to include in any course. Learning objects located in the LOR may be exported for integration with alternate LMS platforms such as BlackBoard and WebCT. This option of reusability within a learning management system illustrates the visionary design that defines XplanaCourse.



Other features include:

- **Navigation** XplanaCourse operates with the student's needs in mind. An easily navigable platform, XplanaCourse contains a toolbar located at the top of each page with links to various sections and features for smooth maneuvering throughout the course. A quick nav bar on the left side of the screen enables students to locate specific units, lessons and activities quickly from a drop-down menu.
- **Activity and Assessment Creation** Instructors can have activities created from pre-existing content or may author new activities using the eleven activity templates. Activities and assessments such as jumbled sentences, short answer and fill-in-the-blank reinforce learning objectives and test student comprehension.
- **Content Management** A customizable design equips instructors with the ability to edit or create content at any time. Instructors can modify content or activities, add resources and rearrange units or lessons with ease. Instructors also wield the authority to weight grades and designate whether or not an activity is graded.
- **Administrative Options** Extensive administrative options allow for the instructor to maintain maximum control over their course. Instructors can easily edit or add activities, access student or group journals and manage groups.
- **Resources** Instructors can include resources in the form of uploaded text documents, PowerPoint presentations and links to URLs. Additional resources enable students to pursue further investigation of topics of interest or provide helpful sources for projects.
- **Syllabus** The syllabus feature provides students with an overview of the sequence of units and assignments. The syllabus details class expectations, grading systems, and indicate necessary steps to succeed in the course.
- **Roster** The roster page of XplanaCourse displays a class list with email addresses, and links to public journals and profiles. Instructors possess the ability to access private profiles and journal entries, import and export rosters and email the entire class.
- **Grade-book** The grade-book allows students to view their grades in addition to the actual points earned out of possible points ratio. The grade-book tool allows instructors to view class grades, individual student grades and grades on specific assignments. Instructors also have the option to export grades or import grades from a .csv file.
- **E-mail** Email within a course functions as a means to communicate with group members, the instructor, or the entire class.
- **Groups** The ability to divide students into groups provides individuals with the opportunity to interact with their online peers. Instructors can delegate groups, let the computer auto-sort groups or allow students to select their own groups.
- **Journals** The journal tool serves as a forum for the expansion and application of ideas in a composition format. Journals encourage critical thinking and self-expression. Students may opt to permit all students, select "friends" in the class or just the instructor to access their journals.
- **Discussion Boards** Discussion boards encourage collaborative learning through the establishment of forums and themed discussion topics. The exchange of ideas creates a lively learning environment from which all students can benefit.
- **Calendar** The calendar is an invaluable tool for effective time-management and organization. With the calendar tool, students can create personalized calendars to keep track of assignments and due dates.



- **Import Capabilities** XplanaCourse's inventive design allows for the importation of text files, activities, course content and media files. Unique in its compatibility with other LMS, XplanaCourse includes the capability to import quizzes and structured content from WebCT and BlackBoard.
- **Export Capabilities** The Learning Object Repository (LOR) stores all learning objects such as activities, units and assignments. Any of these SCORM compliant learning objects export smoothly to other LMS platforms.
- **Integrated E-book and E-workbook** The flawless integration of the XplanaBook media book and XplanaWorkbook into XplanaCourse results in a comprehensive online course that enhances the learning experience.
- **XplanaVoice** XplanaVoice is a pioneering integrated tool that encourages voice-based communication through discussion boards and posts. Instructors can listen and respond to comments or leave messages for individuals in private mailboxes. This voice-based communication method further opens lines of communication and cultivates relationships among students.
- **Additional Integrated Learning Tools** The versatility of XplanaCourse encourages the addition of integrated learning tools to produce an unrivaled learning experience. XplanaPresentation provides the instructor with templated slides as guides for uncomplicated lecture or presentation creation. Integrated voiceover functionality permits instructors to record lectures or instruction. XplanaFolio is an organizational and personal management device that serves as a complete ePortfolio module.



Concluding Thoughts

Advancements in technology endow us with the means to educate virtually anyone who thirsts for knowledge. E-learning and online courses provide almost anyone with access to a computer the opportunity to learn, or even earn a degree. XplanaCourse facilitates learning by offering interactive and multimedia courseware that converts any space – from a person’s home to a bustling coffee shop-- into a virtual classroom. XplanaCourse eclipses the competition as an educational paradigm for the e-learning revolution.

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