

# The Three L's of an LMS

By Matthew Pittinsky, Ph.D. · **DRAFT** · Last Revised May 14, 2026

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The highlight of my 2026 ASU-GSV Summit was participating in a panel with D2L founder and CEO John Baker, moderated by analyst Phil Hill. The topic was the LMS at 30, looking back and looking ahead. My opening remarks summarized the arguments I made in *The LMS at 30: Part 2* that the LMS has not changed much in 30 years. It remains more of a *course* management system than a *learning* management system. Put a screenshot of an LMS from 1999 next to one from today and they look, feel, and taste very similar.

John disagreed. Well, first, he prefers "learning platform" over LMS. More to the point, he argued that D2L was never a CMS and the category has evolved a lot since the 1990s. I will leave it to those who have managed or used Canvas, D2L, Blackboard, and Moodle over the years to decide which of us is correct. The point is not our back-and-forth, but the question it forced me to think about in the face of pushback. If I am going to say the L in LMS is not yet deserved, I should be clear about what would earn the moniker.

At the risk of being cutesy, I think the answer is  $L + L + L == L$ . Three Ls must be realized: the product must be organized around the *Learner*, used for *Learning*, and be the system of record for what was *Learned*.

## Learner

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The first L reflects who the product is built around. Part of why the “course management” term stuck was because the focus of the product was making it easy for instructors to develop and manage their courses. Today’s LMS does have points of aggregation -- a dashboard, a calendar widget, a notifications pane -- but anyone who has watched a student use one knows where they spend their time: spelunking course by course. Each course is its own world. The application surface for the learner is narrow.

A learner-centered LMS reverses that. The home is her academic planner, not a series of course tiles. The application surface for the learner is wide: software that holds her program of study, surfaces what is due across every course, flags what is recoverable and what isn’t, tracks her trajectory toward whatever credential she is working toward.

Again drawing on *The LMS at 30 Part 2*, the capabilities of AI here are so compelling that I think we will likely see the organizing experience shift toward the learner soon. AI gives a learner application surface real material to work with. Pulled across all her courses at once, the platform can present a *supra-course* view of her week: which projects sit on the critical path, where the workload is bunched, what to do first, which two assignments combine into one study session, which classmate is working on the same problem set tonight.

On the panel I gave a personal example. I cannot reliably tell what my high schooler has due in a given week. Some of it is in

the LMS, some in the SIS gradebook, some in a linked Google Doc, some buried in long teacher emails. And the LMS only knows about the work a teacher remembered to enter -- a deadline that lives in a linked Doc or an email is invisible to the system. The native learner-level tools in today's LMS are brittle in that way: if the teacher didn't add it, the LMS doesn't know.

Solving this with today's rapidly improving software affordances is not too much to ask before we embrace the L.

## Learning

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The second L is what the product is for. Today's LMS is for managing coursework -- distributing assignments, collecting them, recording grades, holding content, hosting discussion. The pedagogical work, the moves that help a student learn, happens through the links out of the LMS -- into courseware and specialized applications -- or outside the digital environment altogether. The term I hear most often is that the LMS is a "container." Assessment and discussion boards are the notable exceptions.

A learning-centered LMS supports pedagogical work through the delivery system itself. As I argued in *The LMS as Platform in the AI Era*:

*"Pedagogical design elements that previously were designed, 'printed,' and shipped -- e.g., level-appropriate explanations, summaries, simulations -- will increasingly be produced on demand by the LMS, drawing on the*

*corpus of the course as raw material rather than as a finished pedagogical artifact.”*

On the panel I called this the Hogwarts Book of Magical Study Aids -- what a student should be able to ask for from inside the LMS: flashcards from tomorrow's reading. A practice quiz on the chapter — or just on the half of it that didn't make sense. A spoken summary of the lecture she missed. A worked example of the problem she is stuck on, done the way her professor does it. (Please don't sue me, J. K. Rowling.) The LMS can ground these capabilities in the course's syllabus, its readings, and its rubric, aligned with the instructor's approach.

## Learned

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The third L is what the product tracks, reports, and activates. An LMS today is a system of record for the course -- enrollments, grades, assignments, content -- but not for what was learned. The organs of a record of learning are present: the syllabus states objectives, the curriculum-management system maps courses to program outcomes and programs to institutional outcomes, assessments in the course map on paper to one or more of those objectives. What is missing is the circulatory system -- the flow that carries evidence from a specific assignment up through the objective it tests, up to the program and institutional accreditation processes, and out into the learner's credentials. Without it, claims about learning rest on indirect approximations and correlations.

A *learned*-centered LMS makes that circulation a byproduct of ordinary coursework, not a parallel reporting burden on faculty. Think of it as putting broccoli in a smoothie: the vegetables go down with the strawberries, no separate plate required.

Take the Research Methods course, SOC 391, I taught when on the faculty at Arizona State University. The syllabus listed five objectives — compare research methods, reason about ethics, interpret findings, use basic statistics, write in APA format — and the signature assignment was a Method Critique Paper: a review of an empirical article, a critique of its method, and a review of two subsequent studies citing it. The alignment between objectives and assignment lived on paper. I knew which sections tested which objectives; the LMS did not. At the end of the semester it recorded a grade on the paper, the institution recorded that I taught the course, and the accreditor saw a syllabus. Whether students actually learned to critique a research method was inferred, not measured.

A learned-centered LMS closes that loop inside the workflow. When I draft the assignment, the platform reads the syllabus, proposes that the critique section maps to “compare research methods” and “interpret findings,” suggests rubric criteria — identification of the design, recognition of threats to validity, plausibility of alternatives — and I confirm or adjust with a click. When a student submits, the rubric scores each criterion and the objective-level signal accumulates underneath the letter grade. The student gets a paper back; the program gets evidence; the institution gets a record; nobody filled out a separate form. And when that same student writes a literature review in a 400-level seminar two semesters later, the platform

already knows where she was strong and where she was shaky, and threads the right scaffolding into the direct Learning capabilities alongside the general course experience.

## **What Earns the L**

So, an LMS is still a CMS when the product is built around the course, when learning happens outside the platform, and when what is left at the end of the semester is enrollment and a letter grade. When does it earn the L? When the product is built around the learner, when learning happens through the platform, and when what is left is a record of what was learned.

To be clear, while each of these shifts is impactful on its own, the true category transformation comes from joining all three.

And this isn't about AI per se. The LMS could and should have evolved through the cloud and mobile platform shifts. That said, AI's capabilities map so directly to the three Ls, in such compelling ways, that it will be the driver of true category change.

I should close by saying that John and I, panel theatrics aside, believe in the same destination. And whether we call it a Learning Management System, a Learning Platform, or a Virtual Learning Environment — well, that's a question for another panel.

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