A Review of
Online Education and Learning Management Systems –
Global E-learning in a Scandinavian Perspective

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Review

Morten Flate Paulsen has many years of experience in distance- and online education. During the last 15-20 years he has actively contributed to the development of the online education field in Norway and abroad. Now he has assembled a collection of his experiences in the book "Online Education and Learning Management Systems". The book will be very useful for tutors, administrative staff and political authorities that focus on online education institutionally, regionally, or nationally.

The book mainly consists of a collection of articles that thematically are organized in four parts. In addition, Paulsen has vitalized the content with intertwining anecdotes providing a personal flavor and illustrating examples of the theoretical discussions. In addition, the book has hundreds of useful literature references and links to relevant web-pages that supplement the material presented in the book. This is highly useful information for people who want to study the field of online education. Some of the material contained in the book is also published online (www.studymentor.com), including multimedia presentations, digitized audio and e-book content developed for PDAs.

In the following paragraphs, the four parts of the book are briefly referred to:

In Part One, “Online Education, Teaching and Learning”, the book presents basic concepts, techniques, and theoretical views that should provide a basic understanding of the multifaceted online education field. The entire first chapter is dedicated to numerous meticulously formulated definitions of central concepts that help the reader understand the rest of the book.

The author continues by introducing four basic teaching methods used in online teaching. Briefly mentioned, these are: self-directed learning (one-online), individual learning (one-to-one), presentation for many students (one-to-many), and teaching in which everyone may contribute (many-to-many). A lot of examples and real life experiences with these methods are provided. Paulsen further presents the tutor’s/moderator’s various functions regarding online teaching. He discusses organizational, social, intellectual, and evaluational functions and provides valuable recommendations for these. He is also concerned about how one can reduce the online tutors’ workload and how assignments, assessment, grading etc. should be handled online.

Part Two, "Commercial and Self-developed LMS Systems" starts with an overview of the elements the author claims institutions must consider if they want to succeed with online education. The presented recommendations, primarily based on the results from the EU-funded projects Cisaer and Web-edu, should be read with interest by politicians and administrators in educational institutions and civil services. In the anecdote "Online Education Obituaries", Paulsen elucidates a number of unsuccessful online education ventures around the world. One should absolutely learn from these examples.

The remaining sections of Part Two, also based on the above-mentioned EU-projects, discuss characteristics, functionality and use of Learning Management Systems (LMS systems). In general, it is pointed out that LMS systems may be based on very different pedagogical methods and theories, which may reduce its usefulness. The survey also includes an overview of tools for content development and tutor and student support, as well as an evaluation of the quality of the administrative tools. The integration between LMS systems and other support systems, especially the student management systems, is also
evaluated. Further, the financial aspects of commercial and self-developed LMS systems are discussed. The analysis also provides some indications on which commercial European and American LMS systems that can be regarded as market leaders. Those systems are discussed in more detail.

Part Three, "Global E-learning in a Nordic Perspective" is concerned with Nordic cooperation in online teaching and the barriers against proliferation of Nordic cooperation. Among other things, Paulsen in this part reveals the results from a comparative analysis of online education support systems in Norway, Sweden and Australia. Here, he defines online education support systems as content creation tools, LMS systems, student management systems, and accounting systems. Not surprisingly, one conclusion is that the lack of integration between these systems represents a problem. Part Three further includes an article by Søren Nipper about the development of online education in Denmark and a corresponding Swedish analysis written by Carl Holmberg.

In Part Four, "Trends and Future Developments" the author in an anecdote presents some possible efforts that may be taken in order to make web-sites more accessible for students with disabilities. Except from this, accessibility is a minor theme in the book. The major focus in this part is the author's visions for online education in the future. Among other themes, he touches upon systems integration, the use of e-learning standards, the development of mobile equipment and the proliferation of improved infrastructure. Finally, based on the Web-edu survey, the author has compiled a comprehensive list of improvements that should be implemented in LMS systems.

The reviewer has read Morten Flate Paulsen’s book with great interest. In spite of my many years of involvement with related issues, I have found numerous new professional incentives and aha-experiences in the book. I will give it my best recommendations.