LMSs and LCMSs Demystified by Brandon-Hall

Learning management systems (LMS) and learning content management systems (LCMS) really have two very different functions. It's unfortunate that both have such similar names and a shared acronym, which only serves to confuse e-learning buyers even more.

The primary objective of a learning management system is to manage learners, keeping track of their progress and performance across all types of training activities. By contrast, a learning content management system manages content or learning objects that are served up to the right learner at the right time.

Understanding the difference can be very confusing because most of the LCMS systems also have built-in LMS functionality. In fact, 74 percent of the systems in our "LCMS 2004-2005 Report: Comparative Analysis of Enterprise Learning Content Management Systems" include LMS functionality as part of their system. Many of these LCMSs have also performed interoperability tests with leading LMS products.

Besides the embedded learning management system functionality, there can also be significant overlap between LCMS and LMS capabilities and purpose. The following chart is based on what we've observed by analyzing both LMS and LCMS products. While some products have functionality that crosses the boundaries, we found most systems generally focused on their own domain as follows:

	LMS	LCMS
Primary target users	Training managers, instructors, administrators	Content developers, instructional designers, project managers
Provides primary management of...	Learners	Learning content
Management of classroom, instructor-led training	Yes (but not always)	No
Performance reporting of training results	Primary focus	Secondary focus
Learner collaboration	Yes	Yes
Keeping learner profile data	Yes	No
Sharing learner data with an ERP system	Yes	No
Event scheduling	Yes	No
Competency mapping - skill gap analysis	Yes	Yes (in some cases)
Content creation capabilities	No	Yes
Organizing reusable content	No	Yes

Creation of test questions and test administration	Yes	Yes
Dynamic pre-testing and adaptive learning	No	Yes
Workflow tools to manage the content development process	No	Yes
Delivery of content by providing navigational controls and learner interface	No	Yes

More about LCMSs

A learning content management system is a multi-developer environment where developers can create, store, reuse, manage, and deliver learning content from a central object repository. An LCMS will generally have a majority of the following characteristics. You can use this checklist to determine if a software application could be called a learning content management system. The primary differentiator to determine if a product is an LCMS is if it offers reusability of learning content and is generally constructed using a learning object model.

LCMS Common Characteristics Checklist

- Based on a learning object model.
- Content is reusable across courses, curricula, or across the entire enterprise.
- Content is not tightly bound to a specific template and can be re-deployed in a variety of formats, such as e-learning, CD-ROM, print-based learning, Palm, EPSS, etc.
- Navigational controls are not hard coded at the content (or page) level.
- There is a complete separation of content and presentation logic.
- Content is stored in a central database repository.
- Content can be represented as XML or is stored as XML.
- Content can be tagged for advanced searches (at the media and the topic level).
- Pre-tests and post-tests can be automatically aggregated from test questions written for the primary instruction. In addition, the system can deliver the test and prescribe learning based on performance.
- The system manages the development process by providing some level of workflow tools to manage a multi-developer, team environment.
- Version controls and archiving capabilities to store previous versions of content.
- Advanced searching capabilities across all objects in the repository.
- Interoperability with third-party learning management systems.
- Includes a delivery engine for serving up content, automatically adapting to user or group profiles, adding navigation controls, collaboration tools, utilities, and look and feel (skins).