



Melissa's Non-LMS Toolkit

Introduction

While a learning management system (LMS) can be a useful tool to provide structure to an online program, I have not yet found an LMS that can also provide the flexibility needed to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. I believe that teachers need to be responsive to the needs and interests of their learners, finding ways to scaffold learning and encourage collaboration to support students as they construct meaning and develop skills through a range of independent and shared work. A non-LMS toolkit approach can provide the flexibility that LMSs are lacking, as individual tools can be exchanged as needed for something more suitable. Changing one tool in the non-LMS toolkit is also significantly less daunting of a task for a teacher than switching between learning managements systems, making it more feasible for teachers to adapt to changing technologies and needs over time.

Key Considerations

When choosing the tools that I would want in my non-LMS toolkit, I have two key considerations: 1) The tools need to work for the learners and enhance the learning, not be the primary focus of the learning; 2) The tools need to integrate well together and all parts need to be accessible from one main entry point.

In addition, in order to take the place of an LMS, the tools in my non-LMS toolkit need to meet the needs in the following key areas:

- Building community and inspiring discourse
- Provision of content, organization and interactivity
- Assessment as, for and of learning

I believe that the tools described below address each of these key areas and considerations, and in combination would create a non-LMS toolkit that is both flexible and manageable.

Community Building and Inspiring Discourse

Slack

What is it?

Slack is an online communication platform and collaboration app that can eliminate the need for email while allowing for greater collaboration as well as easier sharing of information and organization. Slack allows for 1:1 or small group discussion as well as large group chats focused around a particular topic or theme, and even voice or video calls.



Why I would use it:

I like that Slack is relatively easy to set up and use, and its use can grow as the students become more familiar with the system and its capabilities. It allows for teacher to all students, teacher to single student and student to student interaction and collaboration. Channels can be set up that are dedicated to specific topic. For example, an Announcements channel could be set up, a Book Recommendations channel, a Math channel, and so on. The channel itself works like a chat room in which users can send messages to the whole channel, to one specific user, or to a specified group of users.

The contents are searchable, making it possible to easily revisit key ideas. This use of channels allows for many people to be working together, but not necessarily on the same thing; there can be multiple projects going on at the same time in different channels. Direct messages in Slack can be used for private or group chat messaging. Slack also goes beyond messaging and can also be used a more of a central hub through which content and resources can be shared. Slack allows for file sharing by pinning files to a channel or chat. In addition, Slack includes app integration in which third-party apps, such as Google Docs, OneDrive, Zoom, Canva, and many others, can be added to Slack, eliminating the need to work in other windows outside of the Slack system. Users within an outside application may also be [directed to a specific channel](#) in Slack - potentially creating opportunities to create greater cohesion between the dashboard site and Slack).

Zoom

What is it?

Zoom is a video and audio conferencing platform that allows for 1 to 1 meetings as well as group meetings.



Why I would use it:

I believe that the use of video conferencing can go a long way to building online community and supporting the humanization of online courses through helping teachers and students see one another as real people and sharing ideas in a way that can feel less formal than written communications.

Zoom works well, which limits the potential for technical frustrations, and it is relatively simple to learn how to use the various features available such as placing participants into breakout rooms or screen sharing. It is also simple to make a recording of the Zoom session which can be easily saved and accessed online, or saved directly to a computer.

Content, Organization and Interactivity Tools

Dashboard

Google Sites

What is it?

Google Sites is a tool for creating simple custom websites through which content can be shared, without the need to have any programming skills.



Why I would use it:

Having a website as the dashboard, or home base, for a course provides an organizational structure that students are familiar with and that they are able to access and interact with from a variety of devices, especially given that Google Sites are responsive in nature. A major benefit of Google Sites is the ease of integration well with other GSuite components such as Drive and Calendar, simplifying the process for loading content into the website and creating greater cohesion between some of the other elements in this non-LMS toolkit. Images, video files and other media can also be embedded within the website created. There are design templates that can be used, further simplifying the creation process, and like other GSuite tools, Sites allows for collaboration, making it possible to create and edit a Google site together with another designated person in real time. The site can be published publicly or shared only with designated people.

Presentation and Processing Tools

[Google Docs, Slides and Sheets](#)

What are they?

Google Docs, Slides and Sheets are all components of the GSuite that can be accessed for free. They each provide a means for content creation whether it be in documents form, a slideshow, or a spreadsheet.



Why I would use them:

The fact that these tools are free goes a long way as all students will be able to access them. These tools also allow for teachers and students to create files that are easily shareable and that can be created and edited collaboratively. Docs, Slides and Sheets can also be worked on offline and synced when back online if set up with the Google Docs offline browser extension in Google Chrome, making this tools even more flexible in nature.

[Prezi, Slides, Canva, Powtoon](#)

What are they?

Slideshow, graphic design and simple video animation tools.



Why I would use them:

These free tools (some paid upgrades available) can be used to help present content and ideas to students in a way that is more visually appealing than text alone. Their use, in conjunction with the other presentation tools described below, would add some variety and interest for students. These are also tools that can be used by students as options to present their learning.

Possible Addition: [Vyond](#) Vyond can be used to create animated video content, including whiteboard animations. The learning curve is minimal and there are a variety of characters, backgrounds, props and templates available, making it flexible to use for a variety of purposes and topics. This is a paid tool and can be quite pricey if not being used a significant amount.



[Screencast-o-matic](#)

What is it?



Screencast-o-matic is a tool for creating and editing video, particularly screen captures. There is a free version available, however the paid version is a good value and provides access to more features that are very beneficial if using this as a main component of your content creation and presentation toolkit.

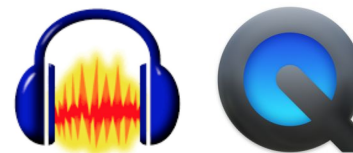
Why I would use it:

The simple video creation using your webcam to film yourself for introductions, announcements, or feedback allows for increased humanization of your online course, helping to develop an enhanced sense of teaching presence and personal connection. Also, if a picture is worth a thousand words, a video can potentially save you days worth of talking or writing. Screencasts can provide students and parents with a demonstration of how to do something, supporting their capacity to learn how to use new online tools or to navigate through assignments or course content. Screencast-o-matic itself provides a variety of editing tools, while not being overwhelming to learn or use. It works well for quick screen captures as well as those that you want to make more polished for presentation to a wider audience.

[Audacity, QuickTime Player](#)

What are they?

Audacity and QuickTime Player are both audio recording and editing software. In addition, QuickTime Player can also be used for simple video and screen recording and editing.



Why I would use them:

Both of these tools are free and quick and simple to use, making it easy to create audio recordings that can be shared with or by students for multiple purposes, including as podcasts. Audacity is a free, open source, cross-platform software, while QuickTime Player is also free, but only available on Apple devices. Audio recordings provide another means of communication, allowing for greater variety of options for presenting course content and student learning.

File Sharing Tools

[Google Drive](#)

What is it?

Google Drive is a web-based file storage and synchronization service.



Why I would use it:

As a web-based service, Google Drive allows for teachers, students and parents to access and share files from any device. The sharing process is easy within Google Drive, and the sharing settings make it possible for each user to choose the level of collaboration that they want to have with each folder or file. The storage capacity is sufficient, and as a GSuite component, this tool meshes well with many of the other tools selected in this toolkit.

Calendar

Google Calendar

What is it?

Another component of GSuite, Google Calendar is a web-based calendar application.



Why I would use it:

Google Calendar provides a simple way to schedule events. This application integrates very well with the other Google Suite applications, making it easy to embed into a Google site, to attach documents from Google Drive to an event, or to note the event location and have it integrate with Google Maps. Multiple calendars can be created for different courses or for personal and professional use, and the user can select which calendars to see at any given time with the events color coded. The calendar is easy to share with other users, who can then sync it to their own calendar if they are already set up with their own Google Calendar.

Assessment As, For and Of Learning Tools

ePortfolio, Reflection/Self-Evaluation and Feedback

FreshGrade

What is it?

FreshGrade is a digital portfolio and assessment platform.

Why I would use it:



FreshGrade supports an ongoing home-school connection where students can upload samples of learning using various media forms, reflections and self-assessments from home or school. The process of learning can be captured and shared along with the products. The teacher and parents can then provide the student with feedback on their learning, supporting the assessment as and for learning processes, while also being a means of assessment of learning when the finalized portfolio posts are evaluated against the learning outcomes, which can easily be connected to each post made. Teachers are also able to upload portfolio posts for students, and they are able to select the assessment mode used, such as numeric scores, mastery or anecdotal notes, making the system more adaptable for different grade levels and varying school methodologies. FreshGrade is a great fit for a blended learning or distance learning program, allowing teachers to engage with their students and parents on a flexible schedule. The FreshGrade platform can also be used by teachers to create, assign and grade activities, with the assessment data captured within the associated gradebook features, giving this the potential to be used as more of a class hub if desired. The core features are free, with paid upgrades available.

Possible Alternative: [Seesaw](#) In many ways Seesaw is similar to FreshGrade, providing a platform for digital portfolios to support assessment as, or and for learning, while also allowing for activities to be created for students to work on within the system. Overall, Seesaw seems more suited for the elementary grade levels.



Gradebook

Google Sheets

What is it?

Google Sheets, a component of GSuite, is a free web-based spreadsheet program.

Why I would use it:

Finding a gradebook that is highly customizable and can be used to account for assessment data that is gathered through a variety of means, such as a digital portfolio, online assignment submissions, paper or other physical assignment submissions, and teacher observations during face to face contact is challenging! In a blended learning environment like the one in which I work, there is no one size fits all system. I do not find overall percentages and scores on separate assignments to be the most important assessment data at the elementary grade levels. I prefer to assess using a 4 point scale to represent student progress towards given learning outcomes. The achievement towards a given outcome will often change as the year progresses, so there needs to be room to easily revise the mark based on new evidence. I also need to be able to personalize the gradebook somewhat for different students by adding, removing or changing entries based upon individual learning plans. A spreadsheet such as Google Sheets allows me to keep the assessment data for all of my students in one place while also providing the flexibility that I am looking for.

