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The LMS: an open or shut case

The US is experiencing a lack of faith in LMS vendors, and open source software is making inroads. Ken Chad discusses its percolation into the UK

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'...we're seeing the seeds of a new revolution being sewn [sic]. As the goal of some companies becomes once more attuned to trimming costs... libraries and their users suffer. In some cases, cost savings are being generated for the company by consolidating products... When this happens, it is short-term profit that is the objective rather than serving the long-term mission of libraries. These companies have become unresponsive to the collective goals of our profession and, like so much of our society these days, are no longer focused on the "we" but the "me". It is a sad state of affairs and one that will not be tolerated'¹

**'These companies have become unresponsive to the collective goals of our profession'.
Carl Grant. CARE-affilites**

This bitter indictment of library management system vendors comes from Carl Grant, ex COO of VTLS who has now set up a company, CARE Affiliates, to serve libraries with a new vision based on open source. Is open source the solution to a market that has failed libraries? First we need to look at the wider picture.

The new information economy and non-market production

In his book *The Wealth of Networks*,² Yochai Benkler, Professor at Yale Law School, argues that new internet-driven technologies have fundamentally changed the information environment. He claims a paradigm shift from the 'Industrial Information Economy' to a new 'Networked Information Economy'. One of the aspects of this new economy is the rise of a new mode of production, which he calls 'social production'. While this exists



alongside the traditional market economy it is non-market production. Enabled by cheap computing and fast pervasive networks, people are giving their time individually or in collaboration with others to produce goods for free. Benkler makes extraordinarily bold claims: 'It is the feasibility of producing information, knowledge and culture through social, rather than market and proprietary relations – through co-operative peer production – that creates the opportunities for greater autonomous action, a more critical culture, a more discursively engaged and better informed republic, and perhaps a more equitable global community.'

Is open source the solution to a market that has failed libraries?

In Benkler's view open source is '...the quintessential instance of peer production'. Open source software is freely distributed with the right to modify the code and on the condition that redistribution is not restricted. The emphasis on a collaborative and open effort is the key and is more important than the fact that the software itself may be free. Open source is not some quirky small-scale movement but is a major global force. The Linux operating system and Apache web server software have a large market share. Many library Opacs

1 'A symphony out of tune: when companies go deaf'. Carl Grant. Care Affiliates blog. 4 July 2007. www.care-affiliates.com/thoughts/archives/6

2 'The Wealth of Networks. How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom'. Yochai Benkler. Yale University Press, 2006. Free download: www.benkler.org

have an Apache web server behind them and several library systems run under Linux.

Open Source comes of age in the UK public sector

UK central and local government are being encouraged to look hard at open source solutions especially in the context of the increasing use of open standards and a better return on investment.³ A number of local authorities now use the Aplans open source content management system.

Open source has been even more

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successful in further and higher education. 'Last year saw the meteoric rise of an open source e-learning environment called Moodle... it is now the system of choice for 56 per cent of all FE institutions in the UK.'⁴ The founder of Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning

Environment), Martin Dougiamas, began development out of frustrations with WebCT, a commercial virtual learning environment, such as the inability to access source code to fix problems and the cost of the software. 'The thing about software is that production costs are zero after you've produced your first working copy,' he says. To '...charge a lot of money for a stream of bits seems ridiculous'.⁵ By 2006 the Jisc-funded open source software advisory service OSS Watch felt that open source software had come of age,⁶ although it presented a real challenge to Invitation to Tender (ITT), the usual public sector procurement procedure. 'Procurement processes have to change. When you choose a procurement process you have [in effect] automatically chosen whether you are going to do open source or whether you are going to do commercial.'

Open source for libraries

So will the success of open source percolate down to the library sector? It appears open source is now a viable solution for the LMS. Evergreen⁷ and Koha⁸ have been selected by a number of significant libraries in the US and elsewhere but, as far as I'm aware, not yet in the UK. Is it because the UK library sector is too wedded to the ITT-based procurement process that effectively excludes open source? Is it because it does not share the same disillusionment with its LMS vendors as its US peers? Are the LMS vendors simply doing a much better job in the UK?

It appears open source is now a viable solution for the LMS.



- 3 'Open Source Software. Use within UK Government'. Cabinet Office. E-Government Unit, October 2004. www.govtalk.gov.uk/documents/oss_policy_version2.pdf
- 4 'Moodle tackles e-learning.' Cath Everett. ZD-NET Website 15 February 2007. <http://resources.zdnet.co.uk/articles/features/0,1000002000,39285941,00.htm>
- 5 ZD-NET 15 February 2007 op. cit.
- 6 'Crossing the Chasm: open source software comes of age'. A report from the OSS Watch Conference. *Open Source and Sustainability*, held at the Said Business School, Oxford, 10-12th April 2006, by Paul Anderson. www.oss-watch.ac.uk/resources/sustainability06.xml
- 7 www.open-ils.org
- 8 www.koha.org

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Works with organisations such as government, local authorities, schools, colleges and universities, to help make better use of their technology to realise the full potential of their library and information function.

Phrases like 'Web 2.0' (and even now 'Web 3.0'), the 'semantic web' and 'Library 2.0' have become common currency. Innovative business models driven by new, web based technologies have profoundly and permanently changed the way many users interact with the increasingly global world of information. Google and Amazon have redefined the way we search for information and acquire books, digital content and other resources. Libraries in all organizations face stiff competition but have huge potential to deliver new services more effectively and efficiently. Libraries already have significant IT investments that can almost certainly be operated better. In addition, there is a new generation of technologies to be exploited.

Why we do it

We are committed to libraries and want to contribute to their success. We believe the library function is often seriously undervalued. A library can, not only play a larger role in the communities it serves, but also contribute more to meeting the strategic goals of its parent organisation.

Why use Ken Chad Consulting?

Few organisations have the expertise or capacity to get to grips with the library automation industry as well as the complex and strategic nature of the wider information industry and the Web.



We provide the additional capacity and expertise to enable service improvement and efficiencies to be gained more quickly and at lower cost. Unlike generic consulting companies we have in-depth experience and understanding of the library and information sector. We combine that with a detailed, strategic and business understanding of the related technologies. These assets mean we can work with you to transform your library and information services whilst at the same time enabling you to deliver major efficiencies.

How we can help

Virtually all libraries can use IT more effectively and imaginatively. We are well placed to help. We have an unrivalled combination of practical experience in libraries and their parent organisations, together with a sound understanding of information technology and business. Naturally organisations have their own goals and agendas so we work flexibly, adapting to your requirements.

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