

Open Source LMSs Facts and Insight

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One of the areas that always gain interest and usage are open source systems, that is to say, free open source code (some are not), to which any organization, company, educational setting, government and so forth can build their own system (often noted as home-grown) and do what they wish with it.

The usual arguments for building your own, includes you own 100% of it, scalability without the incurring cost (i.e. user seat costs), it's free, and is configurable in such a way that connecting with any 3rd party tool or system is doable.

Exploring those specific arguments will be presented shortly, but in order to gain an understanding of "open source", there are a few key items that many folks are unaware of, or ignore.

Sites that Point to Open Source Systems

I was surprised at the number of directories, sites noting open source "free" systems, blog posts and so on, that listed what they viewed as "free systems" tied around open source. It can get a bit confusing, because many of them slide a "free system" that is commercial, with open source free systems and see them as one in the same.

They are not.

For example, Talent LMS listed on many of these sites, is noted as free. Well, for five seats it is. Anything else is fee-based. Then there is Dokeos, which doesn't offer anything free. At one time it was open source free, but those days are long gone, as in more than two years.

Docebo is on some of these sites noting "free" with open source mentioned. Docebo did at one time, offer free open source, but that was nearly a decade ago, and it hasn't been such a way, in uh, like a decade ago. It is all fee-based.

Moodle Alternatives according to some sites

Type in Moodle Alternatives on a search engine, and a slew of sites pop up. One that is likely to catch an eye is "Capterra".

The problem with the listing is that for folks seeking an alternative to Moodle, they are likely to think that every system on the list is a)Open Source - as Moodle is, b)100% Free

Here is a sampling of those vendors on the ("Alternative to Moodle)

- iSpring Learn - Not open source, and started out as an authoring tool (still core business), which has an LMS. It is also fee-based
- Qooper - Fee based. A clue is it notes "Pricing" on its web site - oh and not open source
- Brightspace by D2L - 100% fee-based and not open source.
- Absorb LMS - 100% fee-based. Not open source
- Accord LMS - 100% fee-based, not open source
- Inquisiq - 100% fee-based, not open source
- Talent LMS - You get five seats for free, everything else is fee-based. Never was open source. Now, eFront was once open source (owned by the same company as Talent LMS, and their first product), but is fee-based too.

On the first page, not one system is open-source today, and unless five seats will suffice - which is free, then uh, the rest isn't.

Solutions Suggest is the first site that appears, when you search for Moodle Alternatives on "Duck Duck Go Search Engine".

I should note that the site generates revenue when you click the links, which should be mentioned somewhere, good news it isn't.

It does note Moodle as free, but jumps quickly into Moodle Cloud- fee based. And yes, saying Moodle alternatives and then listing Moodle itself first, is weird.

Let's take a look at the "Free" Systems (there is no mention of Open Source)

- Google Classroom - This is not an LMS. I mean can you spin it as a learning system sure. But to say it is a true alternative to Moodle is like saying, Blue Button is a true alternative to Zoom.
- Canvas (Instructure) - Yes a free account and free trial. Then that ends and if you want it, you pay. Oh they note "free" with a "free API" - which most learning systems have their own "Open Rest API" which is free for you to use.
- Docebo - Fee-based
- Bridge - Fee-based

- MindFlash - Fee-based, and frankly, yuck.
- SAP Litmos - Fee-based.
- Absorb LMS - Hello again! Fee-based
- Edmodo - Limited free, the “Enterprise” version is fee-based, and BTW, I’ve never seen EdTech use the words “Enterprise” before, which is a corporate term.
- Coassemble - Fee-based
- Schoology - Fee-based

And so on.

Caroline, shows up on some “Free Open Source”, well it is all fee-based today. Totara Learn is another one. Today it is fee-based, but yes, you can find an older versions that are free, because those versions were built on Moodle. New version of Totara Learn, Engage and the talent development whatever thing, fee-based.

Bonus - One commercial vendor, Paradiso, presents “Open Source LMS, “Best Open Source LMS”, you can find this doozy on any search engine. But, there is no listing of any open source systems, whatsoever, just the word “open source” with a link to it, to ensure that folks typing in “open source lms” will see the page, which then covers the Paradiso system, not free, not open source.

Why the Confusion around Open Source?

Some of these sites which note open source free, will take you to places such as SoundForge or git.hub.

The issue there is that the code is usually outdated (unless there is an active community, presented below), and thus, sure you can download and use it, but in some cases, the ‘open source’ freebie is now fee-based, Dokeos and Caroline are two perfect examples.

But that doesn’t stop folks from downloading the free code. Caroline for example, on SoundForge had 37 downloads this week, even though the last update (On SoundForge) for the listing is 2015, but for the actual code is 2014 (for stable).

Dokeos’s listing updated in 2018. The code? 2011.

Searching for Open Source Systems - Pick the ones with an “Active Community”

If you go open source, then you must be sure to select one where there is an active community of developers and gurus of the system itself. This is not the same as “Active users”, because an active end-user isn’t going to creating components built on code. Active users are end-users, students, learners, not the ones designated as an “active community”.

Moodle’s success is partly due to a very active community of developers and gurus who build new features for everyone who uses Moodle to select and share. It also due to service providers who can customize Moodle, for a fee.

If a system doesn’t have an active community, you can still take the code and use it, but good luck finding the latest components or modules to add to the the system, and any bugs you find in 2021, are yours to enjoy forever, because non-active means zero support.

If you want some NexGen features with an inactive community, you build it yourself with some other code, because you won’t find it in a system, that isn’t active.

Open Source Learning Systems with an active community

Every system presented below has three important pieces

- Open Source, 100% free code
- Active Community
- Support - varies, some have tutorials, manuals, community form, knowledge base (I will list those that offer it)

Due to Moodle’s dominance the list of all of the above is ten. That’s it. Ten. Moodle by far is the most widely used system worldwide, it was built for EdTech (k-12, higher education), and this is its biggest audience. Today, there is Moodle Workplace, which is their corporate version - focused on that side of the market, and yes you could use it for EdTech, but why?

Moodle leverages service providers, these are vendors who will customize Moodle for you, for a fee, or offer their version of Moodle, already tweaked, upgraded, etc. for you, also for a fee. If you go this route, the best one in the market is [OpenLMS](#).

[Moodle](#) - The most active community in the open source community, has it all. Biggest player in the open source space. Site has manuals, tutorials, documents, etc. - You can also find plenty of other Moodle fan sites with tutorials, etc. Usually better than what Moodle’s site lists.

[Sakai](#) - Code updates, ignore the marketing hype that is plastered all over its site. Legit competitor to Moodle, in other words, a very good alternative. Totally for EdTech.

[ILIAS](#) - Another legit competitor to Moodle. EdTech all the way. [Support page](#) - features manuals, user guides, online help.

[OpenOlat](#) - Be forewarned the site is in German, but by using a translate extension, it can switch to your preferred language. Scroll down the page (way down) to see some examples others have done. EdTech focused, can do corporate. [OpenOlat Academy](#) - this is their support page, with tutorials, manuals, etc.

[Forma LMS](#) - Corporate focused. Support can be found on the main page and consists of articles, documentation, forum.

[Opigno](#) - Built on Drupal. If you use their LMS consulting, it is not free. The system itself is. Legit competitor to Moodle. Add-ons come from the Drupal community, so yes, e-commerce exists. EdTech and Corporate. [Support](#) - Active forum, use the search function to find additional items.

[Open edX](#) - Once the darling of “Moodle Alternatives”, now? Not so much. Anyway, has a hard-core fan base. The self-managed version is free, the full-managed one is not. This is for the self-managed one. Want answers to everything OpenedX? [Open edX](#) community.

[Chamilo](#) - It exists. Not really UI/UX friendly. Support comes in the form of a [forum](#) - one for U.S., one for Global.

[ELMSLN](#) - ELMS Learning Network. EdTech focused. Has xAPI for those curious, and yes, some of the above do as well. Support page consists of tutorials, documentation, guides, and community. Can be found on the main page.

Where is Joomla and Drupal and WordPress?

I didn't list any of them, but yes, you can use WordPress for your learning system, just as you can for Joomla, Dupal, Dot Net Nuke and others. Each though is really a content management system, and most people use for them as such, especially in WordPress, blogs, biz web sites, and so on. The group above are specifically for learning and only for learning. Big difference.

Two noted of “inactive communities” with Open Source systems

- ATutor 2.2.4 release noted as “New Release” - in 2018. Four requests for fixes in 2019. ATutor’s first release by the way, was in 2001. So for you “traditional” LMS folks, aha!
- Manhali - Last update of code, 2013.

Pros and Cons of Open Source Systems

I’ve written in the past about the pluses and minuses of open source systems, which includes the idea that free is very misleading. Here though is the latest.

Cons

Yes, code is free, but if you are going to tweak that code, add enhancements, configuration, and so forth, unless you work for free, you are a resource which is fee-based. If you want AI i.e. machine learning, that is not free. You need to find a 3rd party provider who does it, and can integrate with your system. Let’s say down the road, CMI-5 takes off, now, unless your community has it, you have to find a way to build it.

Want to integrate with another LMS or learning system, such as Blackboard? Not a problem, but if there is any integration issues with that Open Rest API, there is a fee to solve that. Other commercial systems nowadays can integrate with many open source systems, but always check first. And be aware, that if you have other APIs you want with that integration, there is a fee for that.

If you do not have servers in-house, and thus need to host your system in the cloud, that is fee-based, and depending on what you need, size wise - GBs, or capabilities, the fees can vary, so it isn’t one price fits all. Have servers on site? Unless they were built with cardboard that you found in a dumpster, they cost money to buy, install, and maintain. I mean even cardboard isn’t free anymore. Have you seen those U-Haul prices?

Want a custom domain? Fee-based. Some commercial systems, give you one for free.

End-users have issues or problems, and your admin can’t solve them? You will need a help desk, and technical support that resolve those issues. Those folks have to get paid. And they have to know the system inside and out, even those latest features that may not exist in your community and which you added to your system. Plus any of those configurations, integrations and tie-ins to say a SIS for EdTech, or an Association platform for associations, or HRIS, ERP for Corporate.

You need to make sure you do your updates and maintenance too. Sure, you can get updated code, but you will need to tweak it because you have already configured and tweaked your system to the way you want it.

Adding 3rd party content from off-the shelf providers isn't free, so for those who want the LXP angle, without paying for any content, then TED, YouTube and similar is pretty much the only route to go. Actually, feel free to use MOOCs, which are about as interactive as a pencil.

Thus if you want the LXP angle, you will need playlists and that 3rd party content.

Need an authoring tool? Unless the system includes one, you need to find one, and while there are a few freebies out there, they are limited in what you can do. So that is a fee. And for folks who say, well I use PowerPoint, the last time I looked, uh, this morning, it isn't free. You pay for it, via your Office 365 subscription or directly if that is all you have.

Yes, Google docs and slides are free. So, there is a cost savings there. But unless every one of your faculty knows how to use them, I surmise many at home, have Office365, have fun with that. Good thing the computer lab (on-site) is staffed, and no one is coming in. BTW, feel free to use them as your help desk, I'm sure the head of the lab, will thank you for it, every day.

Pros

- The code is 100% Free - Yours to own and do what you want with it
- If active community - Add-ons, components, etc. available to download and use, and free (although some sites or developers ask for donations, and honestly, you should give them a few bucks, after all they are saving you from doing it yourself)
- Scalability - No costs to you for number of end-users. Want 50,000? Costs you nothing, well, to have them and have them use the system to access content, etc. On a commercial system it does.
- You host where you want to host. Behind your own firewall, with servers on-site, or in the cloud your choice. Some commercial vendors still support on-site, many are just going cloud. If you go cloud, AWS is the best choice.
- OER - Open Educational Resources exist and there are plenty to choose from, which you can add to your system. Granted, you can do this with a commercial system too, but most folks use OER with an open source learning systems. As with anything, quality is all over the board.
- Integrations to other free open source connections - yes, free.

- Skin it and Logo it - You can do this with commercial, and most vendors include this in the setup fee, but, you can do it yourself in Open Source Learning System for free.
- Total control - Some people feel helpless in a commercial system, saying I can't personalize it (you can, depends on the system), so with 100% total control, you do whatever you want. Although I admit, I haven't seen Call of Duty in a system yet. Nor Minecraft.