

## ALT-C 2004 Research Paper Format Template

Authors: P. A. Danaher \*  
Jo Luck \*  
David Jones #  
Jeanne McConachie \*

Address for correspondence: \* Division of Teaching and Learning Services,  
Central Queensland University,  
Rockhampton, 4702, Queensland, Australia  
([p.danaher@cqu.edu.au](mailto:p.danaher@cqu.edu.au))  
([j.luck@cqu.edu.au](mailto:j.luck@cqu.edu.au))  
([j.mcconachie@cqu.edu.au](mailto:j.mcconachie@cqu.edu.au))  
# Faculty of Informatics and Communication,  
Central Queensland University,  
Rockhampton, 4702, Queensland, Australia  
([d.jones@cqu.edu.au](mailto:d.jones@cqu.edu.au))

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# Course management systems: Innovation versus managerialism

## Abstract

*This paper examines the introduction of Blackboard as the designated course management system at Central Queensland University, Australia. The authors use the results of a focus group with a course team using Blackboard as the basis for a set of propositions about, and criteria for assessing the effectiveness of, course management systems. The authors draw on Bourdieu's (1977, 1990, 1993) notions of autonomous and heteronomous forces and the habitus to frame their argument about the most likely means of navigating between the blue skies of innovation and the pragmatism of managerialism in relation to learning technologies in contemporary Australian universities.*

## Introduction

It might be presumed that universities are predicated on the blue skies of innovation, if innovation is understood to be the construction of new knowledge that lies at the heart of scholarship. Yet in contemporary universities innovation has to 'do battle' with the pragmatism of a powerful set of counter forces that reflect increasing government reach into, accompanied by reduced proportional government funding of, higher education institutions. These counter forces, which include the commodification of knowledge, the massification of higher education provision and the marketisation of university programs, entail a growing degree of managerialism, with academics and students subjected to heightened measurement and surveillance in a bid to assure quality and enhance efficiency.

These discursive tensions between innovation and managerialism – or between blue skies and pragmatism – are encapsulated in the policies and practices around course management systems at Central Queensland University, an Australian regional university. Course management systems are software packages that provide Web-based tools, services and resources to support the teaching and learning process for both online and blended delivery. Yet analysis of a focus group with three representative stakeholders in February 2004 reveals that this support is seen by some as cumbersome and stifling of creativity and divergent thinking, while for others the systems provide a minimum standard of provision that is necessary to support and extend individuals' engagements with learning technologies.

This analysis is used as the foundation for a set of propositions by the authors about the ways most likely to enable a path to be steered between innovation and managerialism in the context of a regional university's course management systems, and a parallel set of criteria for evaluating the effects and the effectiveness of such systems. These propositions and criteria are clustered around the issues of negotiating links between blue skies and pragmatism that ensure public accountability at the same time as facilitating necessary inventiveness in the development and deployment of learning technologies.

The paper consists of three sections:

- A brief overview of the contextual framework within which Australian universities operate and learning technologies and course management systems are enacted;

An account of the aforementioned focus group, involving the authors and an academic, a librarian and a multimedia producer discussing a distance education course that has recently been attached to a course management system;

The authors' reflection on the focus group as a springboard for their own propositions and criteria that they consider are most likely to make the course management system an effective negotiation (and possibly a compromise) between innovation and managerialism, particularly in relation to organisational, strategic and management issues.

The conceptual framework informing the paper is taken from the ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1993). In particular, the contextual analysis is informed by Bourdieu's useful distinction between autonomous and heteronomous forces within specific fields, while the notion of the habitus is central to the authors' analysis of the focus group and their reflections on that interview.

### **Contextual framework**

In most Western countries, formal educational institutions, including universities, are subject to ongoing pressures to 'do more with less', and to demonstrate that they are doing so. The conjunction of late capitalism, economic rationalism and corporate managerialism has positioned universities as having to steer uneasily between the state and the market (Danaher, Gale and Erben, 2000). One specific manifestation of this conjunction has been the phenomenon of 'steering from a distance' (Marceau, 1993) – that is, of governments providing less public funding of universities while insisting on increasing levels of accountability and compliance.

Accompanying – and fuelling – these policy shifts are sociocultural changes that are having a profound influence on Australian universities. According to Brendan Nelson, the current Australian Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, "globalization, massification of higher education, a revolution in communications and the need for lifelong learning leave Australian universities nowhere to hide from the winds of change" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 3). An associated phenomenon is the commodification of knowledge, whereby the extension of the market into the higher education field has transformed learners into 'clients' or 'customers' and universities into 'service providers' (Willans, Harreveld and Danaher, 2003).

The ideas of Bourdieu (1993; see also Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002) are helpful in placing these fundamental changes to Australian universities in a theoretical perspective. As Danaher, Coombes, Simpson, Harreveld and Danaher (2002) have noted:

For Bourdieu fields such as education are structured around positions that are taken up, accorded value and made subject to the play of various tensions. One of the principal tensions that concerns Bourdieu is that between autonomous forces (those that emerge within the field itself) and heteronomous forces (those that emerge from beyond the field and seek to transform the way in which it conducts itself). Within the field of education, this tension manifests itself in the vision of a traditional education creating a cultivated individual instilled with sophisticated intellectual dispositions that certain academic agents seek to defend against what they see as the heteronomous threat of a market-driven education sector in which students are called customers and the principle of 'user pays' and maximising private revenue are configured as priorities. (p. 14)

The significance of Bourdieu's contrast between autonomous and heteronomous forces for this paper lies in the potential association between autonomous forces and blue skies or innovation on the one hand and heteronomous forces and pragmatism or managerialism on the other. There is a need for caution here: Bourdieu (and others) would warn against any construction of 'the golden age' of universities being besmirched by 'the grubby hands' of economics and politics. Similarly, there are clearly elements of pragmatism in autonomous forces (such as a feeling by some academics that what and how they have previously taught will sustain them for the remainder of their careers), while innovation can figure prominently in the heteronomous forces (for example, the potentially positive influences of online technology on fields such as distance education). Nevertheless there is likely value in conceptualising the blue skies of innovation as being to some extent diluted and even threatened by the pragmatic necessity of engaging with such truisms of contemporary Australian universities as reduced public funding and increased government surveillance.

This conceptual framework also helps to explain the enactment of learning technologies, including course management systems, in Australian universities. The 'intrusion' of the heteronomous forces of commercialisation and outsourcing has meant that course management systems can be likened to products being marketed and sold competitively by vendors. As we noted in a previous paper (Luck, Jones, McConachie and Danaher, 2004), course management systems are software systems that are specifically designed and marketed to educational institutions to support teaching and learning and that generally provide tools for communication, student assessment, presentation of study material and organisation of student activities. Course management systems form the academic system equivalent of enterprise resource planning systems in terms of pedagogical impact and institutional resource consumption (Morgan, 2003). An enterprise system, by its very nature, will impose its own logic on a company's strategy, structure and culture and will push a company towards generic processes even when customised processes may be a source of competitive advantage (Davenport, 1998). The implementation of enterprise systems therefore often reflects a conscious or unconscious move towards standardisation (Morgan, 2003).

This paper is part of a broader research project investigating the selection in 2003 and the implementation in 2004 and beyond of Blackboard as Central Queensland University's preferred or designated course management system. Other papers have examined the influence of subcultures on the likely take-up of Blackboard (Luck, Jones, McConachie and Danaher, 2004; this paper reported on the findings of an online survey in the second half of 2003 with 91 respondents from the university) and Blackboard's likely effectiveness in facilitating the university's engagement with the contemporary drivers of change confronting distance, flexible and open learning in Australia (McConachie, Danaher, Luck and Jones, in preparation). Our interest here lies in analysing the introduction of Blackboard in terms of the tensions between the autonomous forces of blue skies and innovation and the heteronomous forces of pragmatism and managerialism. We conduct this analysis firstly in relation to the account by three colleagues of their perceptions of using Blackboard and secondly with regard to our reflections on the implications of that account.

### **Focus group**

On 27 February 2004, three of the authors carried out an extended focus group with three colleagues about their use of Blackboard in redeveloping a course entitled "Language for Learning" at Central Queensland University. The three colleagues have

brought to the process different roles and responsibilities: the academic was the then course and program coordinator; at the time of the interview, the librarian provided liaison with the academic's faculty and was responsible for helping to promote the information literacy of students in that faculty; and the multimedia producer supports academics in developing the online components of courses. These three individuals also brought to the course and to the discussion intersecting and sometimes varied assumptions and attitudes about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and about the potential utility of learning technologies in promoting learning in multiple environments. They were selected on the basis of encapsulating in their respective roles the multiple responsibilities and interests framing the university's development of its course management systems. Focus group questions were widely ranging and included the history of the course and its development using Blackboard, role-specific perceptions and observations about innovation versus pragmatism in course design.

The course's history was noteworthy in the context of the discussion. "Language for Learning" is a common foundation course in a suite of programs designed for people with a variety of vocational experiences to become high school teachers and/or to work in the vocational education and training sector. While some of these students have highly developed literacies (such as having worked in the information technology industry), many of them lack formal and recent academic literacy skills. At the same time, all students in the programs have some kind of industry or vocational experience, and the course is designed to build on and value that experience while providing focused and formal literacy education.

The course began in 2000 as a distance or external course (all students in the aforementioned programs are distance or external students, attending a compulsory residential school at the beginning of their enrolment), with a print-based course profile, study guide and resource materials being supplemented by teletutorials conducted by the course coordinator (the academic participating in the discussion). In 2002 the librarian collaborated with the academic to develop an online module that would acquaint students with informational literacy skills crucial to succeeding in subsequent courses in the programs. In 2003 the academic and the librarian placed the online module within WebCT, which at that time was the course management system favoured by the university. Subsequently the university changed from WebCT to Blackboard, with the result that the academic and the librarian, in concert with the multimedia producer who also participated in the focus group, identified the best features and components of the WebCT module and used them as a basis to design the Blackboard module. Autumn Term 2004 saw students in the course using Blackboard for the first time.

The other relevant contextual point to note is that in Spring/Summer Term 2003/2004 the three colleagues were involved in conducting a final year course in the same programs, "Adult Literacy and Numeracy at Work", using Blackboard, with a course enrolment of about 35 students. This involvement provided them with direct experience of operating discussion lists and other educational tools in the Blackboard environment, which was intended to be useful to them in using Blackboard to present "Language for Learning" in Autumn Term 2004.

The focus group canvassed several issues relevant to the tension between blue skies and innovation on the one hand and pragmatism and managerialism on the other. At the same time, as we found with subcultures (Luck, Jones, McConachie and Danaher, 2004), there was no definitive or fixed dividing line in the participants' perceptions of Blackboard's strengths and limitations, so that in some cases the course team members had contradictory views of certain elements of Blackboard, reflecting their different

roles and/or their individual experiential frameworks. These commonalities and divergences were demonstrated in the four issues canvassed in the interview that have been selected for analysis here:

- Technical features
- Educational capabilities
- Administrative requirements
- Training opportunities.

### Technical features

The team members identified particular technical features of Blackboard as implemented in “Language for Learning” as being worthy of comment. For example, files appear as pdf files on students’ computers and the students require an Adobe Acrobat reader to be able to read these files. This requires the students to install the Adobe Acrobat reader software onto their computers before they could read any pdf files. This generated discussion about access issues, with students needing to have access to computers connected to the Internet at a particular modem speed, which is easier for some students than for others to arrange. The participants generally felt that Blackboard is more ‘user friendly’ and ‘intuitive’ to use, and that it uploads more easily, for both students and staff members than they had found WebCT to be. On the other hand, they lamented the fact that announcements do not appear on the discussion lists in date order, which means that centrally authored messages about system upgrades that had been posted early in the term were more prominent and easier to locate than course-specific messages sent by the course team as the term progressed, reflecting a design feature that had not been considered from the perspectives of students or teaching staff members.

An interesting segment of the discussion centred on standardisation versus innovation. One participant expressed concern that, as it is used at Central Queensland University, Blackboard lacks a common template. By this she meant that multimedia producers and/or lecturers do not work from an accepted, university-wide list of navigational tools, with the result that students have to learn the unique combination of navigational tools of each course that uses Blackboard. She felt that one possible future innovation was to develop an html page as an overlay on top of Blackboard that could underpin all courses using Blackboard. Additionally or alternatively, she advocated that no disabling of Blackboard tools take place, in order to ensure a common ‘look and feel’ across Blackboard courses. For her, innovation lies in the multiple possible ways of achieving an outcome within a standardised format. Another participant dissented from this view, arguing instead that in “Language for Learning” certain tools should be disabled in order not to distract students who in most cases were encountering online learning for the first time. Her view was that innovation consists of redesigning the format to suit the particular circumstances and requirements of students in a specific course. For example, she was disappointed that Blackboard appeared not to allow her to make direct links between particular features, although she conceded that the inability to do so might derive from a lack of knowledge of Blackboard rather than its not enabling such links to be made.

### Educational capabilities

To some extent, discursive tensions around Blackboard’s educational capabilities were encapsulated in the debate about whether Blackboard is more appropriately called a ‘course management system’ or a ‘learning management system’. The former approach

suggests that Blackboard is ‘merely’ a set of technical tools; the latter implies that Blackboard has some capacity for directly enhancing or inhibiting innovative teaching and learning. Although at least one participant preferred the term ‘learning management system’, the participants noted that Blackboard had no explicit curriculum focus, and that one had to be adopted from the previous version of “Language for Learning”.

The participants were unanimous in agreeing that the most pedagogically innovative component of Blackboard in “Language for Learning” is the Discussion Board, with its facility for setting up and monitoring specific tutorial topics via its ‘thread’ tracking. These topic specific tutorials have been carefully designed to promote students’ information literacy skills, by requiring them to locate, analyse and evaluate information online. They constitute both formative and summative elements of the course’s assessment, something that was not attempted in the print-based version of the information literacy module of the course. Reflecting the participants’ shared interest in multiliteracies, the Discussion Board and the Email Discussion lists require students consciously to learn and to practise the etiquette, decoding and encoding, and meaning making associated with participating in such lists. All three course team members felt that using Blackboard for the information literacy module is “much more interactive” than the previous, print-based version, and that the online environment is the most effective for promoting information literacy.

### Administrative requirements

The participants in the interview noted a couple of administrative requirements that significantly constrained their using Blackboard as innovatively as they would have liked. One of these requirements was that the print-based components of the course have a relatively long lead time in production, which meant that there was a potential lack of symmetry between the print and online components: the latter could to some extent provide updated information but it could not differ too markedly from the print material, which had to be prepared months earlier.

Another administrative requirement that the participants felt inhibited innovation was that even minor changes to course assessment had to be approved at faculty level and noted at university level months before those changes could be implemented. This prevented the early introduction of assessment changes designed to take advantage of the interactive learning environment made possible by Blackboard. While some might see this administrative requirement as a necessary quality control of a key dimension of a course, the participants felt that it was a pragmatic necessity that restricted their initial capacity to be as innovative in implementing Blackboard as they would have liked.

### Training opportunities

The training opportunities needed to engage proactively with the potential innovativeness of Blackboard need to be seen in the context of ongoing work intensification in Australian universities. This work intensification is partly and directly attributable to the shifts in university funding and governance noted above. In the case of the participants, they had varied capacities to take part in the ‘frontloaded’ training provided (that is, such training took place before staff members were directly using Blackboard as a course management system for courses with which they were involved). They concurred that they learned far more from working with one another, and from making contact with individuals with the required knowledge as problems arose. Similarly, the multimedia producer stated that she learned a great deal from being enrolled in the discussion lists simultaneously as a staff member and as a student; this gave her an experiential and qualitative insight into students’ likely reactions to the

technology. It was felt that it is not easy for institutions to provide opportunities for this kind of ‘just-in-time’, ‘on-the-job’ training, but that such training is the most likely to be effective.

More broadly, the participants noted that what they called the “after sales service” was probably even more indispensable to Blackboard’s effectiveness as a potential innovation. That is, the ‘make or break’ time often occurs after initial training has been made available, at crucial times during the teaching of a course. There was a recognition that this is expensive in terms of costs, and that course management systems do not make online teaching and learning quicker, cheaper or easier than face to face education. Nevertheless, such costs have to be factored into funding for the implementation of such systems, or else they will not be used effectively, if at all.

### **Propositions and criteria**

In reflecting on and analysing the focus group, and in using it as a springboard for our own observations about the blue skies and pragmatic dimensions of Blackboard as a course management system, we have drawn on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) concept of the habitus to frame our thinking. We take up the explanation of the habitus provided by Coombes, Danaher and Danaher (2000):

The habitus is Bourdieu’s way of grasping the operations of subjectivity....[T]he habitus emphasises the way in which these mediating forces [between individual agency and institutional forces, structural relations or biological drives] are worked through in the durable dispositions of the subject. The habitus is oriented to the moment....The habitus is also anticipatory rather than deterministic; that is, it anticipates the moves available to a person based upon his or her position within a cultural field.

The habitus should be understood as both individual and collective....Hence the habitus is never complete, and is always in the process of being transformed. The habitus, then, is related to the subject’s movement across, and positions within, the cultural field that s/he encounters – movements and positions that are largely shaped by the distribution of forms of capital or social value. (p. 10)

In relation to the three course team members whose comments have been reported above, the habitus provides a useful means of analysing their comments in terms of their individual and shared habitus – that is, the reflections of their subjectivities as mediated by their perceptions of what makes up the external world. We see, for example, the librarian’s focus on information literacy as the core to students’ success in other and later courses. We see also the academic’s concern for her students operating in a domain that many of them are likely to find initially intimidating, even alienating. We see as well the multimedia producer’s views of what is technically innovative deriving from her own experiences as an online learner and also from her being a member of a community of design team members, with particular specialist knowledge held in common.

At the same time, the habitus enables us to discern shifts in the participants’ thinking and in their respective and joint negotiations of the cultural fields in which they operate, based on the interview and also on our knowledge of the three individuals concerned. For example, the academic has overseen a radical redevelopment of the course since she first offered it in 2000. Her scepticism about claims made on behalf of technologies has sat beside her determination to provide the best possible learning environment for her students, which in this case has entailed engaging actively with one such technology.



Similarly, the multimedia producer has brought to her work in this course her developing interest in online teaching and learning as promoting ‘authenticity’ and ‘interaction’, while recognising that such phenomena are not automatic features of any educational environment, whether face-to-face or electronic. The librarian has carried with her in her work in the course her constantly updated knowledge of developments in the information literacy field, and of strategies that her colleagues and she have elaborated of acquainting undergraduate students with those developments. In other words, just as in the interview the participants situated the course “Language for Learning” within ongoing negotiations between innovation and managerialism, so their individual and shared habitus framed their own negotiations between blue skies and pragmatism in the context of both the course and the interview.

Likewise the authors of this paper. That is, our respective and joint habitus informs the propositions about course management systems to which we now turn, and which are focused on elaborating some possible criteria for navigating a path between innovation and managerialism. As with the participants, our habitus contains both individual and collective elements, and it is anticipatory rather than deterministic. Accordingly our propositions and criteria (one of each provided by each author, and clustered around organisational, strategic and management issues) are offered in the spirit of dialogue with other practitioners and researchers, rather than as a definitive set of principles.

Firstly, one of the authors is particularly concerned with the potential for formal educational provision to be – sometimes simultaneously – transformative and marginalising for different groups of learners. Therefore our first proposition is **that course management systems must make a substantive difference in the educational experiences of learners, rather than being merely an administrative convenience or an attempt to save money.** This means, for example, that policies that require all distance education materials to be placed online and/or on compact discs need to be accompanied by a demonstration that doing so will ‘add value’ to learners’ experiences and will not reduce access to some learners. The criterion accompanying this proposition is that of *equity*: that is, that a course management system must be able to provide high quality learning experiences for different kinds of learners without causing particular difficulties or disadvantages for any of them. This criterion is more readily linked with innovation, which thrives on difference and diversity, than with managerialism, which generally seeks to elide ambiguities and to standardise individuals and experiences.

Secondly, one of the authors is concerned with the social and technical aspects of the design, implementation and use of educational technologies such as Blackboard. Actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987) acknowledges the importance of studying the associations among actors in the network rather than the actors themselves. In other words, studying how the people and the technology interact and negotiate with one another within the network produces a better understanding of the ways in which educational technological innovations are selected and utilised within an organisation. For Blackboard to exist at Central Queensland University, it had to have human allies on the decision making body that chose it as the university-supported course management system for the university. For Blackboard to survive as the university-supported course management system, it needs to have allies in the management and academic areas of the university. Therefore our second proposition is **that course management systems need to be able to support managers in their desires to provide a mechanism to deliver curriculum materials to a diverse and dispersed population of students within a limited budget, as well as to assist academic staff who desire to provide innovative ways to engage in the teaching and learning of**

**their students.** The criterion for this proposition is the course management system's *capability to create and maintain allies* within the managerial and academic areas of the university. This will mean that the course management system must be able to adapt in order to provide the services that academics need, as well as remaining economically viable.

Thirdly, one of the authors is interested in how improved understanding of the online learning context – especially that based on the notion of a continual refining and merging of the shared habitus encapsulated within online learning – can be best harnessed to generate more effective and efficient approaches to the design and support of course management systems and online learning. Therefore our third proposition is **that course management systems and the supporting organisational policies and structures should be able to support and enhance ongoing and shared constructions of innovation, rather than enact a pragmatic set of existing practices or follow a single conceptualization of what is innovative.** Software based systems, such as course management systems, represent a set of cultural patterns frozen for now into a reproducible and constraining form (Clear, 2002). Application areas that have low volatility in requirements make it possible for stable, precisely designed systems – the outcome of traditional development methodologies – to operate satisfactorily with minimal changes for long periods (Truex, Baskerville and Klein, 1999). The criterion for this proposition is the *capability of the course management system and the supporting organisation to adapt itself and themselves* in response to an ongoing process of shared requirements negotiated within the local institution.

Fourthly, one of the authors is concerned with the potential articulations and tensions between enterprise systems and subcultures and how those articulations and tensions might influence the effectiveness or otherwise of Blackboard as Central Queensland University's course management system. Enterprise systems are “packages of computer applications that support many, even most, aspects of a company's information needs (McConachie, 2001, p. 194), of which course management systems can be considered one particular type, while subcultures are composed by smaller elements within an institution such as occupational roles and membership of a specific faculty or division (Luck, Jones, McConachie and Danaher, 2004). When subcultures are powerful and they resist using the officially supported course management system (whether because they prefer another system or because they prefer to use no system), the outcome does not augur well for the widespread take-up of the university-supported system. Because beliefs are located within the habitus of subcultures, the differing values within the subcultures make it difficult for the university to make policies to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of Blackboard. Therefore our fourth proposition is **that course management systems need to have the knowledgeable and enthusiastic support of as many different subcultures as possible** (in addition to having the aforementioned powerful allies). The criterion accompanying this proposition is that of *utility*: that is, that course management systems need to fulfil the multiple and complex requirements of most if not all of the subcultures who have some involvement in, and ownership of, the teaching and learning activities to which the systems contribute.

## **Conclusion**

Interestingly the participants in the focus group reported here, and the authors of this paper, display far less of the tendency to technological determinism than was demonstrated by the participants in a focus group with four experienced distance educators at Central Queensland University in 1994 (Danaher, Bartlett and Rowan,

1995). There are several possible reasons for this difference, including that the distance educators were familiar with technology as a dominant discourse in the field of distance education, that the interview was located in a research project about technologies and that it took place in a setting that was highly technologised (a television studio) (pp. 60-61). Nevertheless, in that interview “It is possible to detect an opposition between an accepted need to make use of technology to diminish distance and an equal (but unrewarded) need to provide courses that were truly student-oriented” (p. 62).

We would argue that a similar opposition underlay the focus group reported in this paper: between deploying the innovative potential of Blackboard to maximise the meaningful educational experiences of students and labouring without much satisfaction or benefit against a technical and administrative apparatus that was more concerned with management than with education. For the three course team members, the jury is still ‘out’ on Blackboard: Autumn Term 2004 provided a further ‘test site’ for the students’ learning experiences with and outcomes from Blackboard. The lessons learned will undoubtedly be used by the team members to refine the course in 2005 and beyond; what is less clear is whether Central Queensland University has implemented Blackboard in ways that will allow users’ feedback to influence improvements in its design features for future students.

The authors’ propositions about course management systems, and their criteria for evaluating the effects and effectiveness of such systems, outlined in the previous section provide another set of markers for the ongoing struggle between innovation and managerialism in contemporary Australian universities. The research project on which this paper is based is concerned with ways to make Blackboard the most innovative and useful course management system possible, within the context of the financial and administrative constraints noted at the beginning of the paper. It remains to be seen whether this hoped for outcome will eventuate.

Finally, Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990, 1993) notions of autonomous and heteronomous forces and of the habitus have provided us with a rigorous set of conceptual resources for interrogating experiences of, and statements about, Blackboard. In the enduring tensions between blue skies and pragmatism attending learning technologies – not least in relation to organisational, strategic and management issues – such resources are likely to prove indispensable in the next decade and beyond.

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