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Research Article

FLEXIBLE STANDARDIZATION IN LMS TEMPLATE DESIGN: AN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN PERSPECTIVE ON BALANCING CONSISTENCY AND COURSE ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Learning Management System (LMS) templates provide shared structures for course navigation, accessibility, and assessment information, but uniform layouts can restrict pedagogically appropriate course organization. This paper develops flexible standardization as a theory-informed conceptual framework for LMS template governance, informed by instructional design practice within a small Northern Canadian postsecondary institution. It synthesizes structuration theory, scholarship on professional autonomy, and instructional systems design principles, alongside literature on template adoption and flexible institutional structures. Professional artifacts serve as reflective stimuli rather than formal research data. The framework distinguishes shared learner-support requirements from adaptable pedagogical implementations and treats components combining these functions as hybrid cases. An operational decision matrix and a formal consultation process guide instructional designers and instructors in separating stable access requirements from decisions about sequencing, activities, media, and assessment. The framework extends earlier work on required and adaptable template elements by connecting these distinctions to explicit decision responsibilities and review procedures. Its propositions require empirical investigation, and its applicability depends on local governance and support capacity. The intended institutional benefit is a transparent basis for maintaining reliable learner access and orientation while preserving pedagogical discretion across courses.

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1. Introduction

Learning Management Systems (LMS) support the organization of online and blended postsecondary education (Anderson, 2008; Garrison, 2011). Institutions use course templates to make essential information easier to locate and to support consistent course development.

The design problem is how much of a course should be standardized. A common route to assessment information may assist learners, while a mandatory weekly sequence may be unsuitable for a course organized around projects or thematic units.

This problem has particular relevance to the authors' work in a small Northern Canadian postsecondary institution serving geographically dispersed learners. Variable connectivity and limited immediate support can make clear course organization consequential. Instructors also need scope to adapt activities and pacing to disciplinary and local circumstances. Template decisions therefore involve institutional responsibility for learner access and instructors' responsibility for pedagogically coherent teaching.

Earlier research addresses required and adaptable template elements and faculty perceptions of flexibility within institutional structures (Huun & Hughes, 2014; Nehrbass et al., 2022). The problem addressed here is how to integrate these insights into an explicit governance procedure for distinguishing standardizable learner-support features from adaptable pedagogical features and resolving components that serve both functions. This paper proposes flexible standardization as an operational decision-making heuristic. It asks how LMS templates can preserve institutional consistency alongside pedagogical flexibility, and which features warrant standardization, adaptation, or shared decisions. Its contribution is a conceptual synthesis and a reviewable procedure, rather than evidence of improved learner outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Standardization and Learner Orientation

Research on LMS use identifies student, faculty, and institutional perspectives on digital learning infrastructure (Dahlstrom et al., 2014). Quality Matters (2023) provides a concrete design expectation through Specific Review Standard 1.1, which concerns instructions for beginning a course and locating its components. Consistent access points across courses are one possible institutional response to that expectation; the standard does not itself require identical cross-course layouts. This distinction separates the learner-support purpose of a standard from a particular implementation.

Cognitive load theory provides a rationale for reducing unnecessary effort in locating and interpreting learning materials (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2011). Multimedia learning scholarship also supports attention to how information is organized and presented (Clark & Mayer, 2016; Mayer, 2009). Applied to templates, these perspectives suggest that clear labels and reliable access routes may reduce avoidable navigational effort. They do not establish that template uniformity necessarily reduces measured cognitive load. Universal Design for Learning similarly directs attention to barriers and varied means of access and participation (CAST, 2024). Accessibility must extend to the content and activities placed within a template.

2.2 Pedagogical Design and Professional Autonomy

Course organization should reflect relationships among intended outcomes, learning activities, and assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Dick et al., 2015). Learning design scholarship describes teaching as design work involving reusable patterns and context-sensitive decisions (Bennett et al., 2017; Conole, 2013; Goodyear, 2005; Laurillard, 2012). Professional autonomy

provides a further rationale for preserving instructors' disciplinary judgment within shared institutional responsibilities (Freidson, 2001; Hoyle & John, 1995). A template that specifies every activity or sequence can narrow that judgment even when its original purpose is to improve usability.

Structuration theory offers a way to understand this relationship: rules and resources shape action, while their use can reproduce or change institutional structures (Giddens, 1984). Template conventions are sustained through course development and can be revised through negotiated adaptations. Loose coupling provides an adjacent organizational perspective on maintaining connections while allowing components to retain distinct identities (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976). These perspectives support examining how consistency and discretion are arranged, rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

2.3 Related Approaches and the Proposed Contribution

Huun and Hughes (2014) developed a template and accompanying matrix identifying required, adaptable, and additional elements in an online nursing program. Their work establishes a direct precedent for distinguishing consistent features from areas of faculty discretion. Nehrbass et al. (2022) examined faculty and administrator perceptions and described acceptance of structures perceived as beneficial alongside a need for flexible boundaries. Together, these studies show that the combination of structure and autonomy is already an established design concern.

Other approaches address complementary questions. The Community of Inquiry framework concerns teaching, social, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Personal learning environment and open learning network scholarship explores connections beyond institutionally bounded platforms (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Mott, 2010). These contributions inform learning design without providing the specific decision procedure developed here.

Flexible standardization synthesizes these streams into a heuristic linking a feature's learner-support function, its pedagogical function, and responsibility for decisions about it. It builds on existing template matrices by specifying how mixed functions can be separated, negotiated, documented, and reconsidered. The proposed contribution is therefore an explicit connection between design classification and instructional governance. It does not depend on a claim that flexible templates or shared design authority are new.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a theory-informed conceptual approach supported by practice-based reflection. It develops an interpretive framework rather than reporting an empirical evaluation or a formal institutional case study. Following Jaakkola's (2020) guidance on conceptual research, the analysis makes the roles of its selected perspectives explicit. Professional reflection provides context for the problem, consistent with Schön's (1983) account of professional knowledge, while the framework's justification rests on the coherence of the theoretical synthesis and its application to design decisions.

The literature is used selectively to connect usability, instructional alignment, professional discretion, and institutional structure. This is a conceptual synthesis, not a systematic literature review. The analysis moves from the consistency–flexibility problem to the functions served by template features, then uses hybrid cases to examine the limits of a simple structural–pedagogical distinction. The resulting matrix and consultation procedure are proposed tools requiring evaluation.

3.2 Institutional Context and Sources of Insight

The professional context is a small Northern Canadian postsecondary institution offering online, blended, and technology-enhanced in-person courses across geographically distributed communities. The authors' experience includes variations in connectivity, digital familiarity, and access to immediate support. These contextual observations explain the problem's practical importance; they are not measurements of the wider Northern learner population.

The reflection draws on course development and template implementation experience between February 2025 and February 2026 across more than ten courses, including weekly, unit-based, modular, and activity-centred designs. LMS course shells, template revisions, planning records, meeting notes, email-based design discussions, and course organization reviews served as reflective stimuli rather than formal data sources. They prompted recollection of design decisions but were not assembled into a research dataset, systematically coded, or used to establish frequencies or participant findings. No human participants were recruited, and no surveys, interviews, learner analytics, or identifiable learner data were collected for this paper.

Reflection involved considering recurring tensions in navigation, assessment visibility, sequencing, and requested adaptations. These recollections helped formulate and examine distinctions between shared access requirements and pedagogical implementations. The composite illustration in Section 4.4 explains that reasoning without representing an identifiable course or reporting an observed intervention effect.

3.3 Theoretical Synthesis and Positionality

Structuration theory explains how template rules enable and constrain design and how negotiated use can reshape those rules (Giddens, 1984). Scholarship on professional autonomy explains the importance of disciplinary judgment within institutional responsibilities (Freidson, 2001; Hoyle & John, 1995). Instructional systems design supplies a criterion for evaluating adaptations: their alignment with intended learning and coherent learning experiences (Dick et al., 2015). Cognitive load, inclusive design, and loose coupling inform the synthesis without constituting additional stages of the method. Together, these perspectives connect institutional expectations, professional discretion, and learner-facing design requirements.

The authors occupy insider roles in instructional design and teaching and learning leadership. These positions provide close engagement with template decisions but may privilege institutional and design perspectives. The second author's leadership perspective provides internal critical scrutiny, not independent validation. Faculty and student perspectives were not directly collected. Local technical limitations, workload, disciplinary practices, and individual preferences could also explain tensions encountered in template use. The framework

consequently offers a way to discuss decisions, not proof that governance arrangements caused those tensions.

The single Northern Canadian setting limits generalizability. Larger or differently governed institutions may have different faculty authority, support capacity, course-production arrangements, or consultation requirements. Transfer requires local adaptation and empirical investigation; neither statistical representativeness nor institution-wide effectiveness is claimed.

4. Results of the Conceptual Analysis

The conceptual synthesis yields the flexible standardization framework presented below. Its outputs are a distinction between shared learner-support requirements and adaptable pedagogical features, an operational decision matrix, and a consultation procedure for hybrid components. These are results of conceptual analysis; they do not represent measured effects or empirical validation.

4.1 Definition and Design Boundaries

Flexible standardization is an approach to LMS template governance that maintains shared learner-support requirements while allowing pedagogically justified variation in their implementation and in course design. The structural layer concerns dependable access, orientation, accessibility, and assessment transparency. The pedagogical layer concerns sequencing, activities, media, interaction, and assessment design. These layers describe functions rather than mutually exclusive lists of tools.

Consistency is required at the level necessary to protect the learner-support function. For example, an institution can maintain a recognizable assessment access point while allowing tasks to appear within thematic units. A stable access route does not require identical content organization. Conversely, an instructor's choice of media or activities remains subject to accessibility, curricular, and applicable institutional requirements. The distinction therefore identifies where discretion operates without treating flexibility as exemption from shared responsibilities.

4.2 Operational Decision Matrix

Table 1 translates the distinction into operational questions. Structural features warrant a shared requirement when variation would make essential information or support difficult to access. Pedagogical features warrant discretion when their design depends on learning outcomes or disciplinary practice. Hybrid components combine both functions and require explicit agreement about which features remain stable. The placements are starting points for local decisions, not universal classifications.

Table 1
Operational decision matrix for flexible standardization

LMS feature or component	Structural requirement	Pedagogical discretion	Hybrid application and shared decision
Essential navigation	Recognizable routes to course information and support.	Organization of content within those routes.	Agree how local content paths connect to common access points.
Accessibility	Accessible navigation, content, and interaction.	Accessible formats appropriate to the learning task.	Review proposed activities or media for access barriers.
Orientation and labels	Clear starting instructions, help routes, and meaningful labels.	Welcome content, examples, and presentation format.	Keep essential information clear while adapting the introduction.
Course organization and pacing	Visible sequence and relevant dates.	Weekly, thematic, modular, or project-based organization.	Agree how learners track progress through a varied sequence.
Media and learning activities	Accessible access and clear participation instructions.	Media, task design, and instructional strategy.	Agree alternatives where connectivity or access constrains participation.
Discussion forums	Consistent access and clear participation information.	Purpose, prompts, grouping, and facilitation.	Stable access point with flexible discussion design.
Assessment areas	Fixed assessment access point; clear dates, criteria, and submission route.	Tasks, rubrics, weighting, and feedback within program requirements.	Fixed access location with flexible rubrics and task design.
Collaborative activities	Clear access, roles, and participation arrangements.	Group tasks, membership, and assessment approach.	Common access instructions with flexible grouping and collaboration.

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis. Examples are illustrative and remain subject to applicable institutional and program requirements.

The matrix concerns requirements and implementation features separately. Orientation materials, for example, need to explain how to begin and obtain help, but the welcome message and presentation format can vary. Action-oriented labels such as "Read," "Discuss," and "Submit" can clarify expectations without becoming a compulsory sequence of activities. Assessment weighting and pacing remain adaptable only within approved curriculum and program requirements. Local constraints should be recorded where they alter the discretion illustrated in the table.

4.3 Formal Consultation for Hybrid Components

Hybrid elements require a formal consultation process between the instructional designer and instructor, guided by Table 1. Formal consultation means an explicit, recorded agreement within the existing course-development process. It need not create a separate committee or approval cycle for each routine design choice. The following procedure makes the boundary between shared requirements and adaptable features reviewable.

1. Identify the requirement. State what learners must be able to find, access, understand, or do, and identify any relevant institutional or program requirement.

2. Separate the features. Use the matrix to distinguish the shared access or information requirement from choices about instructional purpose, sequence, media, assessment, or interaction.
3. Compare implementations. Consider whether a proposed adaptation preserves access, accessibility, and clarity while improving pedagogical alignment. Discuss technical constraints and the work required to maintain it.
4. Agree and record. Document the stable features, permitted variation, pedagogical rationale, and responsibility for implementation. Refer unresolved policy or curriculum questions to the institution's designated authority rather than assuming that either participant can override them.
5. Revisit the decision. Review the agreement during course revision or when learner difficulties, accessibility barriers, or changed requirements indicate that it no longer serves its purpose.

Institutional governance should define shared requirements through appropriate academic, accessibility, and teaching and learning processes. Instructors and program areas retain design discretion within those requirements. Instructional designers help interpret both and document workable implementations. Learner feedback and usability checks can inform later review, although no such evaluation is reported here. Reusable agreements for recurring cases can reduce repeated consultation.

4.4 Composite Illustration

A composite illustration drawn from recurring professional design situations considers a course whose thematic units extend across several weeks. A template based on one topic per week would fragment the intended sequence of activities. The instructor and instructional designer identify two distinct requirements: learners need a dependable way to locate current work and assessments, while the instructional sequence needs to follow thematic development.

Using the matrix, they would retain a common assessment access point, clear submission information, and orientation instructions, while organizing content into thematic units. A schedule could map those units to relevant dates without making weeks the primary content structure. Their recorded rationale would explain how the thematic sequence serves the intended learning and how learners reach essential information. Later usability checks could test those access routes. This illustration demonstrates the proposed decision process; it does not establish that the design improved usability or learning.

4.5 Scope of Application

The framework is intended for institutions using common LMS templates across courses and retaining some instructor or program authority over design. Its application assumes access to instructional design support or an equivalent consultation function. Highly centralized course production, externally regulated programs, self-paced learning, and settings with limited staff support may require different allocations of authority. Shared requirements should also be revisable when they create barriers. Standardization is justified by its learner-support function, not by the persistence of an existing template convention.

5. Discussion

5.1 Implications for Instructional Design and Quality Assurance

The framework directs quality assurance towards whether learners can orient themselves, locate essential information, and access learning activities. It connects those questions to a record of why particular design features remain common or vary. A course organized by projects could satisfy the same access requirements as a weekly course. Quality review would examine the reliability of those routes and the coherence of the learning design rather than using visual sameness as a proxy for quality.

This approach extends the practical distinction between required and adaptable elements by making responsibility and reconsideration explicit. It also recognizes that learner needs and instructor discretion cannot always be allocated to separate components. The formal consultation procedure is most useful where both functions are present and the consequences of an adaptation require discussion. Its value remains a proposition to be tested, rather than an established advantage over existing template governance.

5.2 Northern and Distributed Contexts

In the institutional context informing this paper, reliable access to instructions and support is relevant to asynchronous study across dispersed locations. Flexible media and sequencing may help instructors respond to connectivity constraints and local learning activities. For example, access requirements can remain stable while the format of materials is adapted to available connectivity. These are context-sensitive design possibilities, not claims about all Northern institutions or learners. Local consultation remains necessary, and the authors' professional perspectives do not substitute for community or learner voices.

5.3 Risks and Limitations

Governance frameworks can become bureaucratic exercises that overshadow meaningful pedagogical development. Repeated classification debates, documentation requirements, and approval delays may consume the time that the framework is intended to protect. Institutions should integrate consultation into existing design meetings, document consequential decisions concisely, and reuse agreements where appropriate. Review should consider staff time and unnecessary approvals alongside learner access and instructor discretion.

The framework is conceptual and has not been empirically validated. Professional artifacts used as reflective stimuli cannot establish the prevalence of design problems or demonstrate effects. Learner experience also depends on teaching, digital familiarity, course content, support, workload, and connectivity. The structural–pedagogical distinction may be interpreted differently across disciplines, and consultation does not remove institutional power differences. Future research should examine classification disagreements, whose perspectives shape decisions, and whether negotiated implementations preserve accessibility in practice.

6. Conclusion

Flexible standardization offers a conceptual synthesis for governing LMS templates through shared learner-support requirements, adaptable pedagogical features, and formal

consultation for hybrid components. Its contribution lies in connecting these distinctions to an operational matrix, explicit responsibilities, and review procedures. The framework provides a basis for institutional discussion without claiming that one template architecture is effective across all contexts.

A specific empirical next step is a comparative usability study of course versions designed with and without explicit application of the structural–pedagogical distinction. Equivalent content and learner tasks could be used to compare time to locate assessments and support resources, navigation errors, and learner-reported orientation. Counterbalanced task order and attention to prior LMS familiarity would help limit alternative explanations. Instructor accounts of design discretion and consultation time would complement the usability measures. Such a study would test the proposed benefits without assuming effects on achievement or completion.

The intended shift is to treat the LMS template as a pedagogical scaffold that supports reliable learner orientation while allowing teaching to take different forms, rather than as a prescriptive blueprint for every course.

Artificial Intelligence Tool Disclosure

Generative AI tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic), were used in manuscript preparation for drafting and revision, structural editing, literature-search support, language refinement, and formatting review. These tools were not used to collect or analyze participant data. The authors retain responsibility for the manuscript's argument, factual accuracy, source interpretation, citations, originality, and final content.

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