

# Instructor Roles in Next Generation Digital Learning Environments

**Natalie B. Milman**

Next generation digital learning environments (NGDLEs) are what Brown, Dehoney, and Millichap (2015) described as the next phase of learning management system. They summarized their vision in a report, realized through a partnership with the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation and EDUCAUSE to “[explore] the gaps between current learning management tools and a digital learning environment that could meet the changing needs of higher education” (p. 1). In this next phase, Brown et al. explained that student learning will not be limited to the confines of the learning management system, but rather it will be part of a dynamic “ecosystem” and a “mindset” which “[consists] of learning tools and components that adhere to common standards” (“7 things” n.d., p. 1). This new learning environment will be less instructor-centric and more student-centered, and it will consist of the following “core functional dimensions”:

1. interoperability and integration;
2. personalization;
3. analytics, advising, and learning assessment;
4. collaboration;
5. accessibility and universal design (Brown et al., 2015, p. 4).

They emphasized that all five dimensions, as a whole, will be critical to reaching the full potential of NGDLEs.



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Yet while these dimensions are important, there is also a need to examine the role of instructors, not only in imagining NGDLEs, but also in thinking about how they will teach in them. Will it be enough, for example, even for outstanding instructors, to continue teaching how they have been in existing learning management systems successfully? What will instructors need to do differently? How will they need to change their practice? What types of professional development will they need to address diverse learner needs and to foster student success in NGDLEs?

There is no doubt that instructors should continue doing what they have been doing successfully to impact their students' learning. After all, although our understanding of how people learn has evolved (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000), and the practices instructors should employ have too, there are many theories, practices, and strategies that will likely remain critical to a flourishing and effective teaching-learning dynamic (e.g., andragogy, universal design, differentiated instruction, instructor engagement, learning community, student support systems, etc.). Moreover, there is considerable research supporting the importance of the role of the instructor in students' learning (e.g., Vayre & Vonthron, 2016). Therefore, while capitalizing on the strengths of their existing practice, instructors will also need to learn how to take full advantage of the affordances that NGDLEs may offer, in many cases resulting in adaptation of their practice. Their role as nimble, yet prudent "educational designers" (Kilbane & Milman, 2013, p. 32) will need to evolve through innovative experimentation and well-crafted professional development.

NGDLE instructors will need well-designed professional development to learn how to develop and cultivate their teaching practice to:

1. be involved stakeholders and decision-makers in the development, creation,

and implementation of NGDLEs (students should also be involved, as well);

2. reconceptualize their roles and mind-sets so they align with the conceptual and concrete features of NGDLEs;
3. design instruction that takes full advantage of the NGDLE's architecture, integration, data collection, and analysis tools;
4. play a key role in choosing the tools that best support and personalize students' learning;
5. determine how to engage students in meaningful collaboration; and
6. bolster their own knowledge and skills—akin to their own "technological pedagogical content knowledge" (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) of NGDLEs.

NGDLEs are a promising and exciting development for teaching and learning with technology and particularly online, no matter the educational environment (e.g., higher education, corporate, government, and K–12 settings). Although there are many challenges ahead, to reach fruition, as well as to imagine fully the possibilities, critical stakeholders such as instructors and students will need to be engaged in the development, implementation, and evaluation of NGDLEs. One important aspect will be reconceptualizing instructors' roles and their needs to realize fully the promise of NGDLEs.

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**NGDLES = NEXT GENERATION DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS = THE NEXT PHASE OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS.**

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