



Review of LearningBranch

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LearningBranch

Product Type: Learning Management System

Media Format: HTML5 Cloud-Based

Cost: \$3–\$20 per user; \$15–\$39 per commercial course

Developer: LearningBranch

Available from <https://www.learningbranch.com/>

Operating Systems: Windows 7+, Apple OSX 10+, Chrome OS, Android 5+, Linux, or iOS 11+



General Description

LearningBranch (LB) is a multifaceted multimedia learning management system that operates on multiple desktop and mobile platforms: Windows 7+, OSX 10+, Chrome, Linux, Android 5+, or IOS 11+. It is entirely HTML5 cloud-based. Although Firefox and Chrome are recommended, it runs on a number of other browsers. Its main components are Courses, Users, Groups, and Reports (see Figure 1). Courses is where lesson content is created, stored, and assigned. Users is the database of Administrators, Instructors, and Learners. Groups are the cohorts to which Users and Courses are assigned. Reports generates result summaries for record keeping purposes.

Course Name	Code	Status	Instructors	Groups	Last Edited	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication Skills for Health Unit Coordinators	CURRENT		Jack Burston, Androulla...	1	Feb 13 2019	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication Skills for Medical Office Assistants	CURRENT	DEMO	Jack Burston, Androulla...	2	Feb 13 2019	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication Skills for Occupational/Physical Therapist Assistants	2017 Version	DEMO	Jack Burston, Androulla...	1	Feb 13 2019	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication Skills Practice for Practical Nurses	CURRENT	DEMO	Jack Burston, Androulla...	2	Feb 13 2019	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> CUT Health Sciences	Demo	In Progress	Jack Burston	1	Feb 21 2019	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> French Pronunciation (les sons)			Jack Burston	1	Feb 21 2019	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> Orientation to LearningBranch			Jack Burston	2	Feb 22 2019	Track
<input type="checkbox"/> StephenB's US Accent Training IVAR Test				1	May 30 2018	Track

Figure 1. LB home page

Courses

The pedagogical resources used in LB can be either acquired ready-made from the LB online catalog or created by Instructors. Available courses are of two types: those for L2 English language and culture or

those that focus on communication skills in customer service, business, hospitality, or health care. The latter are all in English as well. Courses are available for individual student purchase and require an institutional subscription to access. Courses consist of Lessons that can contain Activities or Assessments. Lessons can be done in two ways:

- Regular lesson: Feedback and scores are visible. In automatically scored Activities, correct answers are shown after the third attempt.
- Lesson with feedback hidden: Correct answers and feedback are hidden. Scores are visible.

Activities

LB has four main types of asynchronous activities: SocioLearner, Worksheet, Writing, and Typing Speed. The latter is intended for corporate users, while the rest are intended to improve language and communication skills. Additionally, all the asynchronous activities can be used for a wide range of other educational purposes. All activities are automatically saved without the need to name, send, or store them anywhere.

SocioLearner activities are based on Learner audio recordings that can be accompanied by a written text, a graphics image, or a pre-recorded audio track. This allows for the creation of text-, graphics-, or audio-prompted Learner responses, listen-and-repeat exercises, record-and-compare exercises, or simultaneous interpretation, among other possibilities. SocioLearner activities are manually corrected by Instructors, a task facilitated by the option to speed up the playback and rewind by 5 seconds to replay a passage. In addition to grading submitted recordings, Instructors can also leave audio or text-based comments. Learners likewise can respond to Instructor feedback with their own written or audio recorded comments.



Figure 2. Worksheet activities

Worksheet activities consist of two types of resources: receptive displays and active language production (see [Figure 2](#)). Displays are used for giving instructions or prompts in the form of text, audio, image, or video. Active language production can take the form of audio recording or text input. Audio recordings can either be manually evaluated by the Instructor or scored by means of a proprietary automatic speech recognition (ASR) algorithm. The ASR works on the basis of a match between student audio input and the anticipated response which the lesson creator types in to guide the algorithm. Written input takes the form of single-answer, multiple-choice questions, multiple-choice checking, or blank-fill completion or cloze exercises.

The Writing activity is a simple text editor that is intended for open question responses. These, of course, need to be manually evaluated by Instructors.

Each Course offers a tracking option, where Instructors can check the results of Learner Activities. It is possible to view all Lessons and Activities or just selected ones. Six icons indicate the state of an Activity:

- an hourglass (i.e., an activity that has not yet been submitted),
- a pencil (i.e., a completed SocioLearner or Writing activity that has not yet been scored),
- a number (i.e., an activity that has been scored),
- a checkmark (i.e., a completed activity that is unscored),

- a mail icon (i.e., a SocioLearner or Writing activity where the Instructor has left a message),
- an open mail icon (i.e., a message that has been opened by the Learner), or
- a red dot (i.e., a message from a Learner that has been left for the Instructor).

Instructors can view actual Learner responses by clicking on a pencil or number icon for an Activity. This allows both correction and, in SocioLearner and Writing activities, feedback comments.

Assessments

Assessments can consist of any Activity or combination of Activities. Assessments allow control over when Learners can access Activities (i.e., date and time) and for how long (see [Figure 3](#)). There are three types of Assessments:

- In Normal assessments, Learners can open activities only once. They progress in sequence from item to item. Feedback and scores are hidden.
- In Self-directed assessments, Learners can open activities only once and then check their scores after the test, but feedback is hidden.
- In Free-navigation assessments, Learners can return to the activities and make multiple attempts. Feedback and scores are hidden.

Figure 3. Assessments

Users

There are three levels of LB users: Administrator, Instructor, and Learner. Administrators have full access to the system and are responsible for creating and maintaining the master Users lists. Instructor and Student roles are assigned in the master Users lists. This can be done either by typing in necessary information or importing it from an existing .CSV database files. Instructors can create Courses and access results. Learners can only access Course Lessons and their own results.

Groups

Creating a Group is a 2-step process. First, a Group is named. Then, it is populated with Learners and Instructors. Groups, which are limited to a maximum of 200 people, can be created for any purpose: course enrollments, class membership, tutorial sections, testing, and so forth. Instructors add Learners (or other Instructors) to a group by clicking on names in the master Users list. Provided that their names are already included in the master Users list, students may optionally be invited to self-register in a group.

Reports

The Reports component allows Lesson Activity summary results to be generated by Course and Group. The Report database can be sorted in alphabetical order by Course, Group, Lesson, or Learner (see [Figure 4](#)). Results can be further sorted by date of First Access or Last Access, percentage of Completion, Score, or Final Score. Reports can be viewed online or downloaded for local archiving.

The screenshot displays the 'Reports' interface. At the top, there are two dropdown menus: 'Courses' (set to 'French Pronunciation (les sons)') and 'Groups' (set to 'French Demo Group'). Below these are two buttons: 'Show results' (green) and 'Download results' (grey). The 'Result' section features a 'Detail results by' dropdown menu with options: Courses, Lessons, Groups, and Learners (selected). To its right is a 'Calculate' dropdown menu with options: First Access, Last Access, Completion, Score, and Final Score. Below the 'Detail results by' menu is another dropdown menu set to 'Learners'. At the bottom, there are two buttons: 'Show/hide grouping' and 'Reset sort'. Below these buttons is a row of sorting options: 'Learners', 'First Access', 'Last Access', 'Completion', 'Score', and 'Final Score'. The 'Learners' option is currently selected.

Figure 4. Reports

Evaluation

Technical Requirements

Being an entirely cloud-based platform, LB offers maximum accessibility for Learners and Instructors. The only infrastructure required is access to a broadband Internet connection and an up-to-date web browser. No applications need to be downloaded or maintained. Users automatically have access to the most recent version of the system. For anyone with limited, or non-existent, technical infrastructure support, the advantages of a cloud-based platform cannot be overestimated. As LB runs on mobile devices as well as desktop, notebook, or laptop computers, it is accessible virtually anywhere (i.e., in class, at home), without the need for language lab facilities. Even where local technological support is available, LB is likely to offer much more immediate attention to any infrastructure problems that might be encountered.

LB User documentation is available online in the form of a User's Guide for setting up an LB site as well as Recording Help and several Quick Tips that cover creating content, managing users, reviewing, scoring, and commenting. These are all well written, extensive, and good to have on hand, though operation of the system is quite transparent.

LB was tested on the following four devices using a wireless DSL 10 mbps connection:

- a Lenovo IdeaCentre B300 64-bit desktop with 4GB of RAM, running Windows 7 Home Premium and Chrome 72.0;
- a Doogee Valencia Y100 smartphone with 1 GB of RAM, running Android 5.1;
- a Leagoo KIICAA smartphone with 2 GB of RAM, running Android 7.0; and
- an Apple iPad (MGGT2J/A), running iOS 12.1.4.

LB operated on all devices with no crashes or error messages. Overall, performance on the desktop was excellent. Pages loaded quickly and audio and video files played straightaway. Audio recordings made in either Instructor or Learner mode were saved and ready for playback within about one second. Likewise, the automatic correction of Worksheet Activities was essentially instantaneous. Performance on the most recent mobile devices (i.e., Leago KIICAA, Apple iPad) was nearly as good as on the desktop, though screen touch response was slower and less sensitive than clicking on a computer screen. The older smartphone was noticeably slower. In sum, even users with older desktop systems should have no problems running LB. So, too, those with mobile devices less than one or two years old are likely to find the operation of LB more than satisfactory. Users with older mobile devices would need to upgrade their OS or equipment, or be very patient, to run LB. While mobile accessibility is a definite advantage for learners, it must be said that Writing Activities requiring the typing of more than a short sentence would be more easily undertaken on a computer with a bigger screen and physical keyboard. Likewise, for want of screen space and text-input limitations, Instructors are likely to find mobile access more suited to Activity grading, Assessment grading, and Course management than Lesson creation.

The one notable exception to the excellent performance of LB was the operation of its ASR system. According to LB, the algorithm was developed primarily for corporate users in customer service call centers and is intended to evaluate intelligibility rather than correctness per se. Scored Audio typically required 5–10 seconds for the ASR to analyze the input. This would be acceptable were the analysis accurate. However, while the ASR was able to detect non-native English pronunciation and deduct points for this, it frequently failed to recognize native speaker pronunciation and incorrectly gave less than full points for intelligibility. The use of Scored Audio could thus not be recommended as a language learning Activity.

Creation of Lessons and Tests

The creation of Lesson Activities and Assessments in LB could not be easier. Authoring pages are clearly laid out, and options are intuitive. There is also total flexibility in the type, number, and sequencing of Activities. They can easily be repositioned in a Lesson, copied, and deleted at will. It is also possible to copy or move Activities to other Lessons as well as to move or copy Lessons to other Courses. Courses, too, can be copied in their entirety for repurposing or simply for archiving purposes.

Activities support a full range of prompt types: text, image, video, and audio. With the notable exceptions of image labeling, drag-and-drop Activities, and video recording, the available language production types are what would be expected for language learning: audio recording, fixed-choice text selection, fixed-response text input, and open-ended written tasks. It needs to be noted, however, that answer evaluation in fixed-response text Activities is limited to exact string matching. Alternative responses may be specified, but no allowance is made for fuzzy pattern matching (i.e., wildcard symbols), capitalization, or accented character discrepancies.

Fortunately, the absence of student video recording will soon be remedied. A pre-release version of the application was made available for pilot testing and it performed very well on the desktop computer, the (Leago) smartphone, and the iPad.

Learner Operation of Lessons and Tests

From the Learner's perspective, once logged in to the system, Courses, Lessons, and Activities are clearly visible and easily accessible. Activities are transparent and require only the selection of fixed responses, text input, or the pressing of a Play or Record button. Where results and feedback are made available, these are very evident and can be reviewed at any time. So, too, Learners can readily respond to Instructor comments.

Course Management

As with Lesson and Test creation, LB course management could not be easier or more flexible. Being able to import User lists via .CSV databases greatly facilitates student enrollment, especially where large numbers are involved. Groups can be created, disabled, and deleted with minimal effort. Moreover, the

option to allow self-registration can greatly simplify Course enrollment. Once created and assigned, Courses and Lessons can be made invisible so that Learners only access resources when appropriate for them to do so. The tracking function keeps Instructors well advised of student activities (or lack thereof), allowing them to see scores, view and correct exercises, leave comments, and maintain two-way communication with learners. Good control is also provided over when and how Assessments are undertaken. Likewise, the Reporting function allows Activity results to be compiled in virtually any manner an Administrator or Instructor could want.

Pedagogy

Pedagogically, by design, LB is intended to be a teacher-centered content delivery and assessment system. As indicated above, it fulfills this function commendably well. In so doing, however, it offers little internal support for learner-centered, communicative, or collaborative student interaction. Learner control is limited to students being able to do (or not do) available Lessons and Activities in the sequence of their choice. No provision is made for student–student communicative interaction. Communication is restricted to asynchronous teacher–learner exchanges. That being said, LB could certainly be used to prepare learners for communicative, collaborative activities subsequently undertaken by means of other applications such as WhatsApp, Skype, Google Docs, Google Meet, LanSchool, NetSupport School, and so forth. Likewise, the ability to use mobile devices to record audio and (eventually) video segments directly in LB may permit learners to work individually or cooperatively on language learning tasks like interviews, news broadcasts, geocaches, or storytelling.

Summary

For anyone seeking a learning management system as a platform for language instruction, or indeed any general educational purpose, LB is most certainly worth serious consideration. It provides a stable, easily accessible, and very flexible means of creating, managing, assessing, and recording language learning activities—all with minimal local technical infrastructure support. While, by design, it is intended for teacher-centered content delivery, the mobile access it affords allows a degree of communicative, collaborative, student interaction. No less important, LB is quite affordable, not only for institutional subscriptions, but also for the student purchase of commercially available courses where these are relevant. The cost factor also becomes increasingly attractive as the number of users increases.

About the Author

Jack Burston holds the position of Honorary Research Fellow in the Language Centre of the Cyprus University of Technology. He is a language-teaching specialist with a formal background in theoretical and applied linguistics, second language acquisition and testing. His current research focuses primarily on mobile-assisted language learning.

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