Canvas and Michigan Technological University

Canvas a clear winner in the polls, appeals to LMS power users and online-teaching newbies

Michigan Tech

At a Glance

- Michigan Tech chose Canvas as its new LMS after comparing it with three competitors.

- Among the faculty pilot group, 14 out of 17 voted for Canvas.

- Among students, more than 75 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they prefer Canvas to their previous LMS and others they had used.

- An instructor who was already an LMS power user and another who had never previously taught online both said Canvas was the right choice.

The Challenge

Michigan Technological University administrators and faculty were so accustomed to using Blackboard—first WebCT, then CE8—it seemed like it had just always been there. So when Blackboard announced it would no longer be supporting Tech's version of the LMS, they assumed they would naturally transition to Blackboard's new offering, 9.1. But when they began testing it in the summer of 2010, an official university report noted "serious issues of usability, stability, and design." So much so, the report continued, that "many faculty members with extensive experience using these products concluded that Blackboard Learn 9.1 was a step backwards from WebCT." Instead of falling in line with the "upgrade," Michigan Tech was looking for an alternative.

The Decision

Over the following year, campus IT professionals set up test accounts so faculty could try out three competitors: Moodle, Sakai, and Canvas. By fall of 2011, professors had piloted classes using both Blackboard 9.1 and Canvas. When surveyed about their preferred LMS, the pilot group's votes totaled: Blackboard: 1, Sakai: 1, Moodle: 1, and Canvas: 14.

After many anecdotal reports of students preferring Canvas to Blackboard and the other options, administrators surveyed more than 100 students across nine courses in fall of 2011. The results:

- About 50 percent strongly agreed, and 25 percent agreed, that they "prefer Canvas" to the current LMS and others they had used.
- For Blackboard 9.1, about 10 percent strongly agreed and about 40 percent agreed.

"I talked to some other large universities who were already using Canvas, and they were enthusiastic in their recommendation," said Walt Milligan, Michigan Tech's chief information officer. "That, coupled with the clear preference

MTU Fun Facts

- 7,000 students

- Nation's 7th largest undergraduate environmental engineering program

- Nation's 8th largest undergraduate mechanical engineering program

- Men's ice hockey team has won 3 Division I national championships

"Canvas has been great—I had no experience with another LMS, but I was getting this going without having to ask any questions. It's been a very straightforward and easy experience for me."

— Timothy Schulz
Dean of Engineering and Professor
Michigan Tech

demonstrated by the survey results, made it an easy decision to switch to Canvas."

The Result

Michigan Tech moved its courses to Canvas during the first half of 2012. Faculty opinions about the change were represented in the experiences of two instructors with dramatically different online learning backgrounds:

- Mike Meyer was an LMS power user who had already faced a steep learning curve and knew exactly how to do what he wanted to.
- Timothy Schulz was a newbie, eager but nervous to put his first course online.

Meyer:
The physics and astronomy lecturer—winner of Michigan Tech's 2011 Distinguished Teaching Award—was a veteran of Blackboard's CE8. He piloted Blackboard 9.1 and Canvas. He noted that Blackboard's "feature bloat" makes it more complicated to use, but that after enough trial and error he could accomplish pretty much anything he wanted. Meyer said that Canvas is much easier to use and that his students preferred it—they told him it has a more modern and familiar look. For Meyer, Canvas sped up grading, writing assessments, and organizing assignments, thanks to drag-and-drop options.

Although he misses some specific Blackboard features, Meyer said if he had to choose again between it and Canvas, "I'd choose Canvas again."

Schulz:
Timothy Schulz, dean of the college of Engineering, had been away from teaching for five years and was new to using an LMS. His goal was to put 12 lectures online for his image processing course, with associated quizzes so he could make sure students learned from them before they arrived for class. And he succeeded. "Canvas has been great—I had no experience with another LMS, but I was getting this going without having to ask any questions," Schulz said. "It's been a very straightforward and easy experience for me."

He liked the ability for students to upload processes they've written for his course. And the comments feature in the grading system allows him to elaborate on each student's grade and also gives students a forum for discussion with him. It's nice not to have "another layer of email" so interacting about grades is "not as overwhelming," he said. The main benefit of using Canvas is "efficiency," Schulz said. "Once I get a course set, it really saves me time."

Meyer's and Schulz's faculty colleagues, as well as their students, continue to be pleased with Canvas, said Walt Milligan, CIO. "Implementing Canvas has been smooth, and we are very pleased with our decision," said Milligan. "In hindsight, my only regret is that we didn't do it sooner."

Visit us at **Instructure.com**   Call us at **1 (800) 203 6755**