

Canvas – Adopting a new learning management system at the Ontario College of Art and Design University

Phase One – Matching learning needs and system requirements

Opportunity

The Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD U) in Toronto wanted to explore various learning management systems (LMS) to assess the options available to support the University's curricular aims. The goal was to provide students with a rich set of multimedia and social media communication and discussion tools to enhance the collaborative, creative nature of the educational experience at OCAD U. The LMS also has to support the implementation of the new online learning strategy.

A new LMS has to complement and enrich two fundamental aspects of the student learning experience:

- Studio-based pedagogy is the basis of the art and design curriculum, structured around problem-solving, critical thinking, mentored guidance, and engaged and experiential learning. A new LMS is desired to enrich this learning by extending studio teaching and learning space into the online environment to prepare students for time spent in studio, to continue conversations, and to add to opportunities for connecting theory and practice. A new LMS was also sought to connect learners to each other, as well as to faculty and resources outside of the studio and the classroom – particularly for OCAD U students enrolled in hybrid courses, internships, or study-abroad semesters.
- Student learning has become increasingly collaborative, with group projects, discussions, and study taking place outside of class. The Faculty of Design has introduced, in 2011-2012, a mandatory laptop program for undergraduate students in Advertising, Graphic Design, Industrial Design, and Environmental Design and for graduate students in Digital Media and Art, Media and Design. This initiative requires an LMS to support the multiple ways that collaborative learning takes place and information is shared both on and off campus, whether through blogging, collaborative tools, podcasting, social media, or e-mail. OCAD U's commitment to connecting learners via an LMS that is particularly rich in collaboration and communication tools is an effort to serve students in both what they are doing in their course work and where they are working – which is increasingly online. Creating strong student networks is critical to a high quality student experience on OCAD U's non-residential campus.

Phase One: This description looks at the reasons for the choice of Canvas and the benefits and challenges that OCAD U predicts for its integration. Subsequent descriptions will explore the introduction of Canvas to the University, the pilot projects,

the enhancements to the system, and the role that it plays in supporting online experiential and collaborative learning.

Innovation

The search for an LMS that would support studio-based and collaborative online learning began with a year-long project to determine what was needed in an LMS, with input from faculty, students, and staff. The Information Technology Department and the Centre for Innovation in Art & Design Education began the review process with vendor presentations, consultations with colleagues in higher education, a review of professional association research and findings, and a survey of the faculty and staff concerning possibilities and needs.

The Information Technology Department assessed five possible LMSs and narrowed the list to three candidates. Faculty and students then assessed the three possible LMS applications. The students were given a simulated course with learning activities to perform so that they could assess each system's usability. They then ranked them according to content organization, collaboration and communication tools, assessment tools, ease of use, and suitability for course and programs. Faculty were given instructional tasks to perform and assessed the three candidate systems according to the same criteria.

Canvas, the open source LMS from Instructure, was the clear favourite, with comments such as “gorgeous and interactive”, “easy to see and access”, and “better organized”.



Particular aspects of Canvas were seen as essential to meeting the requirements for student learning and faculty adoption:

- The LMS is intuitive, easy to use, flexible, and effectively supports communication and collaboration for learning both within and outside of the course structure.

- Canvas CV is open source under the AGPLv3 license: it is not locked or proprietary and it links well with Web 2.0 technologies. The ease of access to and applications of Google docs, blogging formats, Wiki design, and communications pathways are respectful of how students think and make use of mobile technologies.
- With Kaltura integration, students can use video rather than text as input to discussion. OCAD U students' capacity to present themselves well is critical and with this LMS, they can view, critique, and improve their presentation skills online.
- Students can register the various ways they want to be contacted, using Skype, cell phone, Facebook, and Twitter, which is a huge improvement over relying on e-mail for communication.
- The rubric tool can link to course learning objectives so that student progress can be assessed and evidence of learning collected in the e-portfolios. This provides a transparency to the learning expectations and competencies as students work towards identifiable outcomes.
- A common learning objective at OCAD U is to graduate technologically-savvy students and the scope and design of the LMS supports this learning.

OCAD U is now conducting a pilot study for two semesters in a variety of courses with online components. Faculty boot camps, an online course on teaching in Canvas, a campus users group, individual consultations and drop-in times are being offered to encourage usage and to build a community of faculty who will support each other and share their experience.

Outcomes and Benefits

The integration of the new LMS and the online learning strategy would provide a number of benefits to OCAD U:

- Future flexibility in distance education with the ability to make courses available for current degree students, those seeking entry, students of the former Ontario College of Art and Design who wish to complete a degree program, and potentially non-traditional entry students who could successfully complete courses prior to applying as degree students;
- Capacity to support OCAD U students who are learning anywhere in the world with resources, consultation, and advice;
- Some alleviation of the space constraints of urban campus for meeting and group work spaces; and
- Creation of new markets for OCAD U through extending the accessibility of the credit and continuing studies programs and courses.

Challenges and Enhancements

OCAD U has recognized some of the challenges in moving to the Canvas-based environment, as well as some of the questions facing them as they expand their online learning offerings. The challenges related to Canvas include:

- The cost of commercially available systems was a consideration; consequently, only open source systems were evaluated. Canvas Cloud is a commercial product; Canvas CV is an open source version. OCAD U will be using Canvas CV, supporting the users and updating and maintaining the environment itself. Canvas CV is a demanding application to run and requires performance tuning.
- The open source environment does not have all the features of Canvas Cloud; most significantly, it lacks the mobile apps.
- The need to continue supporting tools that are currently being used for pedagogical purposes while respecting new demands for storage space, support, and finances requires a careful cycle of evaluation and substitution.
- Canvas is a quantum leap from the current LMS, which OCAD U developed itself in 2004. Faculty will need time and considerable support to be comfortable with, and take advantage of, its enormous potential.

As OCAD U moves ahead with the design of courses offered through online learning, Canvas must support:

- The provision of support services to online, off-campus students, including access to OCAD U's vast library of visual resources and specialized journals and publications;
- The integration of students from other institutions taking OCAD U courses;
- The maintenance of quality pedagogy and the support of the unique research and practice characteristic of OCAD U; and
- The development of online learning and supports consistent with the critique- and studio-based experiential learning that OCAD U is best at.

Potential

As OCAD U implements its new LMS and online learning strategy, Mary Wilson, Director of the Centre for Innovative Arts and Design Education, will encourage scholarly research into the application of online learning to the unique aspects of classroom and studio-based learning at OCAD U and dissemination of findings with their colleagues in post-secondary institutions in Ontario and beyond. In turn, OCAD U wants to learn from the experiences of other Ontario post-secondary institutions and their responses to the challenges and opportunities presented by online learning.

Andrew McAllister, Manager of Academic Computing, is interested in building the Canvas CV community in Canada. McAllister is also interested in a consortium of Ontario post-secondary institutions negotiating a subscription to Canvas Cloud.

Contact North | Contact Nord

Ontario's Distance Education & Training Network

Further Information

Mary Wilson
Director
Centre for Innovative Art and Design Education
mwilson@ocad.ca

Andrew McAllister
Manager
Academic Computing
amcallister@ocad.ca