

Project title: UC Davis’ Move to Canvas

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Project Summary

The Move to Canvas project implemented a new cloud-based learning management system (LMS), “UC Davis Canvas”, and transitioned all operations from the existing Sakai-based “SmartSite” LMS which had been a staple for campus instruction and collaborative work for 11 years. This involved a transition of over 40,000 active users, thousands of project sites, and over 5200 instructional course sites published annually. On a typical day, 20,000 unique users would connect to the SmartSite service, with concurrent user connections averaging nearly 10,000 during the term and peaking over 15,000 during finals week and start of term. With such high usage, the implementation team focused heavily on planning, communication, offering a variety of assistance resources, and delivering a solution that limited operational disruptions for instructors. In the process, innovative approaches to cross-functional project teamwork, communication strategy, and integrated applications were employed.



**The New UC Davis
Learning Management System**



canvas.ucdavis.edu

Problem Statement

In 2015, UC Davis was facing an aging SmartSite, Sakai-based learning management system (LMS), that had been implemented a decade earlier and was not keeping up with the changes in technology. Sakai's share of the LMS market was shrinking, as many of the major universities that had sustained the project, were moving to other LMS solutions. In addition, the Sakai-hosting vendor that UC Davis had been working with for several years, sold its business to another company with no experience in the U.S. higher education market. A lengthy RFP project was undertaken in collaboration with a number of campus constituencies, and Canvas was selected to be the new UC Davis learning management system in January 2016.

The problem facing the Move to Canvas implementation team, was how to replace the campus' learning management system (LMS), which had been a staple for campus instruction and collaborative work for 11 years, without disrupting instruction and other core operations of the university. As one team member put it, it was like doing a major organ transplant surgery while the patient was awake and going about their daily business. On a typical day, 20,000 unique users would connect to the SmartSite service, with concurrent user connections averaging nearly 10,000 during the term and peaking over 15,000 during finals week and start of term. The transition would involve over 40,000 active users, thousands of project sites, and over 5200 instructional course sites published annually. For additional complexity, two professional schools that ran their own Sakai instances on campus, expressed interest in moving their learning management system operations to UC Davis Canvas.

Project Timeline

The Move to Canvas project kicked off in January 2016 and is expected to complete in October of 2018. The first six months were focused on planning, communication, and configuration. The next academic year was a transition year with both learning management systems, and the second academic year was for final adoption and migration of remaining materials, as well as transitioning the UC Davis professional schools who were abandoning their own Sakai instances.

Timeline



Minor adjustments were made to this original project timeline, as it related to SmartSite project sites, but transition of instructional course sites to the new LMS was completed on schedule.

Innovations

In the process of this project, we believe that we implemented some innovative approaches to cross-functional project teamwork, communication strategy, and integrated applications.

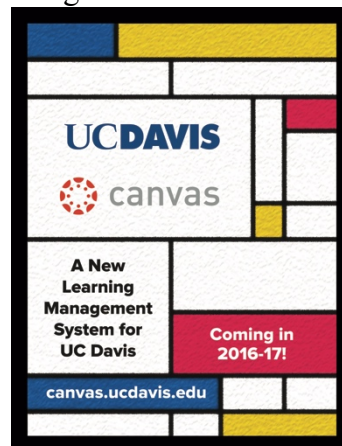
- Canvas was built to be easily extensible by adding LTI tools, and the LTI applications that had been available in the previous LMS were slated to be integrated into UC Davis Canvas, but a decision was made to vet every tool added to the new LMS. With the growing risks of third-party passthrough agreements, and the importance of information security and data privacy we felt that even no-cost apps needed to be evaluated before being added to the new LMS. A popular SmartSite LTI tool, Piazza, was disapproved from integration thanks to this approach, when the free tool was found to be selling student data through another service they provided to employers. A process was established with Purchasing to ensure apps had a negotiated and signed terms and conditions agreement, and when necessary, the Data Security was reviewed as well. A web application (<https://movetocanvas.ucdavis.edu/lti-tools/>) was created and integrated into the project web site to provide an LTI request form, an information page about the process, and status tracking of requested tools. Within Canvas, the Add App button was modified to redirect users to the web application where they could make their request and learn about why vetting tools is important. Though there was concern about limiting academic freedom, this process has been met with a broad level of understanding from our instructors.
- A thorough, comprehensive communication plan was constituted, and used, which included analysis, objectives, identified audiences, types of messages, and laid out a quarterly plan for communications. Communications included a Move to Canvas Project web site (<http://movetocanvas.ucdavis.edu>), quarterly newsletters to key constituent leadership groups, public TechNews articles, physical informational signage printed on actual canvas that was moved from building to building, postcard mailers, business card handouts, UC Davis Canvas t-shirts, postings on established IET social media accounts, discussions at monthly educational technology forums, and presentations at various campus community group meetings. This communication work was critical and key to the success of the project, and the thoughtful communication plan made the task of informing over 40,000 users significantly less daunting.

Move to UC Davis Canvas Communication Plan

January 1, 2016 – October 1, 2017 (updated December 2016)

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- Though Academic Technology Services is the service owner of the learning management system, the implementation team consisted of staff from a number of different IET units including, the Project Management Office, Enterprise Applications and Infrastructure Services, IT Express, and Communications. Group meetings were held weekly to inform all team members of general project progress, and several sub-groups met regularly to focus on project tasks specific to the technical implementation, communications, project management, and training, support, and transition, respectively. A Steering Committee was also formed to keep key stakeholders informed on the project progress, and was used as a decision-making entity when major project decisions were required. The program manager focused on the operational collaboration amongst the entities and external stakeholders, while the project manager focused on the overall project tasks and timelines. This internal structure kept the team focused on their tasks, informed about the project as a whole, and also kept leadership apprised and engaged throughout the project. This approach may serve as a model for future major-system upgrade projects that require cross-functional teamwork.

Collaboration

Collaboration was critical amongst the cross-functional implementation team, and has been described, but there was also extensive collaborative work with a number of external entities. All professional schools were consulted throughout the process, and members of the campus community were engaged in a variety of ways.

External relationships were established that provided the team with feedback, information, and guidance. A group of alpha-phase participants, which included staff and faculty, were engaged to start using the new system in its earliest form, to provide usability information for a variety of use cases. A communication partner's workgroup, which included key students, staff, and faculty, was formed early in the process to provide guidance and feedback on the project's overall communication efforts. This served valuable in generating outreach ideas to inform the campus of the major change that would be taking place in the coming year. After the initial roll-out of the new LMS, in Fall 2016, a Canvas User Advisory Group was constituted with faculty representation, as well as representation from the student representative groups, ASUCD and GSA. This group helped to vet and inform decisions on configuration details of the new learning management system, so that user feedback was taken into consideration. Additionally, relationships were built with key campus entities, including the Office of the University Registrar, University Library, Undergraduate Education, Student Disability Center, Purchasing, and the Campus Bookstore. Though less formally structured, staff from these groups all played an important role in the implementation.

Benefits

The Move to Canvas project took the UC Davis campus from a learning management system based on Sakai that required regular maintenance outages, had difficulties handling the peak load at the start and end of every term, and was losing significant partners from the open-source development consortium, to a cloud-hosted platform that is the fastest growing LMS in the higher education market, has 99.9% uptime, and seamlessly delivers new features and bug fixes every three weeks without requiring outages. Stability is key to this critical service that supports the campus' academic mission.

Additionally, with the inclusion of the two professional schools, the project will see this benefit three times over as it consolidates three Sakai instances into a single Canvas instance. The UCD Health, Center for Health and Technology is now looking to move away from their expensive, external LMS to the central UC Davis Canvas platform, and UC Davis Extension was able to leverage our campus RFP to move away from Moodle to their own instance of Canvas. In the big picture, there is a significant reduction in duplication of services, and saves the university money as a whole.

The new system replicated the automated provisioning of user accounts, instructor assignments, and student enrollments that existed in SmartSite, and the team took advantage of this transition to employ a MULE-based provisioning solution which allowed them to also automate the process of creating course shells and adding sections based on information from the Banner student information system. Instructors no longer need to perform administrative tasks to create course sites and assign course enrollments, they just log into the LMS and focus on building the content for their academic course sites that are already awaiting them.

Instructors appreciate the integrated tools, and the ease at working with the new system. They've found it much easier to add video content into their instructional support materials, and the Speedgrader feature has saved them countless hours of administrative time so that they can focus on instruction and working with the students. While students immediately appreciated Canvas' modern interface, and native mobile-device support.

Measures and Outcomes

The transition was smooth, with little disruption, and the instructional use of SmartSite was deprecated on schedule without any last-minute efforts to extend the use. Throughout the transition year we saw high adoption rates of the new LMS. In the Fall 2016 initial roll out, when we expected to see 20-25% uptake, there was 56% of published course shells offered in UC Davis Canvas. Winter quarter followed with 75% of published course shells, and Spring had 84%. As of Fall 2017, the first Canvas-only term, there were 30% more course shells published in Canvas than just two years prior had been published in SmartSite. In July of 2018, users will no longer be able to interact with the SmartSite LMS, and the system will be decommissioned. The project has been considered a success and can serve as a model for future major-system upgrade projects that require cross-functional teamwork in UC Davis' central Information and Educational Technology (IET) unit.