

Christian Schools Australia adopts Canvas LMS

ET Staff



They're a clever lot at Christians Schools Australia (CSA) national association of independent Christian schools, clever enough to realise that one of the movement's greatest resources is in the intelligence of its membership.

So when CSA affiliated Hillcrest Christian College on the Gold Coast started saying nice things about Instructure's Canvas learning management system (LMS) after independently undertaking a comparison and appraisal process of their existing LMS against the Canvas product, it began to shape up as a solution that could be rolled out across the entire CSA network.

Canvas presents teachers with a powerful way of managing their practice. It is able to help in creating, organising and streamlining lessons, recording footage, hosting conference meetings, assisting in marking and student data capture and gives its users access to a plethora of educational apps.

If it sounds confusing, it really isn't. Instructure have been pointed out creating an LMS which is as seamless and intuitive as possible, the idea is that it doesn't need to be learned, you know how to use it; drag and drop with easy integration of content from familiar sources like YouTube and Wordpress.

"Teachers are notoriously slow adopters, if they are to make use of it, an LMS needs to get out of the way to some degree and the Canvas product does that.

"There are a vast number of short instructional videos available online (they average about two minutes duration), that means it's not a case of constantly having to bring in the IT manager to make things work," the CEO of Christian Schools Australia Stephen O'Doherty says.

Hillcrest College has become the proving ground for the Canvas LMS, the school has been hosting information days and fielding questions from other CSA schools with that role

developing as more schools adopt the product in line with their renewal and purchasing cycle.

As much as anything, CSA seeks to open the lines of communication between its members, encouraging the sharing of resources and experiences toward providing a standardised education to all pupils attending schools within the movement.

It's also a fact that Australians are highly mobile and the provision of continuity in a student's education as they move around the country is something that CSA prioritises.

Mr O'Doherty explains; "We are big fans of the Australian curriculum, we see the common framework as an ideal opportunity to draw on the expertise throughout the entire national membership base.

Toward customising the Canvas LMS to CSA's situation, Mr O'Doherty visited Canvas' headquarters in Salt Lake City.

"The engineers were ready to engage with us in customising the LMS, they were very willing

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to talk about our ideas and responsive to our requirements. The process was very impressive and reflects their focus on a continual improvement of the product.”

Australian Canvas Open Education Evangelist Julian Ridden explains that listening to customers and incorporating their feedback into the Canvas product has been company’s MO and at the core of its success since its very beginnings as the brain child of two grad students. Speaking to people and refining the product accordingly has resulted in a comprehensive, powerful though user-friendly platform.

“The interfaces are intuitive, which what teachers want. As an example, the timetabling feature has been very well received, to change an item is a case of merely dragging and dropping, notifications about the change are updated across the system immediately, a process that might have taken multiple clicks and multiple windows can be achieved instantly. We started to get an idea we were onto something after a crowd at a trade show started to clap and cheer after we demonstrated this function,” he says.

The rise of Instructure and Canvas has been meteoric, it has only been around since 2011 and has since won customers beginning

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in the tertiary space, with K-12 and corporate applications fast bringing up the rear, largely based on recommendations from peers.

Young is good in tech and as such Canvas is native to the cloud and has been built according to open learning tool integration platform (LTI) specs so there’s no back engineering or bolting on. LTI is a relatively recent development that as the name suggests enables material from multiple sources and file formats to be brought into Canvas.

Canvas runs on a multi-tenant, native cloud architecture, which by the end of 2014 will be hosted in Australia on industry-leading Amazon Web Services, with a 99.9 per cent uptime guarantee.

Assignments can be brought to life with direct links to Flickr Creative Commons, videos can be recorded for teacher feedback and vice versa,

assignments in Word are easily pulled in and highlighted and annotated and the list goes on, with new features and additional apps coming online regularly.

Instructure’s Director of International Marketing Matt McGhie says that “Using products like Canvas is leading to changes in the way education is being delivered, the concept of the flipped classroom where students say watch a video at home and are then able to use class time to discuss the what they’ve seen is a natural fit for Canvas.

“We haven’t done a lot of research into Canvas’ effect on student outcomes, but tracking of student performance and updating student records is instant or a matter of a ticking or crossing gesture across a profile. The metrics are live and easily accessed which makes for simple monitoring of students’ progress. Most of the feedback we’ve received so far has been from teachers who love using the product.

“Canvas has very much taken off via word of mouth, nowhere as much as in Australia, it was they who initially showed an interest in us, but that said we have jumped into the market with both feet, some of our best people will be relocating here,” McGhie says.

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