

Textbooks? What textbooks?

Online system puts LMC students, instructors on same page – so to speak

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BENTON TOWNSHIP — A recently adopted learning management system is changing how students and faculty members interact with each other at Lake Michigan College.

Ease of use and adaptability are two major selling points of Canvas, as the computer system is known, according to LMC President Bob Harrison.

“We can place course content in a digital fashion for students to access whenever it’s convenient for them, as well as post instructional resources for them to use,” he said.

Once enrolled in a class, students can log onto the online system and track whatever material their instructor posts for them, Harrison said.

“Depending on the class, you’d find the instructor pushing out the syllabus course assignments, notes, quizzes, and the like,” he said.

The college switched from Blackboard – a similar type of system – to Canvas in July.

“This is a better product, far more robust, and you can

see where it’s integrated with social media,” Harrison said. “We’re finding, as the years go by, that students are far more digitally enabled with using social media.”

That social media linkage is one of Canvas’s most appealing features, Teaching and Learning Center Director Mark Kelly and math instructor Peter Brown recently told LMC board members.

“Students can choose to be notified through various social media. They can get notifications of grades or assignments to their Twitter or Facebook (accounts),” Kelly said.

Brown has established his own informal way of tracking the digital era’s growth.

“Every semester, for the last five years, I’ve been asking (students): ‘Raise your hand if you have Internet access at home.’ Five years ago, half would have raised their hands. Now it’s almost everybody,” he said.

Students can get email and text notifications or a daily or weekly basis, or opt out of receiving them at all, Brown said.

Notifications arrive as private messages, which users can access only after logging onto the system.

Canvas integrates with more than 150 different media systems, such as iTunes University – so teachers have plenty of content options, Kelly said.

“There are lots of choices, lots of inter-operability,” he said.

The system gives LMC a chance to make course material more consistent, as it has already done for math and biology, Kelly said.

“One of the challenges is to standardize the experience for students, so they move right into a course, and see something that’s familiar to them,” he said.

Seeing what’s happening in a class benefits students who often have to juggle competing academic, personal and work priorities, Brown said.

“When they miss class, they can go somewhere, and at least find out the essentials of what’s going on,” he said.

The system has also eased communication between students and adjunct instructors, Brown said.

“Five years ago, just to contact an adjunct could take weeks,” he said.

Secretary Mary Jo Tomasi-ni questioned whether instructors must notify students within a set time period.

“Even in business there’s people that check their email 20 times a day, and people that check their email once a month,” she said.

LMC’s co-vice president of instruction, Leslie Kellogg, replied that the college’s general expectation is to respond within 48 hours.

Canvas’s multi-media applications are another big part of its appeal, as Kelly and Brown said.

For example, instructors can upload and record videos that are stored separately from course material on their

own streaming server, Kelly said.

The server, in turn, can adjust to computers running on slower speeds.

“Very large files take up a lot of room on the server ... so if someone is accessing on a very slow connection, it (Canvas) ‘dumbs down’ the video to an appropriate size for that user,” Kelly said.

Before Canvas went online, LMC’s information technology staff spent a lot of time dealing with Youtube.com videos that the uploading site blocked for copyright reasons, Kelly said.

“Instructors asked why they were blocked, and then we had to unblock them from the teaching stations,” he said.

In keeping with Canvas’s multi-media slant, the college continues to expand e-book offerings, and post more course materials online – such as workbooks, Brown said.

Asked if LMC could eliminate textbooks, Kelly responded that day is getting closer all the time.

However, the college must balance those desires with meeting the needs of students without easy access to technology, he said.

“A lot of students come in with laptops that are so infected with malware, they’re totally useless. It’s an expensive proposition to get a badly infected machine back to useability, and that’s a problem,” he said.