

Faculty CMS stories

Excerpts

What does migrating to a new CMS make me conjure? A boatload of work! It will be a lot of work for me because I use so much of WebVista and because I have my own system down. I think for those faculty who use it without a lot of formatting and just post documents, a migration won't be that hard. But I have drilled down in WebVista.... I could switch to Moodle but it will be three years before my Moodle site comes close to looking like my Vista site. **Leslie Schiff**

I would say, you need to respect the faculty because we're being asked to re-do a lot of things: Liberal Education requirements, writing, student learning outcomes. All of this stuff. I'm involved in at least two of those things. And I understand that in the "pie in the sky" world, it's all for the better, that we don't change unless somebody tells us we have to change, but it does feel like, to your garden variety faculty member, particularly in this economic time, that they are being asked to do more and more and more. So, things are hard. So, I think engaging faculty in the process, warning them, pointing out the bright sides, providing support is going to be crucial. **Leslie Schiff**

There's more fun with Moodle. No doubt. I don't know why that is. But Vista? Vista seems like getting a new broom. It's functional, but it's really not that much fun. Moodle's like a motorcycle. Whee. Let's go for a ride. **Murray Jensen**

Things are going to fail, things are going to fall apart. You have to be able to take that and learn from it, then modify and move forward, but many people will have an event and fail and say "this stuff doesn't work." But you have to be patient. My patience was tried many times with Vista, and I'm sure it'll be tried with Moodle. That's okay. It doesn't mean I don't use it, it just means I get frustrated. **Murray Jensen**

The Department of Education's recent report on blended learning and how powerful it is should be recognized as important. It seems to me that as we increasingly face competition from the University of Phoenix, the Capelas, and the Waldens who have this powerful online stuff ... I think what's going to be really powerful about the University of Minnesota is our expertise at blended learning—that is face-to-face learning augmented with a CMS. That's what makes the University of Minnesota special. The for-profits, the online, they do great stuff with totally online courses; liberal arts colleges like Macalaster do great stuff with traditional face to face instruction. But the University of Minnesota, we have to create some kind of identity about how we use blended learning as an institution. **Walt Jacobs**

I've never been able to collect homework. It's the only way to really motivate them if there are any points associated with it, they're likely

to do it. And I've had a lot of students make comments that say, even though WebVista was a pain, I appreciated that it forced me to keep up a little bit with where we were at in class, and I couldn't fall behind by three chapters because they had to keep on doing an online homework every week. **Leopold, Dreissen, Massari**

I think if I found it to be a difficult interface to use, I'd probably look at it and I would probably go build an HTML page for myself and then never again have to worry about having to learn a new system because I would just maintain that and it wouldn't change all that much. It would take away my grade posting functionality but I'd have to figure out a way to work around that. But I probably would stop using it if it was too difficult to migrate to or if it was too clumsy to use. **Leopold, Dreissen, Massari**

LESLIE SCHIFF

August 11, 2009

Leslie Schiff is a Professor in Microbiology.

Professor Schiff has used WebCT since the semester conversion. Her courses range in size between 40 and 60 students. She posts notes, lectures, links; she uses the gradebook, groups, iClicker, and discussion boards; she used to use the "turnitin" powerlink when it was available. "There is little I have not done in WebCT." She contemplates using podcasting down the road.

I love it. I thought WebVista was very clunky in the beginning, but in its various incarnations I think it has gotten easier and easier. I think at this point I use lots of aspects of it. It expands my classroom. Students can't email me any other way, so I use it to organize correspondence, to post assignments, to check writing with "Turnitin," I post lecture notes, I have links. For me, now, each semester is fairly easy; I have a course shell and have the course cloned. I ditch material and noodle it, adding material as each new semester rolls on.

There is so much that I use that is in the WebCT package that changing or adding another CMS would be too hard for me ... until somebody tells me that I have to. And then I'd be sad if Moodle didn't allow me to do easily all of these things that I have come to rely on. I think because I've been using WebVista for so long, I know what the full power of it is.

I have language to this effect in my syllabus. WebVista expands the classroom so that it is 24/7. It so enriches the classroom so that students can stay engaged between classes. It takes pressure off of me when I'm in class, and it takes pressure off the students. I would query my students about their use of WebVista, and many of them said back in the early days back when WebVista was less pervasive, that communicating with me that way made them less hesitant to communicate with me

face-to-face because they could ask a question, it could be a dumb question, I could answer it with no attitude, and they didn't have to see me. So, it sets the stage for more comfortable face-to-face communication, because we're communicating all the time in lots of low-stress ways.

What does migrating to a new CMS make me conjure? A boatload of work! It will be a lot of work for me because I use so much of WebVista and because I have my own system down. I think for those faculty who use it without a lot of formatting and just post documents, a migration won't be that hard. But I have drilled down in WebVista. Over time, students have said "your website is so complicated," so, over the years, I have figured out how to make navigating the folders easier for my students. So figuring all that out in a new system—how to not just put up documents but how to do that well—is a challenge. I could switch to Moodle but it will be three years before my Moodle site comes close to looking like my Vista site.

If there was enough lead time so that some person could help me look at what I had and then could show me the way in Moodle, I think you can get a long way. And have this happen a year before it absolutely has to happen. I think faculty who have just figured out how to use WebVista are now going to say, here is one more change, why do they have to keep changing things once we figure out how to use them?

Other faculty who are actually using a tool can actually help. I actually did that a lot for WebVista because I was an early adopter. I think you can get faculty to help other faculty, but not in a pressured situation when everybody needs to change. So, I think if it's going to happen, I might think about trying to get my site organized before I had to.

What would I like? I would like all of the features that I love in WebVista to be in Moodle. That's what I would like.

I use this to organize all my course correspondence. I don't want my students emailing me on my .x500 . I want a gradebook. I want it to integrate with my clickers. I want to post my files in a nice organized way. I want a discussion board. A whiteboard and chat tool. That's what's nice about WebVista now. I know how to do it.

I've held open office hours the night before an exam when the students are in there, communicating and drawing things. There are certain years when the students take ownership of what's in there. Look at what we could do, Dr. Schiff. Could you hop on at 10:00 and answer any remaining questions. I encourage them to use it.

I think what you gain is the chance to start fresh. I think sometimes with technology, we get into the "more is better" mode. If you listen to students, less is better for them. So, I could see a migration would give me a chance to clean up and start over. So, there is something to be gained.

I would say, you need to respect the faculty because we're being asked to re-do a lot of things: Liberal Education requirements, writing, student learning outcomes. All of this stuff. I'm involved in at least two of those things. And I understand that in the "pie in the sky" world, it's all for the better, that we don't change unless somebody tells us we have to change, but it does feel like, to your garden variety faculty member, particularly in this economic time, that they are being asked to do more and more and more. So, things are hard. So, I think engaging faculty in the

process, warning them, pointing out the bright sides, providing support is going to be crucial.

I'm on Facebook because students are on Facebook, and I need to know what they are doing. To be the best teacher I can be, I can't always be reactive and behind the times. To be the best teacher I can be, I think it's important for me to be as current as I can be.

I'm thinking about podcasting because I talk fast, I take no prisoners, and I realize that it might be helpful to students.

I would see a fantastic blog posting about the swine flu and I KNEW how to get it to all of my students. I knew where in WebVista or that some students look at the announcements but don't look at their email or the discussion board. So I know based on student behavior – if half look in this place and half look in this other place – what I need to do to get the information to everybody. I need to know in how many different ways I need to post something, and I know how to do that in WebVista.

WALT JACOBS

August 11, 2009

Walt Jacobs is an Associate Professor in African American and African Studies.

Walt came to the University in 1999, and he has always used some kind of CMS, even as a grad student at Indiana University where he worked with Alta Vista. After using WebVista, he switched to Moodle in the Fall of 2007 and now uses it exclusively. He teaches mainly smaller courses of 20 or fewer students, but used WebVista to teach a course of about 74 students. He typically uses discussion boards, posts readings and supplementary documents, and has worked less frequently with some of the other CMS tools. In addition, he uses UThinks blogs and keeps an active profile on Facebook and allows his students to follow him there. He recently taught a digital storytelling course and is working on a book about the experience.

What I really like about the discussion fora that I use in Moodle is that it really encourages a wide variety of students to participate. Some students, as you know, no matter what you do, are not going to talk in class, and I love how some of my shyest students are so eloquent in the CMS. I would have to figure out how to draw out that student who is uncomfortable speaking in front his peers. To me, it creates another way of giving students voice. Some students, no matter what you do, they're not going to speak in class, and to me that's fine, as long as they have other avenues to express themselves.

I think [migrating to another CMS] would frighten some of the faculty who have invested a lot into getting their Vista sites into exactly what they would want them to

be. In my particular department, though, a lot of the faculty have not used any CMS at all, so it'll be less of an issue for my faculty because they're just now getting into using a CMS, so whatever comes out will be new for them anyway. And I think there is a third category of faculty, and I put myself into this, that would change anyway. It's relatively easy to migrate from one to the other. In a way, I kind of like to keep fresh, to have to learn a new system.

I think one of the things that is helping my colleagues is the IT fellows that are assigned to each department. Afro had never had an IT fellow until this last year. One of his priorities was to expose faculty to a CMS for the first time. So a couple of faculty used it for the first time with the guidance of an IT fellow. So, I think that as the word gets out that this guy is great and helping them do it, he'll be a key resource. Just getting more people to the fountain and use it!

There are two reasons why I changed from WebVista to Moodle. One, I was finding that WebCT was having some performance issues. Sometimes it would go down, bog down. Some of my students found it kind of hard to get up and running. On the other hand, I heard that Moodle was very easy and that students would find it very intuitive. So I said, let me give this a shot, given the known performance issues. So that was why I switched. I didn't lose anything at all. It took me a while to get it to look the way I wanted to, but once I had that, I was fine with it.

First and foremost, the University should support some kind of CMS. It would be a mistake if a CMS went away altogether. The second thing is that you've got to have various support systems for faculty. The IT fellows are a great resource. I know a lot of faculty in other departments who use their IT fellows as well as the training that we can get at the Digital Media Center.

19:20: We also had a blog where students could post their digital stories. We thought it was important to have the private CMS but also to have the public blog so that they could share their stories with family and friends. We think having the comments that they got from family and friends and strangers was a big part of that process. So I would definitely continue to use blogs to continue to think about the distinction between public and private.

To me, whether it's Alta Vista, WebVista, Moodle or whatever Blackboard system, the specific form is less important than just having a system and having the resources to help faculty shape it to make powerful learning experiences.

The Department of Education's recent report on blended learning and how powerful it is should be recognized as important. It seems to me that as we increasingly face competition from the University of Phoenix, the Capelas, and the Waldens who have this powerful online stuff ... I think what's going to be really powerful about the University of Minnesota is our expertise at blended learning—that is face-to-face learning augmented with a CMS. That's what makes the University of Minnesota special. The for-profits, the online, they do great stuff with totally online courses; liberal arts colleges like Macalaster do great stuff with traditional face to face instruction. But the University of Minnesota, we have to create some kind of identity about how we use blended learning as an institution.

August 7, 2009

Professor Doreen Leopold, Michelle Driessen, & Assistant Professor Aaron Massari are faculty in General Chemistry.

Doreen and Michelle in General Chemistry have been using WebVista since 2003 and 2001, respectively. Neither have used Moodle. They post documents, use the gradebook, and use sign-up sheets. They have a particular time-investment in a quizzing system, and they very much value the ability of WebVista to deliver unique quizzes to individual students. The aspect of the quizzing system that is paramount to their current teaching is the ability to ask questions with dynamic variables so that essentially every student has a different quiz from each other with different variable values. As a result, copying answers from each other is ineffective, and the instructors can have enough confidence in the system to award points for the quiz.

Typically, course lecture sites separated by instructors (with approximately 350 students in a single lecture); labs share a single WebVista site with approximately 1,200 students.

Private grade posting would be one of the key components to most of the people that use the system here in a minimal sense. They post grades through a web vista site and maybe don't do much more than that. We don't have to come up with any convoluted system for posting numbers. It's private and [students] can log in to find their grades. We have electronic student solution manuals that we get through our publishers that are private, and we would not be able to publish them outside of a protected site.

I use it [online quizzes] in my course, but I wouldn't call it essential. [Due to recurring problems with the format students are compelled to input the answers.]

I don't know of anybody that uses the blogs or the discussion tools very often, but I find it very nice to just put a topic up and have students answer their own questions back and forth.

[Problem sets for extra credit 9:30] I think with our large classes, it's always frustrating to get the students to do the problems because that's the way you learn. Some students think they can just sit in lecture and take notes and that they'll learn, but then they take a test and do poorly, and it's like riding a bike you have to practice, you know. We can't collect homework because we don't have the TA resources to grade it, so this is a way to encourage the students to do more problems. And they know it counts. I think it's a nice way to encourage students to do more problems and they get some reward for it. So, it's very efficient once it's programmed. I've been using these for several years. Once the bugs are out, you can use it for any class.

I totally think that a CMS has changed how I've taught, and I think it's been to the benefit of my students. I can [publish] a lot more resources—old exams, keys, grades.

I've never been able to collect homework. It's the only way to really motivate them if there are any points associated with it, they're likely to do it. And I've had a lot of students make comments that say, even though WebVista was a pain, I appreciated that it forced me to keep up a little bit with where we were at in class, and I couldn't fall behind by three chapters because they had to keep on doing an online homework every week.

On Migration.

Posting files and things, I'd say is fairly minimal, but it's still an energy barrier for a lot of faculty to say that I've got 20 old exams posted, and I'm going to have to organize them in a new structure. But that's a small time investment. But the online quizzing function?, I foresee that as an almost "build from scratch" every time we transfer systems. Even when we went from WebCT to WebVista, there were so many links to images that were broken and HTML code that changes slightly from one browser to another, and "the delta symbol doesn't show up in my web browser when I'm taking the quiz, what is this questionmark supposed to mean, what symbol is supposed to be there?" Things like that get kind of frustrating, and the students get pretty frustrated pretty quickly with it. It's just not good all around. I foresee having to start from scratch with that, and that's not a small project to rewrite all of these problems. They're fairly complicated and some of them have 8 variables, and you have to type formulas in and get them to function. It takes a little while to get that to work. Frankly, I wouldn't do it. ... If I had to reinvest all that time into another system and gamble that it's going to be user friendly for my students, I don't know that I would do that. I think I would go with a pre-packaged version of online homeworks, if I did any at all, because those cost students money, and we're always trying to keep that to a minimum.

If there were a way to download it into Respondus and then upload it into the new system so that it would sort all the questions out and figure those out. . Any sort of patch like that would be very helpful.

We would like a technology person to be assigned to us to help convert our large bank of quiz questions if indeed we have to migrate to a different system and the questions can't be automatically cloned.

Because, otherwise, human nature being what it is—the students are busy—they think they understand it if they copy the answer. So, this way, it's really nice to be able to give each person their own problem.

I would like [OIT] to offer up their top two or three choices and have a group of faculty use them and look at them for a couple of months. Or even if we had a free trial subscription just to play with them for a summer course or something to really use them to find out what does and doesn't work to see what we could live with. It would be very nice to give that input before the choice is made.

I think what is crucial is that there would be more than one CMS to pick from because I would worry that if they gave you a trial run with one option, you might

give feedback, and it would never be implemented because there is only one choice anyhow.

How do you see yourself using new technologies?

I certainly envision myself using any tools that are useful. It depends upon how useful they are in terms of teaching. I think in a lot of cases they can be a distraction. I love the idea that students can go in and get supplementary information about a course or topic and learn more directly from one of these types of technologies. But I also like to force people to have to study. I think there is value in the answer not being at your fingertips, especially in the sciences, because most answers aren't at your fingertips. So, having to dig is a skill that people should have to learn. I guess I would see myself using any of these things that don't take away from that, that don't make it overly easy, but that, at the same time, would reinforce something they've learned in class.

I don't have much of an imagination regarding unknown technologies until someone shows me.

Now, if they were to incorporate video chat into these, I could see this being useful, having some virtual office hours in the evening. I could write out a problem and hold it up to the camera. Not exactly sure how that would work.

Final thoughts :

I think if I found it to be a difficult interface to use, I'd probably look at it and I would probably go build an HTML page for myself and then never again have to worry about having to learn a new system because I would just maintain that and it wouldn't change all that much. It would take away my grade posting functionality but I'd have to figure out a way to work around that. But I probably would stop using it if it was too difficult to migrate to or if it was too clumsy to use.

Somebody uses it, people talk, and a lot of people are hesitant to start putting all that energy into building a web site into a certain class management system, and if they hear it's difficult to use, they're just not going to use it at all. I think a lot of people dabble with it and they get their toes wet, and they're like, "oh, there's this little function here, maybe I'll try it," and each semester they might try something new, but I think if there's a big energy barrier to get over in order to use it, I just don't know if anybody in our department would really get on board with it.

I can see [having developmental control over the software, as in Moodle] as being a bonus, if we had some control over that [software development] I don't know if you've ever had any issues with WebVista, and you send an email over to them and say, "hey this is a problem," and they go "we don't know how to fix that. We're going to have to escalate that to the WebVista software people," and then it goes into a black hole and you never hear about the problem again.

I think integration is the most important thing. I need everything to be in one place. I don't want to have 5 different email accounts, 5 different services, 5 different passwords. Everything in one place is crucial. If not for the fact that I like iTunes, I wouldn't have done iTunesU. Otherwise, purely because it's not connected to WebVista except through a link (and that link sporadically works). The lack of integration makes people choose. Everything integrated is also good to get people

who maybe don't want to do that more advanced stuff. If there is just a basic simple page that people can set up and get in and have it running and then slowly start incorporating things because it's all integrated in the same place, then people will. If they have to go to a different service for every new technological service, then they'll just stick with what works.

On a large scale, I really think hard before I integrate another place that my students need to go to [into my course] and information that they need. I think long and hard before I do it because if it doesn't work well, I get 300 emails telling me so.

MURRAY JENSEN

August 18, 2009

Murray Jensen is an Associate Professor in the college of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Murray began using WebCT when it first arrived on campus, having put up his own web pages prior to this. Although he has tried many of the tools, he primarily uses the quiz tool and gradebook for student records. He has a large question bank in WebVista and is currently making the transition to Moodle. His classes average 80 to 100 students. He is frequently an early tester of technology. For instance, he has tried podcasting, rejected it for now, and plans to return to it when the recording mechanisms become more automated.

You can say, I learned to love Big Brother. I spend a lot of time with WebVista. But the learning curve is very steep.

I'm skeptical with the grade book function in Moodle. I know the grade book function in Vista, and I'm not familiar with the grade book function in Moodle. This will be the first semester that I'll rely on the grade book function in Moodle. We did a few practice runs last semester with limited success. I think we know why we had limited success. They'll be bugs.

Things are going to fail, things are going to fall apart. You have to be able to take that and learn from it, then modify and move forward, but many people will have an event and fail and say "this stuff doesn't work." But you have to be patient. My patience was tried many times with Vista, and I'm sure it'll be tried with Moodle. That's okay. It doesn't mean I don't use it, it just means I get frustrated.

The functionality of the grade book and the quizzes, I need that. Because I love the idea of frequent quizzes and frequent tests. If I do that with paper and pencil, that's a lot of data entry, and I don't have those resources. By using a computer for automatic quizzes, automatic grade recording, that's wonderful. I like that. I like the idea of a student taking a test multiple times. I like persistence.

I like to think of it as encoding and decoding. Students just typically encode when they study. When they take a quiz, they're using their skills and information to solve

puzzles. They're decoding. This is an exaggeration, but typically students only do that when they take a quiz. So, the notion of the quiz as a study tool, as formative assessment, that works for me.

I'm kind of excited about Moodle because when people talk about Moodle, there is a little bit of spark in the eye. Never saw that with Vista. So, this is kind of like getting a sports car, in a way. (I don't get new cars, so getting a new CMS is my equivalent.) I know there will be trouble. There is no question in my mind. I will have bad days.

I think the key with any University-supported software is that the support system is wonderful. The people behind Vista are what makes it tolerable.

I want to know how something works. I want to see the links. It makes me nervous when I don't understand the code behind it. I want to be able to problem-solve, as opposed to "It doesn't work; I'm done." I want to be able to fix it. I want autonomy. I want to have some level of confidence that if something doesn't work, I can do something to fix it. When I rebuild my test questions in Moodle, I'll have that autonomy again. I'll know how they work.

There's more fun with Moodle. No doubt. I don't know why that is. But Vista? Vista seems like getting a new broom. It's functional, but it's really not that much fun. Moodle's like a motorcycle. Whee. Let's go for a ride.

Make a good financial decision. The rumors about the contracts with Vista make it seem like maybe it wasn't a great decision. It works because the people behind it are great and they've supported it. But the initial decision, I don't know, I wasn't there. With Vista vs. Moodle? Both would be nice but can we afford both? That's not my call, that's an economic call. Long run, I think Moodle's probably cheaper and it's more fun to use. It's open source, which means the money behind it might be a little bit smaller.

You need a big head's up. If you're shutting down Vista, there are people who have a lot of days, a lot of weeks, a lot of months invested in that system. If someone is a big time research professor, and they ask me if they should invest time in Vista, I say "no." You're going to lose a lot of lab time and a lot of time out of the field. But if they have support, then yeah, it's a great tool. Moodle might be a possibility. There's more of a chance they might like it because it's more of a motor scooter than a broom.

I can't stress enough the need for human support behind the program. You hit a problem, and you have to be able to contact someone. They have to be available. They can't get back to you in two weeks.