Formal Report Proposal: Improving UBC’s Learning Management System for Remote Learning

To: Dr. Erika Paterson

From: Cody Gagnon CG

Date: July 16, 2020

Subject: Improving UBC’s Learning Management System for Remote Learning

# Introduction

On June 8, 2017, the University of British Columbia (UBC) announced that Canvas had been selected as the university’s new Learning Management System (LMS). Although Canvas is an undoubted improvement upon Connect (the LMS previously used by UBC) the flaws and failings of Canvas are increasingly clear in today’s remote learning context. Canvas often fails to meet the needs of faculty members and students. As a result, many courses taught at UBC must depend on external software applications, such as Piazza, edX, Facebook, Gradescope, Slack, and Zoom. The need to master so many tools may impede faculty members in designing and delivering lessons and detract from the learning experience had by students. In a world that is increasingly dependent upon online learning tools, the quality of a university’s Learning Management System is paramount.

# Statement of Problem

Many courses taught at the University of British Columbia are dependent upon external software applications, because Canvas, the university’s Learning Management System, fails to meet the needs of faculty members and students. The tools most commonly used to supplement Canvas (such as Piazza, Facebook, Slack, and Zoom) focus on communication. Other tools often used to supplement Canvas (such as Handback and Gradescope) focus on grading and the delivery of critical feedback. Therefore, communication and grading may be two potential areas for improvement to Canvas. Demand for remote learning tools is rapidly rising and UBC must adapt to meet the changing needs of its stakeholders.

# Proposed Solution

Given the current remote teaching and learning context, the University of British Columbia should consider either improving or replacing Canvas to better meet the needs of faculty members and students. To better understand the needs of stakeholders, I propose to conduct a survey of current UBC faculty members and students. In addition, I would review scholarly journal articles on best practices for remote teaching and learning. Finally, I would consider alternative Learning Management Systems used by other leading universities and investigate their strengths. This research would provide information that is highly relevant to the audience described below.

# Audience

The proposed formal report would be addressed to the User Committee or the Innovation Committee within UBC’s Learning Technology Hub, depending upon the specific recommendations made. If the report were to recommend improvements to Canvas, then the User Committee would be the appropriate audience. Otherwise, if the report were to recommend that Canvas be replaced with a new LMS, then the Innovation Committee would be the appropriate audience. The User Committee recommends user experience improvements and the Innovation Committee recommends the adoption of new learning technologies. Both committees provide their recommendations to the Learning Technology Hub Leadership. Moreover, both committees exist to ensure that faculty and students have the right tools to create the best possible teaching and learning experiences.

# Scope

To assess the needs of faculty members and students and to establish which features of Canvas are most in need of improvement, I plan to pursue 7 areas of inquiry:

1. What features of Canvas do faculty members and students find least helpful for remote teaching or learning?
2. What features of Canvas do faculty members and students find most helpful for remote teaching or learning?
3. What features, if any, do faculty members and students think should be added to Canvas?
4. What software applications or digital tools are currently being used to supplement Canvas and how do they help with remote teaching or learning?
5. How easy or difficult is it for faculty members and students to learn and use multiple software applications or digital tools for remote teaching or learning
6. How has the shift to remote teaching or learning impacted faculty member and student needs for digital tools?
7. How satisfied or dissatisfied with Canvas are faculty members and students?
8. How much demand currently exists for improvements to Canvas?
9. What digital tools are most crucial in remote learning contexts?
10. What are the strengths of Learning Management Systems used by other universities and colleges?

# Methods

I will conduct primary research by surveying current UBC faculty members and undergraduate students. I will also research secondary sources, such as online publications, company websites, and scholarly journal articles on remote learning and teaching best practices.

# My Qualifications

As a software developer and fourth-year computer science student, I have studied Human-Computer Interaction and I have experience with the software design and development process. I have worked with several teams to build web applications and I am currently working with a team of graduate students at the Centre for Digital Media to design an educational mobile application. In addition, I am currently working as a software developer with UBC’s Department of Psychology to develop an online educational tool. As a former professor, I have formal training in pedagogy and years of experience in teaching. I have used several Learning Management Systems as a student and, as a professor, I have used an LMS to design and deliver lessons and assessments. I believe that my experience affords me with valuable insight into improving UBC’s Learning Management System for remote learning.

# Conclusion

Online education has been growing in popularity for years and remote learning has recently become the only safe alternative to large, in-person gatherings available to post-secondary institutions. A large majority of courses taught at UBC during the upcoming academic year will be taught online. In the post-pandemic future, we may see more courses taught online despite a return to university classrooms and lecture halls. Given that many courses at UBC must depend on numerous software applications and digital tools to supplement Canvas, it is clear that Canvas does not meet the needs of faculty members and students. Demand for remote learning tools is rapidly rising and UBC must adapt to meet the changing needs of its stakeholders. With your approval, I will begin research into how UBC should improve its Learning Management System for remote learning.