What this is

The Innovative Instructor is an article series (https://ctei.jhu.edu/ii) and a blog (https://ii.library.jhu.edu) related to teaching excellence at Johns Hopkins

Article categories

Best Practice
How to use technologies and apply innovative instructional methods
Pedagogy
Hopkins professors share successful strategies for teaching excellence
Technology
Information about emerging technologies, who is using them, and why you should know

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About the CTEI

The Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation partners with faculty, postdocs, and graduate students to extend instructional impact by connecting innovative teaching strategies and instructional technologies

CENTER for **TEACHING EXCELLENCE** & **INNOVATION**

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Canvas
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What it is

Canvas is a learning management system (LMS) that allows instructors to organize and deliver course content to students whether face to face, online, or in a blended learning setting. As one of the leading LMS options for both higher education and K-12, instructors use Canvas to facilitate learning and share resources with students. A Canvas course site provides a consistent method of delivering course content, where the amount of interface customizations are minimized in an effort to streamline content creation and delivery.

Why Canvas

Blackboard Learn was the LMS used by most of the University's divisions for over 10 years. In 2020, Blackboard announced that our version of the LMS would no longer be supported. The University began a multi-divisional, comprehensive evaluation process to select a replacement for Blackboard; this included investigating leading LMSs adopted by peer universities, surveying faculty, staff, and students, and conducting a pilot for each option. By the summer of 2021, Canvas was selected as the LMS of choice for its wealth of documentation, wide offerings of 3rd party tool integrations, and a simplified, intuitive interface.

Note: The School of Public Health will continue to use its local CoursePlus application as its LMS.

Screenshot of the Dashboard in Canvas

Why it matters

Organizing course content can be a challenge that could result in students having a difficult time following along or finding what they need. Canvas includes Mod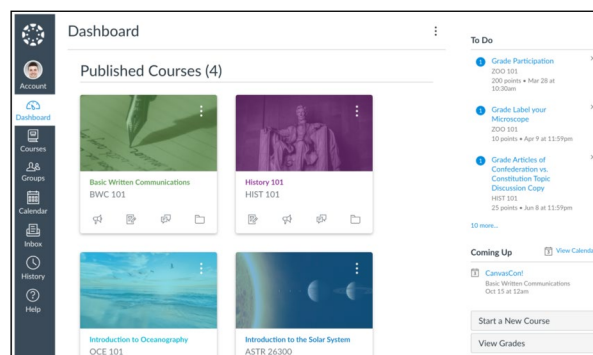ules, a feature to help you organize your content in a clear, sequential manner. For graded content, such as Assignments and Quizzes, Canvas conveniently creates an auto-generated list of due dates that is included in the Syllabus tool. Students can also view due dates in a global Calendar which displays all of their assignments across multiple courses. This can help identify weeks with the heaviest workloads and plan effectively.

University guidelines require course content to be accessible in order to meet the needs of our diverse learners. The Ally accessibility tool has been integrated with Canvas and will display a colored gauge for each content item indicating an accessibility score; clicking on the gauge displays the problems identified and suggestions for how to fix them. Canvas also provides its own accessibility checker (located in the content editor) which is intended to check content that has been created within the editor.
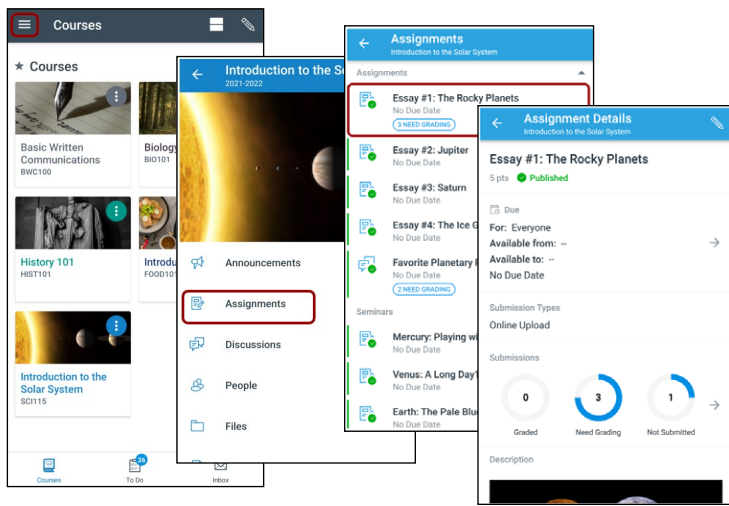
Mobile phones are an important and ever-present method for consuming content. With Canvas's Student and Teacher apps, available for both Android and iOS, both students and instructors can access their course materials wherever they may be. With near alignment of features when compared to the website experience, the mobile apps can be a convenient way to stay connected to course materials, peers, and instructors.
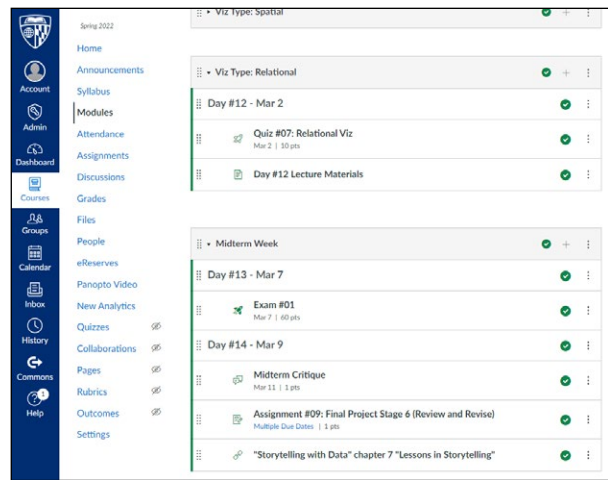
Instructors often wonder how (or whether) their students are engaging with their course materials. Beyond synchronous class meetings and office hours, instructors have access to a wealth of interaction and per-

Screenshots of Canvas Teacher Mobile App

Screenshot of Modules in Canvas

formance data made available through Canvas's analytics tools. These tools can be a valuable resource to monitor student progress and settle disputes concerning student access and engagement with course materials.

How it can be used

At a minimum, Canvas is a great place to upload your syllabus to make it available to students, but that barely scratches the surface in terms of creating an engaging course site. Canvas can be used to facilitate your class's assignments, activities, and tasks using the Assignments features. You can choose among several options for students to submit their work such as a file attachment, text response, or submission through another tool (see 3rd party educational tools below). A built-in tool called SpeedGrader allows instructors and TAs to grade inline with digital annotations. You also have the option of recording grades for in person assignments, such as group presentations or papers graded manually.

You can also use the Quizzes tool to deliver online quizzes and exams for assessing student knowledge. You can create quiz questions one at a time or draw upon question banks that were set up beforehand. It is possible to set time limits on quizzes and also set accommodations for students who may need more time or additional attempts. Unlike administering quizzes and exams in person, the online Quizzes tool auto-grades many of the question types, which can save time.

Canvas also makes it easy to communicate with students, either by sending messages through the Inbox tool, posting to the discussion board, commenting on student work using SpeedGrader, or posting an announcement for the class. All Canvas users have the option to receive notifications immediately or in aggregate; assuming they have notifications turned on, students will receive push notifications to their email accounts and/or phones (via the Canvas Student app).

One of the more appealing aspects of Canvas is its multitude of integration offerings of 3rd party educational tools. Canvas may not be able to do everything an instructor wants, so the ability to offer an expanded series of vetted tools to support instruction is highly beneficial. Many of the tools, such as Panopto and Turnitin, offer the ability to interact directly within the Canvas environment, which helps maintain the pedagogical structure and flow of the course.

Where it is going

Canvas continues to be improved with new features on the horizon. Among these are the full implementation of a new quizzing tool (available now) that offers additional features not found in the classic quiz tool, such as question and answer choice shuffling and several new question types. There will also be a redesigned discussion board with enhanced usability and page responsiveness.

How to get started

Log into Canvas: https://canvas.jhu.edu. The main Canvas page includes detailed documentation and help resources for instructors and students. Check with your division's teaching and learning center, for training opportunities throughout the year.

Additional Resources
- JHU Canvas, Login Page: https://canvas.jhu.edu
- JHU Canvas, Faculty Support Documentation: https://canvas.jhu.edu/faculty-resources
- JHU Canvas, Support by Division: https://canvas.jhu.edu/faculty-resources/faculty-canvas-support-by-division-or-school
- Canvas Help Guides: https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Canvas-Guides/ct-p/canvas_guides

Author's Background

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Reid Sczerba is a multimedia developer at the Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation. He provides training on a variety of educational applications, aids in educational resources development, and shares expertise on information and graphic design with faculty at the Homewood campus. He also teaches as a parttime instructor at WSE's Center for Leadership Education. Reid holds a BFA in Illustration and a MA in Digital Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art.