# How Can a Learning Management System Help You?

Learning Management Systems (LMS) are the backbone of distance education offerings, but they can also be very useful in organizing and teaching face-to-face classes.

Here at UBC, WebCT Vista has been used for many years, but it is currently being phased out in favour of the "Blackboard Learn" system. The way these systems and others, such as the open source Moodle, function is broadly similar: they are all programs that you can use to help organize and teach your classes. Whether you teach online, face-to-face, or some blend of the two, any class can benefit from using a LMS. As we at UBC are about to start using a new LMS, now is a great time to think about adopting one for your classes.

But what can a LMS do for you? There are a variety of tools built into most LMSs that can be used with face to face classes:

Host course files – One of the most basic functions of any LMS is hosting files for your course. This means you do not have to create or maintain a course webpage. Students are automatically entered into the course when they register, so course passwords are not required either.

Discussion board – An online discussion board, if set up and used properly, can be a great resource for you students. Students can post questions whenever they are working and the questions can be answered by other students, the TA or the instructor. It is important to note, however, in order for the board to function well, students must see a need for it. See page two for some advice on how to encourage participation and keep a discussion board running smoothly and effectively.
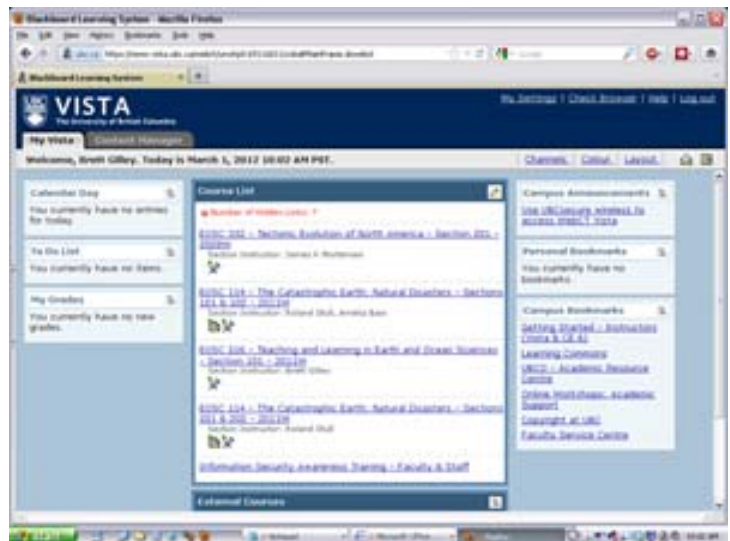
Assignment drop box – The built in assignment drop box allows you to: set homework due dates that do not coincide with class; keep backup copies of assignments; organize the assignments and the marking; keep assignments in the same format; and keep assignments in the same place.

Online quizzes – LMSs allow you to create automatically graded quizzes. There are many applications. For example, assigning quizzes both pre or post lecture gives you an opportunity to monitor student learning. Our LMS even has built in tools that let you analyze the results quickly and easily, giving you more time to deciding on how to respond with useful feedback.

Online surveys – Similar to quizzes, but the results are anonymous. You only know that the survey has been completed, and see the results in aggregate, not how each individual student responded. This can be very useful if you want to gather feedback about how the course is going, before the end of term evaluations.

Grade book – The online grade book is useful for students to keep track of their progress and releases you from having to answer questions about individual grades. If you are also using functions such as online quizzes and the assignment drop box, those results are automatically tallied in the grade book once they are marked.

Course Calendar – The course schedule can be entered into the calendar to keep everyone on track. You can have the LMS automatically create announcements and warnings when assignments or exams are due.

Create course wikis – classes can develop their own FAQs, or students can work on projects that have a distributed processing component to create documents that would not otherwise be possible.

Advice on running Discussion Boards from experienced Distance Education TAs.
(Thanks to Tashia Dzikowski, James Ferguson, Jan Finke, and Emma Shelford for their input)
Discussion boards can be very useful, but there are some important thing to remember to make sure they are used effectively. Students need to understand how the board can help them and how it can be a resource. A discussion board that is working well is a vibrant place where students help each other learn difficult concepts. We asked several of our experienced Distant Ed. TAs to provide some guidance on how to increase discussion board participation:

- Do not answer everything right away. Discussion boards will function better and with less input from you if students answer other students in most cases.
- When you do answer, guide students towards an answer, don't just give it away. You want to respond promptly, but it's much better to get them to find the answer themselves.
- When answering questions, be sure to ask a follow-up question to encourage the students to go deeper. If you can't think of a specific question try, "What do you all think?" or "Do you need more clarification?"
- Add in links to current affairs stories that link to the class and/or websites that will be a good resource.
- Do what you can to keep students involved. Teaching online is like running a department store - you want them to stay. So make sure they have to pass something that might engage them on the way to what they need. Encourage them to stay online as much as possible, and to come online regularly.
- Just like fact-to-face teaching, sometimes it can be hard to get students to respond. If the board is quiet look at the topics currently being covered and ask a few interesting questions about those. If this doesn't work try asking multiple choice type questions. Note that boards tend to be much busier around when quizzes or midterms are due. Remember that even though the board is quiet there may be many students "lurking" (reading but not contributing).
- Note that The LMS includes facilities to check the type of activity of each student.
- To drive traffic to the board, try sending questions by email, with instructions to answer on the LMS board.
- Organizing a TA-TA, TA-Prof, or Prof-Prof discussion might encourage students to join in (caveat: Make sure TAs and Profs know each other's online names! More than one group of TAs has spent time "teaching" each other before they realized what was happening!)
- When students do participate, be sure to highlight what they did well, especially early on. Students will not participate if they believe they will only get criticized.
- For the sake of clarity and efficiency, ask students to include the lesson and section that their question comes from in the subject of their post (e.g. L 2.3 What is a carat?)
- Consider giving marks for discussion participation, both for posting questions but also for answering other students. Or tell students you will take some questions from the discussion board for the exam.

Note that UBC's new LMS is being piloted now, and there is already support for getting started or converting from Vista to BlackBoard. See http://pilot.lms.ubc.ca/ for current information. Or ask an STLF if you need advice.