The Canvas learning management system: integrating educational philosophy, communication, delivery and tools

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*I believe everything creative is somewhat collaborative.
If you're a painter and someone stretches your canvas,
it was collaborative on some level.*

Ron White

Resumen

Los educadores como diseñadores del aprendizaje primero crean un *template environment*, el cual es un espacio donde es más probable que el aprendizaje se pueda llevar a cabo, para después guiar a los estudiantes a través de un "viaje nómada" en busca de un objetivo global de aprendizaje. Con este fin, los educadores se benefician al reflexionar sobre una filosofía educativa, el tipo de comunicación utilizada en clase, y la manera de entregar la información colectiva, considerando las herramientas *web* apropiadas, o tecnologías de la información y la comunicación (TIC) que se pueden emplear. Además, las TIC vinculan el material (es decir, las herramientas, los objetos, entre otros) a una trilogía teórica, comunicativa y entregable, de tal manera que facilite el proceso de aprendizaje basado en las necesidades, intereses y preferencias de aprendizaje de los estudiantes. A continuación se provee una justificación del uso de *Canvas*, una plataforma de aprendizaje (n.d.), dentro de una red trilógica de conceptualizaciones que se desarrolla en torno a la enseñanza del inglés para fines académicos, concretamente en un curso de lingüística aplicada. A pesar de que la justificación está ubicada en un contexto específico, la intención es que pueda ser transferible a cualquier tema, viendo las tecnologías como un elemento integral entre estudiantes y docentes, al interactuar entre sí dentro de un escenario educativo formal.

Stretching one's "collaborative canvas" is an accurate metaphor in how educators ought to approach the iterative and reciprocal practice of teaching and learning. Educators as learning designers first create a template environment where learning is most likely to take place, and then guide learners through a nomadic journey in pursuit of some comprehensive learning objective. To this end, educators benefit from reflecting on an educational philosophy, type of communication used in class, and form of information delivery collectively
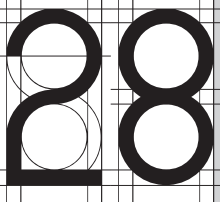
when contemplating the appropriate web tools, or information and communication technologies (ICTs) to be used. Thus, ICTs link the material (*i.e.*, tool, object, etc.) to a theoretical, communicative, and deliverable trilogy in such a way that facilitates the learning process based on the learners' needs, interests, and learning preferences. What follows is a rationale for using the learning platform *Canvas* (n.d.), within a trilogical network of conceptualizations that evolve around teaching English for academic purposes, specifically a course in applied linguistics. Although the rationale is placed in a specific context, it is meant to transfer to any subject where technologies are viewed as an integral part of how learners and teachers interact with each other within a formal educational scenario. For the purpose of this discussion, terms like *students* and *learners* will be used interchangeable, as well as terms like *teachers, educators,* and *instructors*.

Before considering any ICT, one's educational philosophy underpins how one teaches and views learning overall. An educational philosophy answers some of the following questions: *Why do you want to teach? Whom are you going to teach? How and what are you going to teach? and Where are you going to teach?* (Combs, 2010). Even in formal education where educators adhere to a written curriculum, an espoused educational philosophy still will depend on and drive individual preferences that are subject to a particular group of students. Based on the local contexts within a particular classroom, teacher roles begin to emerge that typically fall into three general categories that are inherent in an educational philosophy: didactic instructor, facilitator, and coach (Adler, 1984; Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). And while each of these three teacher roles are not fixed, one's educational philosophy will dictate certain recognizable tendencies: a) educators who assume a more traditional approach to teaching by presenting simplified contexts while learners passively observe (didactic instruction), b) educators who guide learners to become more independent and responsible for their own learning, and c) educators who transform independent learners to interdependent learners who rely less on the teacher when completing a purposeful task. Perhaps how one teaches is most observable when associating learning theory with communication and information delivery.

How one teaches which extends from an overall educational philosophy relates to how communication emerges. Two types of communication can be found within any educational setting: a) synchronous (real-time) communication and b) asynchronous (delayed) communication. Intuitively, one can reflect on common examples of both, regardless as to the role of educational technology or the subject matter. Synchronous communication is found in all face-to-face courses where conversational dialogues take place, but can also occur in blended learning environments when live video conferencing or chat software is being used (*e.g.*, Skype and Google+ Hangouts). Conversely, asynchronous communication commonly occurs when homework is being turned in, followed by educators grading homework and returning it a few days later. In a blended learning context, the use of online forums, blogs, microblogs (*i.e.*, Twitter), and wikis are typically all considered various degrees of asynchronous forms of communication. Indeed, how one approaches teaching (*i.e.*, one's educational philosophy) will dictate the type of communication that is viewed as ideal when setting out to achieve course objectives. But determining the appropriate ICT to use not only is based on an educational philosophy and communication type, but also on information delivery.

Information delivery is a dichotomous notion in terms of how learners receive input. The simplest way of looking at information delivery is in terms of being either online or offline. Before ICTs became so ubiquitous, information delivery was fairly straight-forward; that is, *offline*. Students would attend face-to-face classes and receive information in real time in the presence of an educator. Physical textbooks would also be used as a way to deliver content to the learners and would either be sold or returned (if rented) once the course was completed. But as ICTs became more prevalent, information delivery quickly became more diverse. With the *Web 1.0*, content became more easily available via personal computers and the Internet as information delivery was viewed as one way, or a broadcast approach with essentially no forms of immediate two-way communication. Two-way communication and content creation quickly became associated with a new term, *Web 2.0,* which represented a shift in how individuals interacted with content and open authorship, occurring not only by experts in the field but anyone with an Internet connection and a personal computer. Currently, the notion of a *Web 3.0*, or semantic web, has taken information delivery one step further in how augmented reality merges technology with everyday infor-

mational input, making the human experience even more engaging (*e.g.*, technological overlays during American football games viewed on TV and Google glass that inserts data within one's field of vision based on the current external environment). Hence, any information that is not restricted by time or space, can be considered online: electronic books, online magazines, and journals; videos found on video sharing hosts (*e.g.*, YouTube); online communities; and educational learning management systems (LMSs) used to deliver content to enrolled students (*e.g.*, Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, etc.). Online information can be accessed any time and from any place (where there is an Internet connect), and has changed how learners engage with content versus the limited, offline delivery practices of the past.

Choosing an LMS is not an isolated decision-making process, but rather is one that is made based on *course* objectives, a teacher's *educational* philosophy, types of *communication* required, and optimal means for *information* delivery (CECI). Stated simply, an LMS depends on CECI. For teaching English for academic purposes (EAP), Canvas offers an LMS that lays out a canvas, as it were, where students can experience learning in a variety of ways. When using the LMS Canvas, CECI not only is planned beforehand, but also may vary as the course transpires, depending on the particulars of the group dynamics. The remaining rationale behind using Canvas as an LMS will reveal CECI within an EAP context, and should be viewed only as an example and not as a prescribed way of using ICTs to enhance the learning process.

Canvas by Instructure is an LMS that provides flexibility both from an instructional and learning perspective. Educators can upload content to Canvas in a variety of ways such as a course syllabus, course-related files, content pages using a what-you-see-is-what-you-get interface, assignments, quizzes, rubrics, course announcements, and discussion forums. Additionally, Canvas offers a free virtual conference application that allows for synchronous communication by uploading PowerPoint presentations, conducting audio and video exchanges, and engaging in an online chat discussion. Finally, grades and attendance as well as course statistics and reports can all be maintained with ease as these features are included for free for all teachers. By appearances, Instructure's Canvas functions *vis-à-vis* with Moodle until educators quickly realize the user-friendlier experience that does not require additional func-

tionally that constantly depends on updating to the latest release. Indeed, less time is spent on understanding the LMS, which allows for more time on course planning, implementation, and student assessment. Not only will educators find the LMS Canvas flexible and more productive, but students themselves will find that using the platform affords them the opportunity to interact more with course content instead of being hindered by unnecessary technological constraints.

Students also have many options when it comes to interacting with course content within Canvas. For instance, besides using the modules view, which is much like how Moodle courses are typically organized, students may also view content in alternative ways: via assignments, discussions, announcements, and the virtual conference application. Canvas easily integrates synchronous and asynchronous communication, allowing greater opportunities for students to interact, not only amongst themselves but with their instructor and other experts in the profession as well. The email system is another feature that far surpasses its Moodle counterpart. Each email exchange between teacher and student is called a *conversation*. The history of all prior email correspondence is specific to each conversation, so that both student and teacher can easily view past conversations as needed. Also, the email system has an option of uploading text, audio, or file attachments, which especially is beneficial when it comes to communicating with language learners. By way of example, what follows illustrates how those who use the Canvas LMS navigate and interact with course content without much time investment in technological know-how or training.

A Canvas course in EAP (*i.e.*, applied linguistics) will show how content navigation functionality and personal preferences integrate (Stewart, 2014). The home page of any Canvas course presents various viewing options that appear along the left-side of the screen: course announcements, modules, assignments, among others – see Image 1 (Stewart, 2014). This procures easy access for students and teachers alike when navigating around a course. Along the top-right corner, accessing emails is possible by clicking on *Inbox*, which allows various ways of handling email correspondence: individually, per class, etc. The main body of the page allows for embedding different types of multimedia (*e.g.*, YouTube videos), and special course events can be managed via a calendar view that is accessible
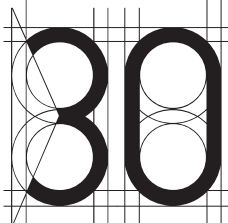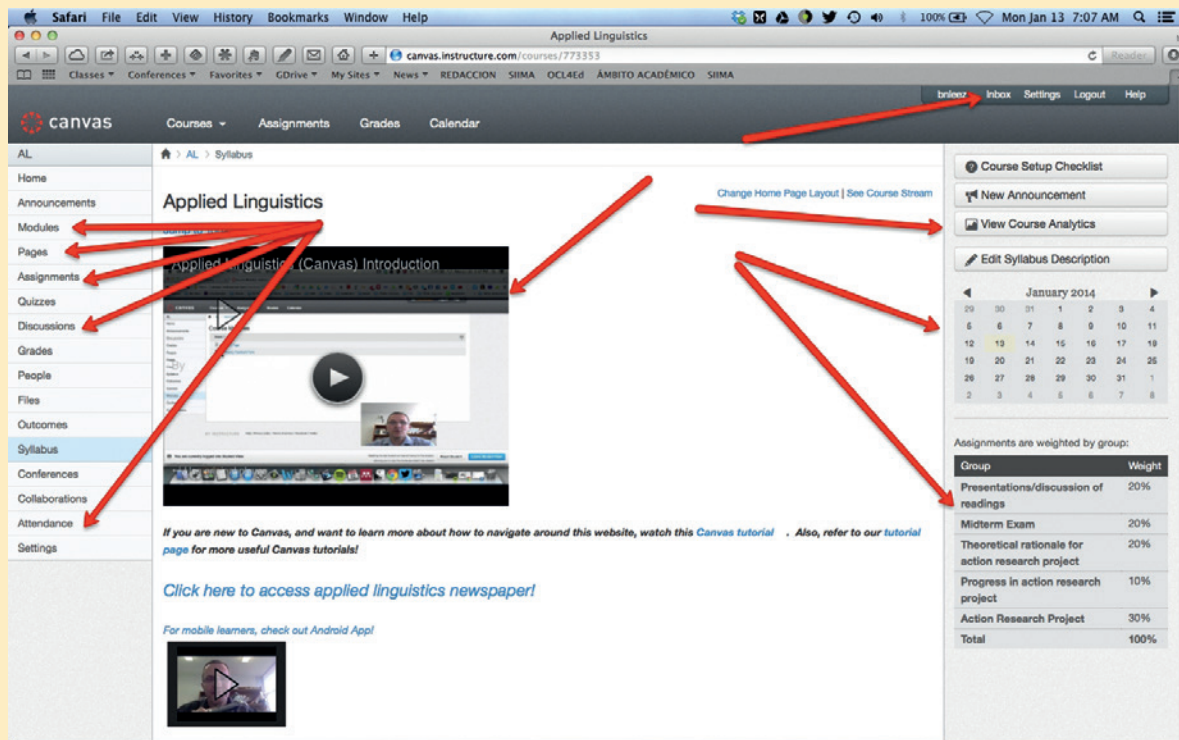
Image 1. Applied linguistics, 2014.

along the right-hand side of the screen. The design of Canvas courses is designed to be user-friendly but highly functional so that navigation does not take away from the learning experience (*How is Canvas Designed?* 2014). And although the learning objective stems from an institutional curriculum (*i.e.*, a syllabus), this particular course in applied linguistics is meant to be as open as possible.

One key aspect of learning design an educator must consider is the notion of openness. This applied linguistics course is open in that anyone may access most of the content made available without the need of having to create an account or enroll in the course. And even though there are sections of the course that remain private (the *Discussions* section for instance), all announcements, pages, assignments, etc. remain available to the public. The benefit of using the Canvas LMS is that the course designer is able to decide what content is made public (*i.e.*, open) and what content remains private. For example, groups can be created whereby certain files remain accessible only to those in the group, whereas other files may remain public (*What are Student Groups?* 2013). The way in which a learning designer decides what content is made public and what remains private will depend in large part on one's educational philosophy, type of communication required for the course, and information delivery (*i.e.*, CECI).

Sixty percentage of the final grade for this applied linguistics course comes from a participatory action research project (*i.e.*, 20% for a theoretical rationale, 10% for the learning process, and 30% for the final project or product). The project is a comprehensive inquiry into the student's own teaching practice, which consists of a final document that embodies the main sections of an academic research paper: theoretical framework, method, results, discussion, and references. In addition to using the Canvas LMS, Google Drive is also used throughout the semester to host student's work (*Go Google: Google Drive*, 2012). Each student maintains an individual Google Drive word processing file that is shared with the instructor so that timely feedback yields continuous support throughout the entire research and writing process. Additionally, students taking applied linguistics create a Canvas page whereby Google Drive student documents are shared openly with not only their classmates, but the public at large (Stewart, 2014b). The rationale behind this is to create an openness to the learning process so that students can learn from their classmates and also view how the instructor is providing feedback to everyone else enrolled in the course. Since these documents are also made available to the public, the learning process can also easily extend to learners and experts beyond the course itself. Finally, from an instructor standpoint, open author-

ship of this kind may lead to informal pedagogical dialogues with other teaching practitioners interested in the topic of teaching and learning an additional language.

Deciding to use a learning management system like Canvas stems from a personal educational philosophy of openness, a variation in how educational stakeholders (*e.g.*, students, instructor, outside experts, etc.) communicate with each other, and the way information is delivered. The applied linguistics course, which was hosted in Canvas, illustrates how open authorship (*i.e.*, student work as well as course content) lays the groundwork for further collaboration and cooperation beyond just the instructor and students who are enrolled in the course. Students are given various options in how they may communicate, not only with the instructor but also how they interact amongst themselves. They are also encouraged to communicate in real time or via forums by sharing their work with others outside of class. Content delivery occurs both face to face as well as content that is uploaded to Canvas, serving as a complement to what transpires in class. Instructors create a canvas, metaphorically speaking, that affords learners to create their own paths to academic success. Canvas, as an LMS, grants educational stakeholders the means for getting the most out of a learning trajectory that stems from blending a face-to-face class with educational technology. Ultimately, the learning trajectory that emerges from formal education is best served when connective knowledge emanates across academic domains, institutions, and professional fields.

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