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Chapter **1**

The Who, What, When, Where, and Why of Canvas

Regardless of whether you are an aspiring Canvas Panda or you are a proper Panda Professional, we all share the same goal: to do what is best for the learners in our classrooms. You understand that *blended learning* — the mixture of traditional face-to-face instruction with digital media in any teaching modality — is here to stay; you may have struggled through teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most arduous times in history (let alone in your educational career); and you now are looking to use one of the most powerful educational technology (edtech) platforms in the world. You are in the right place.

With nearly 30 million paid users worldwide, 1.5 million active users within the Canvas community, 13 U.S. states adopting Canvas LMS and/or Instructure-powered products statewide, and tremendous growth in Europe, Latin America, and the Asia-Pacific, you are among an enormous group of fellow Pandas all working toward the same universally important goal.

This chapter provides you with an overview of the Canvas LMS ecosystem and the reasons why it is such a powerful educational technology tool. You also get a preview of the topics you will explore in more detail throughout this book.

Who Uses Canvas?

The answer to this question is fairly simple: a world of educators, administrators, and learners who are focused on teaching and learning beyond the walls of a conventional classroom.

Educators

Next to students, educators are the biggest users of Canvas LMS in the educational sector. We hope that school administrators, social workers, instructional coaches, and office staff also gain helpful insights into how Canvas LMS can make learning and communication better for all by reading this book as well.

As educators ourselves, we have had very different Canvas experiences. In 2018, Eddie worked as the innovation coach at Central Nine Career Center, an adult and continuing education career center in Indiana. As most of the students who came to Central Nine were familiar with Canvas LMS already, having used it in school prior to coming to the center, Central Nine administration decided that it needed to consider adopting a learning management system (LMS), too. Eddie was well-versed in all things edtech and was extremely excited about the possibility of adopting and implementing Canvas LMS. Within a few months, Central Nine had made the decision to adopt Canvas LMS, and Eddie took on the task of facilitating a year-long implementation plan with a pilot teacher team that he named the “Panda Pilots.” It was a great success! While Eddie was in those early stages of adopting and implementing Canvas LMS, he was constantly collaborating with Marcus. Marcus is what we refer to as an “OG” or “original gangsta” of Canvas LMS.

Marcus’s background with Canvas started back in 2013. He was teaching high school English at a small rural school district in Indiana. As he recalls, the original reason for adopting Canvas LMS was because in the flatlands of Indiana, two inches of snow could shut down school for the day. Some of you know exactly what we are talking about, but for those who don’t, the situation was this: Even a minimal amount of snow could close school due to the hazardous road conditions caused by the blowing and drifting of snow. So, in any given school year, Marcus would see roughly six to ten school days canceled by inclement weather. Those lost instructional days would be added to the end of the school year and every time

that happened, end of the year events such as graduation ceremonies, open houses, awards nights, athletic events, and on and on, had to be rescheduled. This rescheduling of events over and over became quite a strain on relations between the school district and the community members.

Believe it or not, the primary reason his district adopted Canvas LMS back then was to attempt to avoid this calendar nightmare. The philosophy was simple. Having Canvas would enable teachers to provide work, mostly busy work in those days, to students even when they were not in school, thereby avoiding a full cancellation of the day. So, Marcus has been using Canvas for a long time. Though the journeys are clearly different, that is precisely what we felt made our collaboration work so well. To this day, we still often see Canvas LMS from completely different viewpoints and are constantly learning from each other's experiences in working with teachers.

The point right now is that many teachers worldwide from all types of teaching backgrounds — K-12, higher education, career and technical education, and beyond — find their way to Canvas LMS. (In Chapter 3 you take a look around the Canvas interface, and in Chapter 4 you discover the steps to setting up your very first Canvas course.)

Administrators

Administrators use Canvas LMS, too. Canvas is one of the few edtech platforms that can and should be used as regularly by administrators as it is by teachers in classrooms. Think about that. How many digital platforms do you use each day? How many of those can be effectively leveraged by an administrator? The answer is that there are very few, but Canvas LMS is one of the most effective platforms for administrators to utilize on a day-to-day basis.

Our primary experience is in the K-12 setting, but when you think about the myriad of ways administrators can use Canvas to lead within their buildings, you can see that an administrator not using Canvas LMS is an administrator who is working hard, but maybe not working intelligently. Whether you are a principal, an assistant principal, a curriculum director, or the superintendent of your district, leveraging Canvas LMS is absolutely critical, worthwhile, and effective.

We have all said this before: *This meeting could've been an email!* Well, as administrators continue to learn Canvas LMS, they can leverage the platform to save everyone time and struggle within the day-to-day grind of teaching. In Chapter 8, we go into the ins and outs of using the Canvas communication tools to not only make learning personal for your learners, but also help you streamline communication between departments and clearly communicate with stakeholders.



TIP

Did you know that there is an entire department at Instructure that solely focuses on educational thought leadership and provides professional development to school and district administrators? The Center for Leadership and Learning (www.instructure.com/product/canvas/leadership-development) works with hundreds of administrators every year to assist them in their implementation of the Canvas LMS, Canvas for Elementary, and MasteryConnect platforms, in order to better lead by example.

School staff

The phrase, *it takes a village* is likely one of the most appropriate phrases to apply to teaching and learning. In the K-12 setting, there are instructional coaches, technology coaches, technology integrationists, innovation coaches, paraprofessionals, councilors, teacher aides, and about a dozen other titles that all fall under this umbrella of “other folks who support learning who need to be fluent in their use of Canvas LMS.” In Marcus’s experience in some small- to medium-sized school districts, he would often leverage some of the classroom aides and paraprofessionals on campus to ensure that everyone could assist a student with learning via Canvas LMS. In short, adults in the building should be functional, if not fluent, in using Canvas LMS because it is one of the few digital platforms that truly impacts nearly every stakeholder associated with a school district or university.

Students

Last, but certainly not least, millions of student learners use Canvas LMS every single day. Whether the student is a kindergartener in Kansas, a preteen in Oregon, a teenager in England, a college student at the University of Notre Dame, or a student of dental hygiene in Australia, Canvas LMS students are as diverse and as powerful as ever. As with so many other technology platforms, often the adults struggle more with new technology than the kids do. Canvas LMS is quite intuitive, and with some basic knowledge of the platform and a little bit of time to become acclimated, students always find a way to see learning success within Canvas.



TIP

One of the best things you can do as an educator or administrator is to find a way to also be a student within the Canvas LMS platform. This is a point that is paramount when learning Canvas LMS. As an educator, you need to create, design, and build content for your students, but you should also experience that content *as* a student. (You discover how to use the Student View in Canvas to check out how your courses appear on students’ screens in Chapter 4.)



REMEMBER

In much the same way you design a lesson backward, starting with the desired outcome, as an educator you always want to consider how your lesson design in Canvas LMS looks, feels, and works from the student perspective. We are all life-long learners. We are all students.

What Is an LMS?

LMS is short for *learning management system*. What is that? We like to put it like this: A learning management system, like Canvas, is an accessible and intuitive ecosystem for teaching and learning. We use the word *ecosystem* because when done properly, student learning, communication, and more can all “live” within this platform.

Your experience with an LMS as a teacher has likely been similar to one of the following stories:

Story 1: You had never heard of an LMS, the pandemic hit in 2020, and your district rushed to buy an LMS (maybe Canvas) so that teachers could continue to teach virtually, remotely, or in any of the other modalities of learning we have seen over the past few years.

Story 2: You had been using other LMS platforms like those that rhyme with “Cruelogy,” “Poodle,” “Pits Burning,” or “Moogoo Glassbroom,” and your district finally got wise and moved from those platforms to Canvas LMS.

Story 3: You have been using an LMS for years, even before the pandemic. Maybe you were teaching online courses in higher education, maybe you were teaching in a virtual K-12 school setting, or maybe your district simply had a bit more foresight and adopted an LMS years ago.

Regardless of the path through the jungle that brought you to Canvas, you are here now. So, let’s embrace the opportunity to learn together, teach better, and improve at our craft.



TIP

If you are reading this book and you are reluctant to use Canvas or you think that its sole purpose was “to get us through the pandemic,” then you’re definitely going to need to keep reading. We believe, and most blended learning experts would also agree, that use of an LMS should be an integral part of your day-to-day teaching and learning, regardless of circumstances.

When Should You Use Canvas?

What is so powerful about Canvas LMS is that it can and, in our opinions, *should* be the hub of all things in your classroom, regardless of what learning modality you are working within: traditional, hybrid, or remote. We have both taught in fully face-to-face settings where our students used Canvas every single day. We have both taught within a hybrid modality where we saw students on certain days of the week, while other students were completely remote. And, we have both taught in a fully remote-learning modality where we went for months without being face to face with our students. The great equalizer in all of it is Canvas LMS. It is empowering. You are reading this book so that you can gain those Panda Powers. When you've finished this book, you will have the basic skills, strategies, and motivation to do amazing things with your students this school year and beyond.



REMEMBER

A healthy balance between traditional, hybrid, and even remote-learning teaching models can provide opportunities for student success, both inside and outside the classroom. So when should you use Canvas? In our opinions, all the time.

Traditional learning

As we state earlier in this chapter, Marcus was using Canvas LMS years before any pandemic. His district had a need to extend learning outside of the classroom, his administration had a vision of how to accomplish that, and Canvas LMS was the solution. What his district quickly realized was that Canvas LMS was so much more than just a bandage to place on its issues with weather-related school cancellations. It also soon realized that Canvas was more than a depository for digital stuff or a digital locker. Through a bit of early training, extensive effort by the technology department, and additional support from techy teachers in the district, administrators in the school district began to see the full power of utilizing a learning management system within the traditional school environment.

Through ongoing training provided by both technology team members and by teachers who were excited to share what they were learning, Marcus's district began to evolve the use of Canvas over the course of those first few years. Teachers began transitioning conventional classroom activities into Canvas. Things like bell ringers, heat checks, exit tickets, simple quizzes and tests, and the like, all began to find themselves living within Canvas. That didn't happen and won't happen overnight. However, in Marcus's experience, the buy-in happens slowly at first, but when everyone begins to truly understand the Panda Powers of Canvas, the transition and full integration of Canvas into the traditional classroom setting becomes clear.

Hybrid and online learning

Online, distance, remote, virtual, web-based, or cyber learning. Whichever term you may have used or heard over the past decade or so, they all lead to one inevitable fact: True and authentic learning can happen wherever there are learners and educators. We don't need to be in the same building anymore.

While we realize that there are specific differences and rationale for using any of the previous terms to describe a remote-learning situation, to us, these terms all signal a need for a learning management system. Again, none of those learning modalities were invented during the COVID-19 pandemic. They all existed before the pandemic, but the pandemic simply pushed these learning modalities into the mainstream and made them all commonplace for most educational settings.

If you are teaching within a hybrid or fully online environment, you already know that nothing is possible without an LMS like Canvas. Canvas provides the bridge you need between you and your students. Canvas LMS is where the teaching is done, where the collaboration happens, where the communication flows, and where grading, assessment, and feedback find a home. In Part 3 of this book, we dive deep into the bamboo of these very things.

If you were teaching in a hybrid or fully online learning environment due to the pandemic, then you simply had to learn very quickly about what many educators were already doing. We say this all the time: *The pandemic pushed educators off of the ledge of digital learning*. We believe that this was one of the greatest and most unfortunate parts of the pandemic. Education probably needed a “shock to the system” in order to get us moving toward more effective teaching and learning and better implementation of technology. We believe that education, as a whole, may have been getting just a little bit complacent and stale. The last few years have really pushed educators to think differently, reinvigorate our own learning, and ultimately become even better for kids.

Where Is Canvas Used?

Canvas is built for learners. It supports all types of learners and all learning modalities. Here are the most popular ways Canvas is being used today.

K-12: Panda Cubs

Canvas LMS has become the proven, powerhouse learning management system within the K-12 space. It may not have always been that way, however. There was

a time years ago when educators would suggest that Canvas was best for high school and higher education students, and that it wasn't user-friendly enough for young learners. Marcus always took issue with that because he was working in districts that were using Canvas in kindergarten through twelfth grade and he knew that the usability was all about proper design within the platform.



TIP

Now, because Canvas LMS is constantly evolving and improving, Instructure, the parent company of Canvas, has designed and implemented a fully functional Canvas for Elementary platform. This platform took all the best elements from Canvas, implemented research about young learners and early literacy, and built a platform that is fully conducive to the fundamental needs of kindergarten through fifth grade students. Schools now have the option of either Canvas LMS or Canvas for Elementary to use with those young learners.

Higher Education: Panda Pupils

Higher education is an amazing place for the use of Canvas LMS. Unfortunately, for us, we are of a certain age where we didn't really use any sort of learning management system in our own college days. Marcus is so old that he recalls spending hours in the university library using a magnifying glass to look up entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

However, these days, colleges and universities are able to leverage Canvas LMS to facilitate better course content within traditional courses, as well as for all the different variants of courses they offer. More opportunities to learn equals more learning, which we believe can only be good for the world.

Career and technical education: Panda Professionals

Yes, Canvas can also be a valuable platform in the career and technical education space. CTE for short, career and technical education has seen a recent boom in interest at both the federal and state levels as skills-based training continues to see an uptick in enrollment.



TIP

Although there is still work to do in finding ways to recreate "hands-on" experiences with our students in CTE classrooms, a robust LMS offers the opportunities to expand virtually, with more focus and attention to details when in person. Often we see CTE programs "flipping" their classrooms using Canvas. For example, CTE teachers may post non-lab and independent work on Canvas, and free up in-class time for those necessary hands-on tasks and projects.

Why Do Folks Use Canvas?

The final question we are left with is *Why use Canvas?* If you are a teacher in an urban, Title 1 school teaching third grade, or an AP English teacher at a private Catholic school, why Canvas LMS?

The importance of blended learning

We have made this point already and you will see it throughout this book. One of our unifying messages or biggest takeaways we hope you get from this book is that blended learning and strategic implementation of digital tools is the most important part of education in today's world and the educational landscape of the future. We can't and won't go into all the reasons why blended learning and effective technology integration is best for learning. There are entire books dedicated to that exact topic. However, what we want all of you Pandas to truly embrace, understand, and believe is that *blended learning is better learning*. It gives educators the ability to expand learning outside of the walls of your classrooms. It enables you to do things with learning that may have been impossible when you were growing up.

Blended learning and technology create almost endless possibilities to inspire learners. Isn't that why we teach? If so, then why not embrace a tool like Canvas LMS as a vehicle to transport your students toward success? Think of Canvas LMS as the DeLorean for teaching. If you are familiar with the *Back to the Future* movie trilogy, you know that the DeLorean was the vehicle used to help Marty and Doc Brown travel through time. Think of Canvas LMS as your DeLorean, because using it can take learning to places that were impossible without it.



REMEMBER

Blended learning also enables us, as educators, to truly meet students' needs with content and learning experiences in a variety of ways. It enables us to leverage technology to better meet the needs of all types of learners. We dig more into that in Chapter 12 later on in this book.



TIP

Blended learning strategies, implemented through Canvas LMS, also enable more enriching opportunities for student voice and choice. Through elements within Canvas LMS like Discussions, Media Recorder, Media Feedback, Modules, Mastery Paths, and Pages, we have a wealth of opportunity as educators to create opportunities for students to express their understanding of content and to make decisions about *how* they learn and how they *express* that learning.

Finally, blended learning provides a pathway through the educational jungle for improved student engagement. Let's shine a spotlight on the chubby Panda in the room! How many of you have felt as if you are basically competing against

technology for the attention of students? Maybe you feel that today's learners don't even have the ability to pay attention in school because they stare at YouTube and social media from the moment they get home until the moment they go to bed. Maybe you feel that education can never compete for students' attention when put up against video games, social media, and virtual reality.

Though all of these are certainly valid feelings that we have heard educators express over the years, our retort to that would be to stop fighting it and lean into it. This may be a bit controversial for some of you. However, if you think about the trends in education over the past decade, what are they? Gamification, virtual reality in the classroom, video production, podcasting, project-based learning, and so on. If you're desperately romanticizing the concept of "back to normal," then you're missing your chance to evolve, to impact, and to inspire learners. So, for all of those reasons, we believe that leaning into blended learning concepts and strategies, through the DeLorean that is Canvas LMS, just makes the most sense.

The flexibility of efficient educators

The number one complaint most adult professionals have, and in our case, educators have, is that we never have enough time. Throughout the chapters in this book, we point out the multitude of ways Canvas LMS provides educators with more time through a more efficient approach to everything you do in the classroom.



TIP

As technology coaches in the K-12 setting, both of us have seen firsthand how saving incremental chunks of time throughout the week, month, quarter, or semester can happen when we implement Canvas LMS effectively. Marcus would always tell teachers that they must invest a bit of time up front in order to save a lot of time later on. That can be a tough "sell" to educators who already feel like they have no time to dedicate to learning Canvas, building modules, redesigning lessons, creating quizzes, and so on. However, educators who have taken this approach and truly dedicated themselves to learning and embracing a blended approach with Canvas LMS as the centerpiece of their classroom attest to the fact that doing the work early pays off later in the school year and even more so year after year. So, when we talk about efficiency, we are ultimately asking you to trust us. We know you're reading this book, dedicating extra time right now, and you are hoping for a big payoff of time later. We will get there.

When you have tools at your fingertips like SpeedGrader, quizzes, modules, discussions, and announcements, you soon see that the more dedicated you are to learning and becoming proficient with these tools, the more time you begin to save yourself. There is a pot of gold full of time at the end of this rainbow.

Another key element we want to stress to you, Pandas, is the immense amount of flexibility available to you within Canvas LMS. For some of you, the thought of flexibility is enticing and exciting because you see that as giving you options to help students succeed. Maybe you're like Marcus, who rarely taught in the same way in two consecutive years because he figured that if he wasn't stoked about what he was teaching or how he was teaching it, his students wouldn't be either. For that reason, Marcus constantly rebuilt and reevaluated how he taught to try new approaches to what he did. If he loved something and it was well received by students, it might stick for a few years; if not, it was time to redesign. The inherent flexibility within Canvas LMS has always been one of the elements we love most about it.



TIP

If you've designed something in Canvas LMS and you didn't like everything about it, chances are good that you can redesign that lesson, assignment, or module differently. That is such a powerful option as you navigate through your early stages of using Canvas LMS. This book provides you with some of those foundational skills and as you continue to grow within Canvas, you continue to discover new ways to design.

You may be saying to yourself, *I don't want options. Just tell me how to do something and I'll do it that way.* We completely understand that perspective and many of the educators we have worked with over the years feel the exact same way. It is a fair perspective. However, we look at the flexibility of Canvas LMS like a baseball player may look at learning a new position, or the way a computer programmer may problem-solve different solutions, or the way a chef may create a dish. We see flexibility providing all of us with the highest possibility for success.



REMEMBER

Educators who know the "ins and outs" of Canvas LMS provide themselves with options to meet the needs of a diverse student body with a variety of learning needs. It enables us to be problem-solvers because we have the knowledge to do so. We say that we want our students to be problem-solvers, and with the built-in flexibility of Canvas LMS, you learn how to leverage the platform to see more success with your students.

As we begin our journey, we simply ask you to be open-minded, keep your students in mind, and understand that this book is designed to provide you with the foundational skill set you need to function efficiently in your classrooms and spark your creative interest in continuing your learning, evolving your skills, and further implementing Canvas LMS into your teaching and learning ecosystem.

