VISTA COMPASS

(Software review)

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Product details:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>VISTA COMPASS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product Category</td>
<td>School/university intranet software</td>
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<tr>
<td>Producer Name</td>
<td>Vista Associates Inc.</td>
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<td>Producer Link</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vistainc.com">http://www.vistainc.com</a></td>
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<td>Product Link</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vistacompass.com">http://www.vistacompass.com</a></td>
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Snapshot review:

Ease of use  ★★1/2
Ease of navigation ★★
Documentation ★★★★
Price/value ratio ★★★
Available power ★★1/2
Pedagogical foundation ★★★★
Instructional values NA
Production values NA
Interactivity NA

Best/worst features:

Generally a useful package for those who are just starting in online delivery/communication/administration, but is rather basic in a number of areas, in particular student administration and associated functions, when compared to some of the current Information Management Systems (WebCT, TopClass and Course Info to name but a few).

Vista Compass was simple to use and flexible. Its interface was clean, but confusing. Navigation was simple, but non-conventional and hence confusing in parts. Although it could not be fully evaluated, it purports to integrate well with existing course registration databases.

Unfortunately, there seemed to be no sophisticated engine for quiz/test development and administration nor is it possible to collate and utilize the content of discussions between students and students and staff.

Generally, this seems to be a relatively costly approach to providing institutions at High, College and University levels with entry-level information management system capabilities. Although Vista Compass requires minimal investments of time, or support infrastructure, one would have to ask why one of the many existing and powerful IMS platforms would not be chosen over Compass. Its student customized campus wide information dissemination feature is a real plus, allowing the student to have information relating to all his/her courses imported into their own “My Workspace”. However, established systems including WebCT and the like can be set up to provide similar capabilities.

Platforms such as WebCT and TopClass would seem to have much more flexibility in terms of their testing and communication engines. Their interoperability in terms of integration with existing database engines, communication tools and the re-purposing of course materials is being proven as they continue to develop and aim for IMS compliance. Compass is not at a comparable level of compliance at this stage.
Overall, the Compass interface is rather 'clunky' in comparison to systems such as WebCT and Blackboard. For example, navigational control is within the content window and so as the user scrolls down the screen, control is lost and there are no easy steps to get back to "top page". This, the reviewer feels, is a major problem if students are to feel comfortable working within such learning environments and not be hindered by having to expend effort in coping with the system as well as the content. This has been handled well by others. WebCT has all its navigational tools outside the content frames so that the student always has easy access to all controls. Further, the style and function of navigation buttons is non-standard, another source of confusion for the hapless learner.

These two points notwithstanding Compass, is fairly easy to use and class set-up is relatively simple. Word® documents may be directly imported without the need for html conversion. There are also multiple templates provided and there is the capacity to customize the environment. The communication tools are straightforward in their operation but limited in their usefulness. The other major players in this field provide the ability to collate discussion threads for saving or printing at the touch of a single button. This is an essential feature as these threaded discussions can provide a rich source of support information for both staff and students.

A rather nice feature of this system is the ease with which students may develop their own personal homepage. Collaborative work groups are supported by Compass with the ability to form student sub-groups within a course. These provide secure areas in which groups of students can discuss problems, work collaboratively on documents and task.

In summary, Vista Compass can best be described as a student customizable information management system incorporating a fairly simple but functional student management system worthy of consideration for smaller institutions, in particular Elementary through Junior/Senior High, but I suspect that its overall cost would be an issue. Two issues cloud the picture for this reviewer. Firstly, the claims of scalability and integration with any existing student registration / profile databases. The reviewer is sceptical about this claim given that some of the 'bigger fish' in this market place only recognize the difficulties associated with this and only suggest the possibility of this. Secondly and more importantly, are the navigational and interface design issues mentioned which have the potential to negate the effectiveness of the educational learning environments created. Both of these issues would need to be very carefully assessed by any institution considering adopting the Compass system.