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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</thead>
<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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<tr>
<td>Producer Link:</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vistainc.com">http://www.vistainc.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Product Link:</td>
<td><a href="http://www.vistacompass.com">http://www.vistacompass.com</a></td>
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</tbody>
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Snapshot review:

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

Best/worst features:

Easily customized within well-structured organization and designed from first principles as a collaborative and interactive learning environment enabling a great deal of user control. Perhaps too structured at the moment for real user creativity. On this reviewer’s computer the highlighting above and below the data conflicted with the superimposed text and made reading the commands difficult. Clicking on the text was the only way to determine the command. In the pilot demo there are several variations in terms from one page to another, e.g., Data Sets on one page and Data Collection on another.

Vista Compass is an Intranet package that facilitates students and faculty in quickly and confidently moving into an online distributed learning environment. This environment is seen not as a replacement for but a complement to the traditional classroom situation and student body activities. The collaborative and transactional pedagogic principles upon which this product is founded enable the users to not only mould their private space to their own desires and needs but also to draw them into an online community that provides both public and private venues for publishing and discussing their scholarly materials. In addition, the package emulates the many activities of school and university and thereby enables users to readily put the package and its functions into a meaningful context. The intuitive nature of this product accompanied by its easily customized features lends itself to enhancing the learning process by complementing classroom discussions and extending activities to suit the time and place of the learner.

Throughout the introductory web pages, the importance of collaboration of organizational psychologists and technologist working to fit their insights on GroupWare applications to learning is evident again and again. Their goals come through clearly. Their goals are to provide public and private spaces in order to give users some control over their learning and to develop confidence in users in their use of technology, and in participating in building community. This empowerment enables the learners to play a more effective role in developing their online community and develop a stronger relationship with the school or university. As is noted by Vista Associates, their purpose is to use ‘the web as a dynamic environment for both communication and information exchange, rather than a static publishing model.’
Vista Compass integrates course management with campus-wide information distribution and provides a web environment for teaching and learning. By doing so it provides students and faculty a single, unified place to find information on all their classes, campus announcements and events.

The pilot School Intranet with which this reviewer worked reflected the components available to Vista Compass users. Many of the home pages of the current users of Vista Compass are linked from the first web page noted above so that interested readers can quickly get a sense of the look and feel of the alternatives. In essence, there are three categories within which the various elements are grouped, i.e., My Space, Campus, and Faculty.

My Space is allocated to each user and enables him or her to organize this private space within the many sub-areas allocated. The Campus hosts the general public space for Courses, the Calendar of events, Announcements, Resources, a Gallery for images, news of School Clubs, a Bulletin Board feature, the Newspaper, student, faculty and staff Discussions, Chat areas, and a directory of People. The Faculty section provides the Faculty with all the administrative functionality for organizing and carrying out the courses.

The My Space area is illustrative of the other two. Therefore, I’ll offer a more detailed description of that space. There can be several sub-areas with the exact number depending on what the institution determines is suitable. In the pilot demo, under My Space, there are sub-areas called What’s New, Messages, Courses, My Documents, My Profile, Campus Information, Bookmarks, and Administration. What’s New includes public broadcast messages sent by other students or faculty. Messages includes private messages sent or received by a user. Courses includes information on all courses enrolled in by the owner of the space. My Documents is where one assembles electronic materials of importance. My Profile is a list of such items as the owner’s name and address, affiliations, interests, and favourite web pages in as much detail as the user might want. Campus Information allows the user to subscribe to none or as many services as deemed appropriate. These subscriptions can be general announcements, calendar events, school club news, campus bulletin or newspaper, or discussion groups. The notification of these can either be sent to you via e-mail or itemized in the Campus Information space. Editing the subscription list is simply by clicking on a box. The Bookmarks function is a list of the owner’s links. The Administration area provides access for administrators and faculty to the course and activity editing. With the banners, and the displayed commands it is easy for the user to know where he or she is and move through the pages. The help is minimal because of the intuitive nature of these commands and structure.

Generally, within each sub-area there are one or two levels of web pages. First, there is usually an index web page which has two banners across the top of the page displaying hot buttons with the major functions, a list of the relevant functions listed down the left side of the page, data in the centre of the page, and two command lines, one above and one below the data, that have navigating commands such as, previous, next or search commands. Second, flowing from this index page there is the content page which is the message or announcement or activity. The command buttons here permit activities such as, editing, deleting, bookmaking, or closing of the text displayed or navigating to the next or previous page. The content page can also have boxes or spaces for the user to click in or write on. All the pages are variations on these so it is not difficult to understand what is required at each level within the space.

The Courses area is most complex of the areas. It has several more levels of indexes but the layout of these lower level pages follows that described above. Within the first index level of the Courses area, there are eight sub-areas directly related to the online courses enrolled. These sub-areas are Announcements, Syllabus, Discussions, Voting, Assignments, Student Work, Data Sets, Resources, and Home. On drilling down from one of these sub-areas, there is another index to content and a growing series of sub-areas down the left side of the
In addition to Announcements, Syllabus and so on, are Title Page, People, Journal, and Extra Help. Title Page gives an overview of the course. People list the names of instructors and students in the course. Journal is the space for the student to keep his or her journal. Extra Help is where students can ask for assistance either privately if they so wish or publicly if they want other students to assist them. Faculty can also provide insights and hints to the class or back to specific students. The Courses area also provides for easy incorporation of several teaching methods, e.g., case-based approach, threaded discussions, lecture, and group activities. The depth of the Courses area illustrates the thought put into the Vista Compass package and points to the many ways that an online environment can enhance classroom activities and individual learning experiences.

Two sub-areas of note are Voting and Data Sets. Both these provide for student activities that not only get the students thinking about the course but also provide the faculty member with material to adjust the classroom discussion and activities. First, the Voting sub-area provides the faculty member a chance to ask the students their opinions and depending on what the faculty member wants to do with the tallies may provide the student with feedback from the class. This is an excellent approach to stimulate participation and feedback. Second, the Data Sets sub-area is really a Data Collection sub-area. Here the faculty member can ask the students to gather data for use in class discussions. In the pilot demo, the sample was to gather data on the occurrences of references to the family on several television programs over a six-week period. This is one of the many ways used to develop interactivity and participation.

Compass can be run either on a local area network and intranet or through an external server located at Vista Associates. The minimum server platform required is noted as a Pentium 200 Megahertz processor with 512 Megabytes RAM and 8 Gigabyte hard disk running Microsoft Internet Information Server v2.0 or higher, Microsoft Windows NT Server 4.0 (ServicePack 3 or higher), and Radnet Webshare Server 2.5 or Lotus Domino Server 4.5. The actual size of the hard disk depends on the number of students and course that you might have and the space you might allocate to each. The minimum user system is noted as a dial-up Internet connection (28.8 or faster recommended) or Intranet/LAN connection with a web browser such as Netscape or Internet Explorer, Versions 3.0 or later.

To summarize, Vista Compass is an intranet within which an institution can establish a collaborative online learning environment tightly customized to the requirements of students and faculty. It is powerful and easy to use for integrating course management and campus information needs. It already illustrates many constructivist activities and enables a variety of teaching styles. To enhance these features, the current flexibility is to be supplemented with additional navigation and linking capabilities, a quiz feature within the Course area, a student portfolio area within My Space to enable students an enhanced space for reflection, and a more flexible clubs and committees area to promote setting up group and private discussion areas, polling and voting functions, and listing of members. Vista Compass an exceptional intranet package with utility and promise.